

Superfund Job Training Initiative Engages Community by Offering Employment Opportunities at the Savannah River Site - 11032

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ABSTRACT

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Superfund Job Training Initiative (SuperJTI) is a national program that was created to facilitate the employment of local citizens at remedial action sites in their communities. Largely underrepresented, minority, and/or unskilled communities usually suffer the most adverse impacts of the contamination and, due to their socioeconomic status, they are difficult to reach by common public outreach methods. Over the past 15 years, the SuperJTI program has successfully engaged hundreds of communities in part by partnering with local community activist groups including local churches, social service, and schools to inform them of the employment opportunities. While many in this demographic receive the information with skepticism, they graduate from the program with a renewed self-confidence and excitement to embark on a new career. They serve as ambassadors for their community and their employers and facilitate the flow of communication as the remediation takes place. The EPA has worked closely with the companies providing the career opportunities to tailor each SuperJTI program to their needs so the community is prepared properly for the positions being offered onsite. This case study focuses on two cycles of the SuperJTI programs that took place at the Department of Energy former nuclear weapons facility, Savannah River Site (SRS), in Aiken, South Carolina in 2009 and 2010. Ultimately, the SuperJTI program recruited, trained, and employed about 55 people and succeeded in providing sustainable, career employment opportunities to under-represented communities surrounding the SRS.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Superfund Job Training Initiative (SuperJTI) is a job readiness program designed to provide training and employment opportunities for underserved citizens living in communities affected by Superfund sites. The EPA offers SuperJTI training through its Technical Assistance Services for Communities (TASC) contract, which provides independent educational and technical assistance to communities affected by Superfund sites. Over the past 15 years, the SuperJTI program has successfully engaged hundreds of communities in part by partnering with local community activist groups including local churches, social service, and schools to inform them of the employment opportunities. While many in this demographic receive the information with skepticism, they graduate from the program with a renewed self-confidence and excitement to embark on a new career. They serve as ambassadors for their community and their employers and facilitate the flow of communication as the remediation takes place.

The EPA defines environmental justice as the fair treatment for people of all races, cultures, and incomes, regarding the development of environmental laws, regulations, and policies. Through initiatives like the SuperJTI program, EPA maintains an ongoing commitment to ensure

environmental justice for all people, regardless of race, color, national origin, or income. Ensuring environmental justice means not only protecting human health and the environment for everyone, but also ensuring that all people are treated fairly and are given the opportunity to participate meaningfully in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

The Superfund program uses its experience working with communities to create partnerships with local businesses, universities, labor unions, community and social service organizations, and other federal agencies to address local workforce issues. The EPA's goal is to help communities develop job opportunities and partnerships that remain long after a Superfund site is cleaned up. Through the SuperJTI program, EPA and its local partners make the most of existing resources and expertise to help citizens that are living in communities affected by Superfund sites. The initiative benefits communities by:

- providing job opportunities for qualified residents,
- increasing the skills of the local labor pool,
- increasing the local tax base, and
- supporting the work of local agencies already working for the improvement of their communities.

The diverse cleanup sites have been privately and federally funded, may be a relatively small project or a mission ongoing for decades, be located in metropolitan city or in rural areas of the country, and can contain any combination of contaminants from radionuclides to volatile organic compounds. The EPA has worked closely with the companies providing the career opportunities to tailor each SJTI program to their needs so the community is prepared properly for the positions being offered.

The SuperJTI was implemented for the first time at the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) complex at the Savannah River Site (SRS) in 2009. The SRS is a 310-square mile former nuclear materials fabrication facility located adjacent to the Savannah River in Aiken, Allendale, and Barnwell counties, South Carolina. The rural counties of Allendale and Barnwell have been especially hard-hit by the economic recession in recent years, evidenced by nearly a 25% unemployment rate. The SRS operated from 1950 to 1988, producing primarily tritium and plutonium-239 in reactors built on site. These materials were used for the creation of nuclear weapons as well as for the space program and medical and industrial research. Past disposal practices of chemical and radioactive wastes led to soil and ground water contamination at SRS. Cleanup activities at the site have been ongoing since 1989. To date, more than 324 of the site's 515 waste areas have been closed. Other cleanup activities have included the treatment of billions of gallons of ground water. The site's cleanup is scheduled for completion in 2030.

