

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.

The green economy is slowly but steadily growing, and has been identified as one of the five economies expected help lead the post pandemic jobs recovery. As we've discussed many, many times here in Working Nation, job creation is local. Today, we're talking about green jobs in Los Angeles with Daniel Ferguson, director of workforce development at the Los Angeles Cleantech Incubator. Daniel, thank you very much for joining Work in Progress.

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

What a pleasure, Ramona. Thank you so much for the opportunity.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You and I have had a chance to talk before. I know all about LACI and what you do, but for the audience tuning in for the first time to hear about LACI, share a little bit about what you guys do there.

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

LACI, and some folks call it the Los Angeles Cleantech Incubator. We're situated in the arts district of downtown Los Angeles. Our mission is to create an inclusive green economy. We're a nonprofit organization that helps to incubate promising cleantech startups. What that simply means is startups that specialize in technology or solutions within three different areas, the three focus areas in which we call it, which would be clean energy, smart, sustainable cities, and zero emissions transportation, get the opportunity to scale and pilot their projects in order to provide solutions and underserved communities, and also those that suffer from this dismal climate conditions.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So, you're putting money into these startups that are focused in these green areas. Give me an example of a program that you might have helped. You can name it, or you could just give me an example of how you guys do that.

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

Well, we have current pilots running in some disadvantaged communities, which includes San Pedro, Pacoima, Leimert Park, and these particular areas have pilots that are geared around zero emissions transportation. Some of our startups such as Zoomo, Circuit, are all providing e-mobility options and shuttle service to provide means in which folks can use the technology and also help to reduce carbon emissions as well. We also have a company by the name of Envoy that is providing car share services as well, to provide local residents with the opportunity to use electric vehicles, to be able to reduce carbon emissions in those areas as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So, your workforce development program is designed to help underrepresented groups get into the green tech industry. How are you making that happen? How are you working with these pilot programs, or how do those pilot programs work?

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

The actual purpose of our workforce development program is to provide individuals from underrepresented communities with experiential training and industry recognized credentials to get into the green workforce. But the ultimate outcome is to prepare our participants to be a talent pipeline for our startups. Our whole goal is to place our participants with our local startups within the LACI ecosystem, and also partner organizations in our ecosystem as well by way of our transportation electrification partnership. Since the genesis of our ABC Fellowship program, we've been able to provide employment opportunities with local startups, such as ChargerHelp!, and also some of our partner organizations such as PCS Energy. This is how we're really closing a loop when it comes to technical training, and also providing that positive outcome, which is ultimately employment within the cleantech space.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Let's start at the beginning. Where do you find the recruits? Where do you find the people that are going to go through this program?

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

We find recruits from local community based organizations, local work source centers, and also just our LACI ecosystem by way of sending out newsletters and announcements or word of mouth as well is very important to us. We've also partnered with a lot of community colleges and universities that have provided us with incredible referrals that subsequently has led to build a quality pipeline for our partners and our startups as well. Definitely want to recognize our community engagement manager, Jose Hernandez, who does a fantastic job with ensuring that local communities, political officials and the like all are very well aware of our recruitment efforts in Los Angeles at large, by also providing us with an opportunity to engage local community constituents as well, so that they can take part in our program.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I believe that you guys start, once you get the recruits, you have a day of learning, you teach people about what the cleantech industry is. What kind of messaging are you sending during that?

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

Clean tech, for some, it's attractive, and for others, it's this interesting concept that some folks might not be aware of. We believe that introducing them to clean technology is important. Throughout the career expiration day, we're providing individuals with the opportunity to learn about clean tech, also understand career pathways and introduce them to our LACI ecosystem and our startups. We believe that hope springs eternal, and we believe that exposure is key. The ultimate goal is not only helping them to realize some of the career opportunities that can come out of participating in our workforce development program, but also some of the other opportunities to become an actual founder and to have your own cleantech idea and help them to see how realistic it could be for them to become a founder and provide solutions in their local community as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

After you do the day of learning where you're teaching them about the tech industry, do you guys do a boot camp of any kind, technical bootcamp?

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

We do. We provide a technical bootcamp. That is what I call the nuts and bolts of our actual program, where individuals learn from industry practitioners that are experts in the actual area in which we're training. They also receive industry recognized credentials and robust career coaching, really to ensure that folks are ready for the workforce. This technical bootcamp can range from two weeks, all the way up to eight or 10 weeks. It just depends on the particular theme that we're focusing on for the respective cohort.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

The other good thing about your program that I recall you telling me it's earn and learn, so then the recruits go into an apprenticeship program.

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

Yes. They go into an apprenticeship program with our local startups, our partner organizations, where they get three months of hands-on experience to really apply all the things that they've learned throughout the technical bootcamp. They also receive a stipend to be able to help them with living expenses as they go through the three month internship.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Is the internship, and I used apprenticeship before, but internship is the correct term, is this a full-time job? Is it part-time? How does that work?

