

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

How can we create economic opportunity in the face of climate change? That's the goal of the Climate-Resilient Employees for a Sustainable Tomorrow or CREST, an initiative of the Ares Charitable Foundation, Jobs for the Future, and WRI Institute. Earth Day marks the third anniversary of CREST, which emphasizes the importance of working with community-based organizations to create quality green jobs, particularly for underserved populations in regions facing climate challenges. Sara Vander Zanden, Director for Jobs for the Future, JFF, joins me to discuss the progress CREST and its job creation partners have made so far, and where they hope to be in the near future.

Sara Vander Zanden, Jobs for the Future director:

So the big goals of this work. One, to train and place 25,000 people in quality green jobs by 2027, big lofty goal. We also have goals to increase awareness around what a quality green job is. How do you qualify? What are skills that you need to get into a quality green job? And then we also have a goal of exposing leaders, nationally and internationally, to the work that we're doing around quality green jobs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And when you talk about a quality green job, what is your definition.

Sara Vander Zanden, Jobs for the Future director:

It's such a good question. JFF, wrote a paper at the beginning of CREST answering that exact question. Essentially, a green job is anything that integrates green skills. So you can think of any traditional industry, you can think of construction, you can think of manufacturing, you can think of textiles or energy. There are ways to make all of these industries and all of these jobs green through the integration of green skills. And then the quality component comes, really into play when we think about JFF's job quality framework. So there are a lot of things that make a job a quality job, some of those main components are high wages where you can sustain a family. We think about benefits, comprehensive benefits that allow you to take care of yourself and your family and your health. We think about growth opportunities within a company or organization. We think about flexibility to shape your schedule. Knowledge of what your schedule and hours are going to be a couple of weeks in advance, you can plan your life around that. And we also think about dignity. Does this job make you feel more whole as a person? Does it honor who you are and the skills that you bring?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

There's a lot there that I would like to kind of unpack. I like the idea that any job can be a green job. I don't think people really think of it that way. They have the idea of a wind turbine or EV battery work. Yes, those are industries. But jobs, it could be an HVAC, and we're doing this in New Orleans. And so it could be water mitigation because of the climate. Are you trying to match the job opportunities to the region that you're in?

Sara Vander Zanden, Jobs for the Future director:

Yes. JFF is kind of taking the backseat in this work, which is a cool role. We are really letting the regions themselves lead the work. And the regions that we're working with and the quality green Jobs regional

challenge are six winning regions out of an initial pool of 101 applicants. And so they've proven, they know their communities, they know the climate risks, they know the job opportunities, the industries, the employers, who's looking for workers. They know what workers need in terms of wraparound supports. So the regions are telling us, here is where we need to lean in. And some of those areas are, like you mentioned, New Orleans, which is where we are now. They're really focused on construction and green infrastructure. So every time it rains here, they're flooding. And so they're thinking about hyperlocal solutions to stormwater management. It takes a workforce, a trained and skilled workforce, to build these stormwater management parks. It takes a trained and skilled workforce to maintain them. And these are high-quality, high-paying jobs. So that's one example of how your average job, construction job, can really contribute to the sustainability of a community.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

In the training component, you're leaving it to the regions to do that themselves. You're supporting it, you're helping fund it. What kind of training are they going through?

Sara Vander Zanden, Jobs for the Future director:

It is highly regionally dependent, but some of the really cool ones are in Portland, for example. Our partner there is Portland General Electric, and they're spearheading a coalition of 80 statewide partners from employers, to training providers, to community-based organizations. And they are really looking at pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs. They're making sure that these programs are accessible to people who are currently incarcerated so that when they re-enter society, they can immediately go into an earn and learn situation with one of three union apprenticeship programs, which is amazing.

Portland is also, as is Lyra Colorado, both regions are thinking a lot about dual enrollment and CTE pathways, Career and Technical Education. These are certified statewide pathways that are integrated into high school programs. And I love something that Lyra Colorado said. One of their partners when I was out there last year, he said, "High schooler engagement is a national crisis, every single high school principal or teacher you talk to will talk about how there's an engagement crisis. Students are just not engaged in the curriculum. And the antidote to that, the solution is oftentimes hands-on learning opportunities." So CTE pathways technical training are really a new and important opportunity for high schoolers who are otherwise feeling disconnected and disengaged from education.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And also what I like about these programs and the CTE is a good example of that, and the dual enrollment. There's usually an employer component. So the employer has partnered with the educators, whether it's at a high school level, or community college, or even a college level to give them this list of things. This is what I need from this community.

