

## Need for skilled help sparks interest in electrician training

**Monday**

Posted Aug 8, 2016 at 4:47 PM Updated Aug 8, 2016 at 5:43 PM

**Share**

By Anthony Clark Business editor

After a run-in with the law earlier this year that could have led to prison, Reshard Wilson decided he wanted to change his life, get a job, and support his son and girlfriend.

The 26-year-old Gainesville man answered an ad in Craigslist for a free weeklong training program to become an electrician and this week started on-the-job training for the construction staffing agency RAMS Inc.

“I’ve been going through a little trouble as far as the decisions I’ve made in the past and I just came to a point where I just want to be able to provide for my family,” he said during a break from a training exercise last week to mount and wire an electrical box.

Wilson was one of 10 students from the Gainesville and Ocala area to start RAMS’ JumpStart program last week at Santa Fe College’s Construction Institute, the first time the Tampa-based staffing agency has offered the program here since reopening its Ocala office last year in response to demand for more workers in the trades.

A boom in construction has fueled the need for more workers following the bust when few people were entering the trades. Add to that an average age for electricians of over 50 and the industry is struggling to fill its skilled labor shortage.

All Florida Electric has about 100 employees and another 50 to 60 people working through staffing agencies, said Vice President Mike Gentry.

“At this point in time I could put another 50 electricians to work tomorrow,” he said. “I’ve been doing this for 36 years and I’ve never seen this much (construction) going on in Gainesville at one time.”

Gentry said electricians' hourly wages did not keep pace with past raises during the downturn, but have come up \$5 in the last couple years, which is enticing more people into the industry.

The company took six of RAMS' students starting Monday for the O'Connell Center renovation and new UF Health Shands hospital.

RAMS — which stands for Resource Acquisition and Management Services — provides temporary skilled labor to supplement contractors' staffing needs. RAMS started the JumpStart program in 2004 to fill the need for more entry-level workers before putting it on hiatus in 2008 and resuming in 2012.

“It's resupplying manpower. You've got to build the trades back up,” said Charles Discher, safety and training coordinator.

The staffing agency also helps contractors keep their costs down by using entry-level workers for certain jobs before bringing in higher paid journeymen and master electricians, he said.

JumpStart students spend the first week of the six-month program taking classes, which includes 10 hours of Occupational Safety and Health Administration training, and performing hands-on exercises. RAMS gives them tools and safety equipment.

After the first week, participants spend the rest of the six months in on-the-job training working for RAMS' client contractors and take one night class per month. They are paid \$9 an hour during the first week of training and \$10 an hour with incremental raises during on-the-job training.

After the six-month program, participants can get a job with a contractor or remain with RAMS to enter a four-year apprenticeship program that involves two night classes per week while they work. Apprenticeship programs are offered at SFC sponsored by the Builders Association of North Central Florida and at Marion Technical College sponsored by the Florida Association of Electricians in Ocala.

Justin MacDougall, apprenticeship coordinator at SFC, said RAMS' pre-apprenticeship program can provide a way to start training at different times of the year and they have talked about starting another class at the college before the end of the year.

“The one week of school can get them interested and get them in the field and they start to see this can really lead to something,” he said.

SFC's fall apprenticeship program has a record 109 students enrolled for its electrical, air conditioning, plumbing and carpentry programs.

“Everybody needs people,” MacDougall said. “They're having to take helpers and try to move them into foremen and supervisors. Schooling is a great way to do that. It helps move them up a little bit faster and get industry certifications.”

Those who get up to journeyman status after their apprenticeships can earn \$18 to \$20 an hour, said John Cammack, area manager for RAMS.

Safety and training coordinator Dan Perry said they try to assign workers as close to their homes as possible but the average distance for a job is 15 miles. In addition to all the construction in Gainesville, he said they have work for Ocala area workers with jobs along State Road 200 and Silver Springs Boulevard, all the way to Daytona Beach.

J'Von Swoll, 21, of Ocala said he was referred to the program by a family member. After starting in pre-med in college to become an orthodontist, he said he is trying to find out what he really likes.

“I want to become an electrician. Then I want to become a carpenter, maybe even an architect,” he said. “I want to be able to build and own my own businesses. You’ve got to start somewhere.”

Perry said he tries to inspire his students by relating his own experiences after 20 years in the field.

“I was at a dead end road like most of these guys,” he said. “I paint a picture for them of where I came from and how I did things and what this trade’s done for myself and my family.”