While portions of the SRS are in the cleanup phase, the SRS is also still a functioning DOE facility. Over 14,000 people are currently employed at SRS by DOE and its contractors, making it one of the primary employers in the area. In 2003, the SRS was selected as the location for three new plutonium facilities, mixed oxide (MOX) fuel fabrication, pit disassembly and conversion, and plutonium immobilization. The SRS is also home to the Savannah River National Laboratory. The SRS SuperJTI is the first Superfund job training program in the nation to be conducted at a federal facility.

Phase 1 – Core Planning Team

The first step in the process for beginning a cycle of the SuperJTI program is to establish the Core Planning Team. At the SRS, this team consisted of the EPA-Headquarters and Region 4 employees, EPA contractors, DOE-Savannah River, DOE contractors, and community partners. In 2009, EPA met with the DOE and its contractors to educate them about the SuperJTI program and how it could benefit them. The program is a great asset to employers as it provides a local pool of motivated, trained workers, which ensures quicker start-up at the site. These candidates have also undergone a rigorous screening and training at no cost to the employer, which provides the employer multiple opportunities to interact with the potential employees before offering them a permanent position with the company.

Once the contractor agrees to utilize the program, the Core Planning Team discusses the number and types of positions that need to be filled. Based upon this information, a SuperJTI program is specifically designed to meet their needs. For example, during the first cycle of SuperJTI at the SRS, the prime contractor, Savannah River Nuclear Solutions (SRNS), offered 20 nuclear production operator and material handler positions to be filled through the program. During the second cycle, another contractor, Savannah River Remediation (SRR), offered 43 Radiological Control Technicians (RadCon), nuclear production operators, and material handler positions to be filled via the SuperJTI program. The Core Planning Team attempts to fill all the negotiated positions with qualified candidates. Without job commitments from site employers, the Team will not organize a SuperJTI cycle at a Superfund site.

Once the job commitments are established, the Core Planning Team develops the technical training curriculum necessary to provide the candidates with some of the training necessary for their positions. During the first SRS SuperJTI cycle, the candidates were given 40-hour Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response (HAZWOPER) courses, CPR, and first aid training. They also completed courses in math, computer skills and valving. The training was provided by Aiken Technical College, and the Aiken Red Cross. Additionally, the graduates of the program will undergo more intensive training once onsite.

Next, the Core Planning Team reaches out to the community organizations near the site to educate them about the program and the benefits to the community. This step is critical to building relationships and trust with the stakeholders who are vital to reaching prospective candidates. These community organizations also assist with finding locations to host events, catering, screening and selecting candidates, and follow-up support after candidates have been hired. Reverend Brendolyn Jenkins, chair of the non-profit Imani Group, was critical to the success of both cycles of the SRS SuperJTI program. She and the Imani Group were well-known and respected in the community for her work and facilitated the Pre-Employment Job Skills (PEJST) training that followed their acceptance into the program. Once the community partners have been identified and agree to assist with the program, the Core Planning Team develops the schedule to proceed. Depending on the number and types of positions to be filled, the demographics and locations of the positions, and the time when they need to begin their jobs, this phase can take up to three months.