Sara Vander Zanden, Jobs for the Future director:

In Portland, Portland General Electric is a huge employer, but they always talk about too, the work that they do depends upon other industries doing the work really well too. So they're an electrical company, but they also need to rely on construction companies doing their work really well, they need to rely on all these different industries integrating sustainability practices. And then the other thing I want to say too about employers that was surprising to me coming into this work, I think I had a vision at the beginning of working with really large employers because we have this really ambitious goal of training and placing 25,000 people.

So in my mind, I think economies of scale, what's most efficient? Let's go for these really big employers. But across the regions, most are working with small and midsize employers. And sometimes it's companies who consider themselves green, oftentimes it's your local HVAC company. It's like, holy cow, we're doing a lot of heat pumps lately, or there's a big opportunity here to invest in this more. We need to train our workforce, we need skilled workers to do this.

One that really stands out to an employer. When I was in Knoxville, Tennessee last year visiting our partner on the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. They brought us to Helos Global, which is a tier 1 automotive supplier. We were chatting with them, they're making parts for electric cars. I come in there and I'm asking all these questions about, how do you feel about being a green employer in the south? In Appalachia, what is that identity like? And it just wasn't an identity that really resonated at all. It's what the market is telling them to do, it's allowing them to grow and provide really high-quality jobs to their employees. And that's it. It's great that it's green, and it's also just about economic opportunity.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think that's a very important point because I've done a lot of stories on green climate resilient jobs, and it depends on where you're at, and what they call it. Honestly, when I talked to folks in Mississippi, green was not a term that people warmed to. But when I said, "Are you doing jobs that are keeping your water clean so you can go fishing?" And it was, "Yes, absolutely." Or towns along the Mississippi, and it was about having good clean drinking water. So it really does depend on what community you're in.

Sara Vander Zanden, Jobs for the Future director:

Yeah. And what I love about that too is we're finding universal values when we're doing that. It's not as much about dancing around the topic, I don't like to think of it that way. It's just like, well, what is the common denominator? For example, when I was in Salt Lake City and Logan in Utah last year, we were talking about green jobs, and green and sustainability and climate change are not resonant with many of the folks who we were gathering there. But you talk about preserving natural resources, you talk about taking care of your community and the land so that future generations can thrive. That resonates. And so to me, that's beautiful. We all care about the same thing, and if we can just find a way to talk about it, then we're golden.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So tell me about what's going on in New York? What kind of work are you doing around green and climate resiliency in New York?

Sara Vander Zanden, Jobs for the Future director:

In the southern tier of New York, there's a big focus on battery manufacturing. I love what the folks at the University of Buffalo are doing, and New Energy in New York, That's kind of the coalition that has come together to support workforce training in the battery manufacturing space. They are developing a safety training that is XR, so extended, reality and will be open source. So there is currently, despite all of the battery manufacturing happening across the United States, there is no standardized safety training. And this is not a career field without risks, technicians are going in without any standardized safety training. And so they are standardizing it, they're making it open source and available to all training programs, all employers nationwide. And I love what Stacey Johnson at the University of Buffalo said. I was asking her as we were kind of thinking through the model, "Okay, so safety, but what else?" And she's like, "Sara, we can't have quality jobs if they're not safe jobs."

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That makes perfect sense. And then you're right, I don't think people think about that. They think we'll just go in and make batteries. So one of the regional partners that is in the challenge is the Industrial Commons, and they're in North Carolina, a textile community. Tell me about what they're doing there to create green jobs.

Sara Vander Zanden, Jobs for the Future director:

Yes, we love the Industrial Commons. So as you said, this is a textile community. I often say that I'm from an apple farming community. Where you're from, the economy is such a huge part of it. And for Morganton, North Carolina, textiles are the heritage legacy industry. Historically, the industry has provided jobs for the community, but the industry has not been very sustainable. And there was a greater opportunity to really root wealth in the community for the employees working for these textile companies. So the Industrial Commons is doing just that, they have an employee-owned model. They care deeply about rooting wealth in the community. And they are committed to a circular economy approach to textiles, really increasing the sustainability of the industry.

