

## Private Company Gets JumpStart on Florida's Labor Shortage

In the three years since the State of Florida approved JumpStart, sponsored by Tampa, Fla.-based electrical contractor Resource Acquisition & Management Services (RAMS), the pre-apprenticeship program has added at least 800 electricians, plumbers, and pipefitters to the state's workforce. In August, the privately owned company was awarded a one-year grant by Workforce Florida, Inc., on behalf of the Florida reBuilds program, a statewide initiative that uses its \$12-million budget to offer free training and job placement in more than 40 construction trades. Using its JumpStart curriculum and contractor customers, RAMS has been tasked with training and finding employment in the electrical, plumbing, or pipefitting trades for up to 700 unemployed or underemployed Floridians in the next 12 months.

The participants, or "jumpers," in the electrical program — most between the ages of 18 and 38 — receive a paid six months in a mentoring program, which includes simulator training, a basic electrician's tool set, and OSHA 10 training. In return, RAMS gets first dibs on the next generation of skilled tradespeople, which it employs in its own work as an electrical contractor or hires out to its contractor clients to build up their own workforce.

"We are a professional alternate workforce," says Skip Mathews, owner of RAMS. "The people who go through JumpStart will be our employees for a minimum of six months, at which time our customers have the option to extend them full-time employment. Of those who complete the six-month program, about 50% will accept positions with our customers, and the other 50% will stay with us. Those who stay, we'll put into apprenticeship schools."

As an electrical contracting firm, RAMS carries a staff of around 900



Photo courtesy of RAMS

A "jumper" receives hands-on training on a branch-circuit arrangement at one of the mobile training rooms provided by RAMS.

workers, from journeypeople to its own jumpers. However, it doesn't bid jobs or pull permits. Instead, it has built its business around the production side of contracting. When firms working on larger jobs, such as schools and hospitals, need additional skilled laborers, RAMS' full-time, fully benefited employees may be deployed for project completion. Unlike a labor pool, RAMS acts as a subcontractor to the subcontractor. It uses its people on those jobs to help companies with their labor load-in charge and to blend their labor wages down to a more competitive range by bringing younger people to the jobsite.

"There's an extreme shortage of younger workers at the lower end of the scale," Mathews says. "The average age of an electrician is 52 to 54. There

are five or six journeypeople to every helper person. That has everybody's wage bands and performance bands out of proportion."

While the company is finding it increasingly difficult to find new recruits in its home state — from sources such as unemployment offices, colleges and trade schools, purchase lists, and its own internal recruiting programs — because of competition from piecework crews working on hurricane reconstruction, RAMS will extend its reach to Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi in early 2007. "We bring a construction facility virtually to anywhere USA with a complete portable training environment and construction simulator," Mathews says. "We're recruiting and training local talent, and making it so local talent stays local."