Phase 2 – Candidate Orientations

The screening process for qualifying candidates for entry into the program is a rigorous process. Based on the success of the advertising of the program, a significant number of candidates may arrive interested in learning more. The community partners are key to spreading the news about the SuperJTI program, as well as radio and print advertisements. During the second phase of the SuperJTI program, the public was invited to attend Candidate Orientations to learn the details of the SuperJTI program in their area and what will be required of them to participate. The Core Planning Team stressed that no job is guaranteed and the process is highly competitive. During each of the SRS SuperJTI cycles, an average of 350 interested candidates attended the five orientation sessions in Allendale, Aiken and Barnwell counties in South Carolina and Richmond County in Georgia. During the orientation, a Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE) test is administered to those who are interested in participating. This is a basic test routinely given to firefighters, nurses, and police to gauge the applicant's reading and math skills. The SuperJTI program required candidates pass the test at a 6th to 8th grade level in order to continue with the program. Of the 320 candidates who attended candidate orientations at the second cycle SRS SuperJTI program, 250 passed the test and were invited to Document Submission.

Those candidates who passed the TABE test are invited to bring legal documents to show they are eligible for the positions with the site contractor. They are requested to bring in person:

- driver's licenses,
- high school diplomas/GED,
- employment and financial history, and
- a letter of community recommendation.

The Core Planning Team also informed the candidates of the security requirements at the SRS, which due to its nuclear missions, has access restrictions. The candidates who have a criminal record were encouraged to inform the Core Planning Team as soon as possible to determine if it would preclude them from employment at the SRS. Again, no guarantees were made by the Team on the site contractor's behalf and it was up to the candidate to decide if he or she wanted to continue pursuing employment at the site. Once copies of the documents have been made, candidates who brought the necessary documentation were invited to attend Tryouts.

Phase 3 – Candidate Selection

The purpose of the Tryout activities are to give evaluators a chance to interact and assess the candidates personality and skills and to determine if they may be a good fit for employment with the site contractor. Evaluators consist of the EPA, DOE, site contractors, community partners, and graduates of prior SuperJTI cycles. The perceptions of those who have graduated carry substantial weight with the other evaluators as they are members of the community who have been through the process and know what skills are necessary to be successful at the site. Ultimately, each evaluator will vote and, even lobby for or against, candidates they have interacted with since Candidate Orientations. During Tryouts, candidates are asked to arrive sharply at 6:00 a.m. at a large recreation-type facility. A few motivated candidates have been known to leave in the wee hours of the morning or sleep in their cars at the location to ensure they meet this first critical requirement.

After everyone is checked in, the Core Planning Team leads the candidates through a series of exercises to see how they interact individually, within a group, under stressful conditions, during group interviews, and with the evaluators themselves. During the SRS SuperJTI second cycle, 25 evaluators participated in a 2-day tryout event in Barnwell, South Carolina to assess the skills of 179 potential candidates to fill 43 jobs. Both days began with half an hour of calisthenics and a light breakfast. Next, the candidates participated in team building and leadership exercises to assess how they interacted with each other. Another set of math practice tests were also administered to further assess their education skills. During these activities, the evaluators walk around with clipboards with the candidates' background information and a picture to take notes on their observations. These were critical during the voting process to revive the evaluators' impressions of so many candidates. In the future, the Core Planning Team has decided to reduce the size of the group to no more than about 80 potential candidates to ensure each evaluator has a thorough interaction with each candidate.

The evaluators meet immediately after Tryouts to discuss and vote on which candidates will enter the SuperJTI program. Although some attrition is expected, no more candidates are selected than positions are guaranteed from the contractor to ensure no graduate is left unemployed. The unsuccessful candidates are notified of their selection and encouraged to try again in the future, while the successful candidates are invited to Pre-Employment Job Skills and technical training. Table 1 compares the results of both cycles of SRS SuperJTI and the candidate participations during each phase. Cycle 1 was from January to May 2009 and Cycle 2 took place from September 2009 to July 2010.