And what I love about the Industrial Commons is, they're all about their community, but they're also thinking about how this model can be replicated elsewhere. So one example that they gave is a ton of carpet manufacturing happens in a small town just like theirs. I can't remember what state, but it's in the south. And they're like, "What if we could just give them everything that we've had to learn the hard way and tell them, 'Here's how you do it,' kind of give them the blueprint so they can replicate it?" And what a difference that would make if every carpet, if the carpet in this hotel room, in all of our homes was made even 20% more sustainably. Think about what a difference that can make, and if we do that across all industries. So that's one of the things we're really excited about as the work continues to roll out, is we'll be documenting these blueprints across each region, and really identifying for other regional leaders what's replicable and what you can kind of take and adapt to your own circumstances. A lot of the materials that we're developing will be field-facing, and hopefully very accessible.

One of the things I'm committed to, is making sure we're not just documenting the model and the blueprint, but making the tools for getting there accessible. I have an operations mind, so I'm always thinking about, can we just please template this MOU for employer engagement? Can we just make this curriculum publicly accessible? Why do we need to re-invent the wheel every single time? And JFF is very committed to that, and the regions are committed to that as well. So check back in probably 18 months, and the website will be full of open source resources.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What made JFF say, "We're all in on climate resilient jobs?"

Sara Vander Zanden, Jobs for the Future director:

I have two little kids, almost 1 and almost 4 years old. And I religiously watch Good Morning America in the morning, it's just a comfort that I've had since I was a little kid. And I have become so aware of how every single day my kids are sitting there with me watching the world on fire, watching floods, watching unprecedented heat waves. Climate crises are not going away, and we need a trained workforce to help address these challenges. And we need local workforces who are trained and ready to address the local challenges, so that it's local business owners and local workers who have economic opportunity following these climate disasters.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We have a lot of people who need better jobs. There are a lot of marginalized communities that have been kept out, they have not had the access to good-paying jobs. And the jobs you're describing, as you say, a lot of them are family-sustaining, their union with benefits, and they're necessary in a community. So how are you getting word out to those people that there is opportunity, and it's not that far from where they live?

Sara Vander Zanden, Jobs for the Future director:

Yeah. It's such a good question and so important. So when we were shaping the regional challenge, we required every anchor partner, which is our direct grant recipient, to put together a network of partners. And we required all of them to have CBOs, Community-Based Organizations, who are directly engaging with these target populations. Again, we let the regions, we really turned to them and said, "Who most needs access to quality jobs? Who most stands to benefit from entering these quality green jobs?" Many of them said women, many said people of color, many said immigrants, rural communities. We heard about people who are currently or formerly incarcerated needing job opportunities.

So we really turned to the regions and said, "Who do you need to serve? And then which partners in your community are already serving those populations really well? Who's done the work? Who's built the trust?" And that's how we're really getting the word out. And a couple of regions are really focusing on that exact thing. How do we get more and new people into quality green jobs? How do we diversify this sector? Oregon is putting together a statewide marketing campaign. For example, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville is putting together a labor market intermediary, and basically an internal job board where their kind of certified green employers can post a job opportunity. Some CBOs or training providers can say, "Oh my gosh, I've got the perfect person." Another CBO can say, "We can provide transportation or child care."

So really just wrapping around... This is what it takes if we're serious about disrupting occupational segregation, and our regions are committed to it. And then Lyra Colorado is also doing a marketing effort in rural western Colorado, specifically in k-12. So as early as elementary and middle school, starting to talk to kids about how cool these jobs are.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think that's very important component that sometimes goes missing because if people don't know about the opportunity, they will never go and try to get those skills. But then once they get the skills, are you bringing the employers in? Now, Portland, I know GE is probably an exception because I think they're your only employer partner.

Sara Vander Zanden, Jobs for the Future director:

Yeah.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So that is an exception. So how do you make sure the employers are, "Hey, I've got this trained force now let's hire these people."