Table 1 - SRS SuperJTI Cycles 1 and 2 Participation

Event	Total Participated	
	Cycle 1	Cycle 2
Candidate Orientations	250	321
Document Submissions	113	250
Tryouts	90	179
SRS-SJTI Training	21	43

Phase 4- Pre-Employment Job Skills and Technical Training

Once the SRS SuperJTI class was selected, they underwent training with the community partner to prepare them to meet the expectations of their new employer. Many of them have never had a professional career and the particulars of cultural competency, money management, environmental justice, and effective work habits were foreign to them. During the 2 weeks with Reverend Jenkins, she requested the candidates dress professionally for class and arrive early because “early is on time, on time is late, and late is unacceptable!” Reverend Jenkins encouraged sharing personal perspectives from the candidates and fostered a supportive “village” atmosphere where candidates could speak freely in the group and encourage each other to succeed. This would become critical as the technical training would prove to challenge their intellectual stamina and focus. The SuperJTI may not need to include Pre-Employment Job Skills Training (PEJST) at every site it operates. The need can be determined based on the skill levels of the candidates acquired and the positions they were hired for.

This is also true for the technical training portion of the program. During the second SRS SuperJTI cycle, the RadCon Inspector, electrical and mechanical engineering positions required a 4-year college degree. Fourteen of the candidates selected met this qualification and, after completing PEJST, passing their background checks, another SRR test, and being interviewed, they were offered positions with SRR. They did not participate in the SRS SuperJTI technical training, but were hired and started a lengthy training program with the contractor. The remaining candidates participated in additional technical training at Denmark Technical College, a HBCU in Barnwell, South Carolina, to prepare them for the test to become production operators and material handlers. Their training included crash courses in Physics, Fluid Flow, Biology, Chemistry, Radiological Principles, Algebra and Geometry. Other SuperJTI programs have also included training for interview and computer skills, hazardous material cleanup, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), asbestos and lead paint abatement, air sampling, general construction, site assessment, and CPR/first aid.

Near the completion of technical training during SRS SuperJTI Cycle 2, the SRS contractor, SRR, performed background checks and drug screening as required for employment. The Core Planning Team learned that three of the candidates were unable to obtain employment due to negative background information despite their stellar performance in the program. In the future, the Team will have background checks performed much earlier in the screening process. Ultimately, in addition to the 14 candidates who did not participate in technical training, 28 candidates were administered exams and offered positions as:

- 15 General Production Operators,
- 7 RadCon Auxiliary employees, and
- 6 Temporary Material Handlers

The Temporary Material Handlers will be able to test for permanent general production operator positions in six months with additional training. They began their careers at SRS on July 12, 2010. The EPA continues to provide tutoring support for those graduates who want to test into permanent positions.

Phase 5 – Professional Oversight and Support

The SuperJTI program funds monthly status reports by the community partner for the following year after the new employees begin their careers with the contractor. The partner checks in with them to ensure they are assimilating into the new professional culture and any issues that arise are resolved quickly.

SRS SuperJTI Current Status

The EPA Region 4 office continues to maintain relationships with its Core Team Planning members and SuperJTI candidates employed at SRS. While the positions obtained by the graduates were permanent positions, SRNS has recently begun a process to reduce its workforce by 1,400 employees by 2012 due to reduced budgets. It is uncertain at this time how this will affect the 16 employees hired through the SuperJTI program. There has been no indication the 39 employed with SRR will be impacted at this time.

Also, the EPA Region 4 is in the planning stages of a third round of SRS SuperJTI with Parsons, another contractor at the site. Parsons has been an active supporter of the previous two rounds of

SuperJTI and is scheduled to begin operating the SRS Salt Waste Processing Facility in early 2012. The Core Planning Team is scheduled to begin its planning for this cycle in summer 2011 for the approximately 40 production operators who will be needed to test and operate the facility. Each cycle of SRS SuperJTI has cost approximately \$200,000.

References

EPA HQ TASC SuperJTI program

<http://www.epa.gov/superfund/community/sfjti/index.htm>

EPA Region 4 SRS Superfund program

<http://www.epa.gov/region4/waste/npl/nplsc/savrivsc.htm>