Sara Vander Zanden, Jobs for the Future director:

So same thing as on the CBO front, we required all of our anchor partners to have employer partners. And as a part of this planning process, so before we got to this implementation phase, we had a

planning phase. And a part of that was a pretty extensive labor market analysis, interviews with employers. We didn't require employer commitments across the board, but we did require kind of a table of here's who our employer partners, are and here's what their role is going to be. Here's the percentage of our goal job placements that each employer is going to take on. Here's what the entry level wages are going to be at those jobs. So we kind of went into this and selected the final six with eyes wide open, knowing that it's so critical to start this conversation with employers, so we don't graduate people from training programs into the ether.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And you mentioned support. I would imagine the people that you are going after to at least make sure they understand this opportunity. So you're targeting them saying underserved populations. They might have other needs, transportation has been one that comes up, child care. Are you working with groups to offer support systems?

Sara Vander Zanden, Jobs for the Future director:

Yes, absolutely. So I am racking my brain right now, and I'm pretty sure every single region of the six that we have has at least one dedicated CBO partner providing those wraparound supports. And we know that especially... Well, across the board, but right now I'm thinking of some of our more rural partners where transportation is a huge barrier, and there's not an option to get on a bus. It's not that simple. One employer that we talked to, they developed kind of a carpool just among employees, but just took on that coordination effort, "Okay, who lives where? Who can do pick up? Here's the gas sharing," that kind of thing. It's been a really heartening to see how much these small and midsize employers truly care about their workforce. It's about the bottom line, but it's also about, I think, for the employers making a difference in the lives of the people who work for them.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Where are you at in the process in trying to get to your goal, your end goal?

Sara Vander Zanden, Jobs for the Future director:

First, let me tell you how we got here. So we had an open application process, got 101 applications from community colleges, employers, community-based organizations, four-year universities, technical colleges. I'm sure I'm missing some, but just such a diverse array of applications. From their selected 20 grant recipients to enter a learning phase with us, we asked a lot of questions about what are the green job opportunities? What are the climate risks? What's your vision for the future? What an ideal future look like? And then from there, down selected to 10 regions to engage in a planning phase. And now we're finally in the implementation phase. So where we're at right now, is that all six of the regions have really refined models and blueprints for how they're going to train and place people for quality green jobs. What's happening next is getting those training programs off the ground, beginning to scale them locally and regionally, and then placing people in the jobs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So you're going into your third year, at the end of five years, you hope to achieve your goal. But what does success really look like on a human level? So maybe 25,000 people have a job, which is fantastic, but what does it mean to those people?

Sara Vander Zanden, Jobs for the Future director:

I think it will look different in each region, but if I just pull back. If I even think about someone in a green job in my hometown, which is a rural farming community in West Michigan, someone has a job that of course pays their bills, makes it so that they can come home at the end of the day on Friday and not be worried about the bills or every last expense, there's enough to cover the bills and a little left over. I think about someone having the freedom to take time off, paid time off, and someone being able to leave at three o'clock to take their kid to a doctor's appointment, or go to a game. I think about someone having a drink with a friend, and talking about their job and lighting up from the inside out, talking about how it makes their lives more whole and more meaningful. And it's something that they can feel proud of doing because it's making their family better and it's making their community better. Green is one of those words that, we talked about this a little bit, but it can be divisive. It can stop the conversation. And so what I hope people understand is that, green jobs at the end of the day are jobs, and jobs now and always are good. They're good for families, they're good for communities, they're good for our economy. We need people in good jobs. And one pathway toward that is green jobs, and that's all we're talking about.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So you're not doing this alone, you're doing this with the support of Ares Charitable Foundation. How important is it to have that kind of big support in such a ambitious project?

Sara Vander Zanden, Jobs for the Future director:

Yes, it is so important. And I've been in the nonprofit sector my whole career, I've worked with a lot of funders, and I just encourage everyone to look at Ares as kind of a model funder in that they trust that the grantees know their communities best and know their needs. They're not overly prescriptive. They set an ambitious goal, which is important. It unites us all, it mobilizes us. It lights a fire under us, which we need unifying goals like that, and that's a really important role of a philanthropy. But to be able to do that, and to also then step back and let regional leaders lead is really exceptional.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That was my interview with Sara Vander Zanden, Director, Director for Jobs for the Future. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief for WorkingNation. Thanks for listening.