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

Well, technically, it's part-time. We do encourage our participants to take advantage of 20 hours a week. That way, there's a work and life balance so that they get the experience or training that they need in hopes that once they complete after three months, they can transition right into full-time employment with the startup, or either partner organizations, or perhaps other organizations that might be in our ecosystem.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So, Daniel, the programs that you are connecting the job seekers with are people interested in this community, those programs are within the Los Angeles community where these people live, right?

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

Yeah. We recruit from the Los Angeles community, and all of our programs since COVID has happened virtually. Folks are able to tune in from all over Los Angeles county. But previous to the COVID, all of our trainings would be at all our La Kretz Innovation Campus, which is our campus in our district of downtown LA. But now because they're receiving earmark from our state legislature, we are able to hopefully expand our programming to be place-based. That will be in local communities where folks can access the trainings within closer proximity.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What is the impact environmentally by bringing these green jobs to a community?

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

Based on the CalEnviroScreen, which is the tool that is used in California to determine the air quality for a local area, we have found that south LA, which according to Los Angeles County, is considered service planning areas six, and even service planning area four as well has some of the worst environmental outcomes in terms of climate. Most of these areas are in the 80th percentile as it relates to bad air quality. That's one of the ways in which we are impacting the areas environmentally, by helping people become more aware of climate change, and also providing zero emission mobility options and clean energy options as well. That's the environmental impact. Of course, there's also the economic impact by helping folks to have more sustainable wages, by offering them high road employment opportunities, which subsequently lead to better outcomes as it relates to community wealth building.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Speaking of that, what kind of skills are people learning when they go through this program? What kind of hard skills, what kind of soft skills?

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

Well, it definitely varies in terms of hard skills. Soft skills, for certain, they're learning how to be critical thinkers, which now some folks will argue that that's a hard skill. I still regard it to be a soft skill because it's a through line for all the different industries and all the job functions. They're also learning how to be effective communicators as well, and they're also learning on the hard skill side skills from computer aided drafting and manufacturing, electronic assembly, product development, how to service electric vehicle charging stations, how to maintain electric vehicles and diagnose the problems. Also, project management training, and most recently, we had a training for software development and IT support. So, they're learning full stacked development skills and also how to do cloud computing as well. There's a variety of trainings that we've offer, but we arguably would say what's most important is the soft skills that they gain in order to be able to clearly communicate all the skills that they've learned and how they can be a value to a local startup or organization.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I love what you said earlier, too, that one of the other messages that is being shared there is you could become your own entrepreneur. You can start your own business.

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

Yeah, absolutely. I would say really the perfect example is that of ChargerHelp!, which is one of our LACI startups. In late 2019, early 2020, we partnered with Kameale Terry, who at the time helped us to develop our EV network technician training program. She had a great idea. At the time she was an employee for a local EV charging station software provider, and said, "Hey, we can train folks on how to service these charging stations. Out of that idea, a few months later births ChargerHelp! Which is now, as they say, keeping people and charging stations working. Now they're in seven or eight different states, and so it just shows that there's always possibilities and room for opportunity, as long as individuals have the resources they need to be able to scale and be able to grow and see opportunities come out of that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I know a bit about ChargerHelp!, and I know that New Profit has recently just come in and helped fund the rapid re-skilling program to try to help get 20,000 people across the country re-skilled very, very

quickly. I applaud your being one of the initial investors in that company, because it seems that it is putting a lot of people to work.

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

It's a really incredible opportunity. They're doing amazing work as well as all of our other startups as well. We certainly appreciate our startups believing in our workforce development initiatives.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What is the end game here? How does someone go from all the training, from the internship, into that job?

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

I would have to say that ultimately, if I can sum it up, just plug into our ecosystem and plug into the opportunities. But in terms of, I would say the process, is once they enter into our program as participants and they have successfully completed our technical bootcamp and they've been able to go through our internship, then the ultimate outcome, the solution is for them to be placed with a local LACI startup or with one of our partner organizations. If they happen to not go through our actual internship, we also provide career coaching and also a career fair for those that might have completed our technical bootcamp, but did not take advantage of the internship to get placed as well with one of our companies that have partnered with us to participate in our career fairs as well. That's the ultimate outcome. That's the end goal.

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

Some of our workforce development participants are matriculating college students, so some of those returned to school, some of those are encouraged to go to school to continue to up skill and get the credentials that they need for that next step. But then on the reverse, there are some that have gone through a traditional four year university and received their four year degree, but need those technical skills. We've had the good fortune to see both outcomes. One example is a student from Cal State LA that graduated with a degree in mechanical engineering, was able to go through our EV network technician training program, received those credentials, and as a result, working with our career coach week in and week out, was able to land his dream job at LADWP. Those are the outcomes that we love to see. Then we see some that have just have a high school diploma, no college experience, and land a job at a startup. That's the end goal, high road employment opportunities and community wealth building.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What do you see the future for LACI and for this workforce development program? Are you trying to bring in more companies? Are you trying to bring in more partners? How do you want to expand the program?

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

Our vision is more cleaner, greener, inclusive economy by way of being able to both through the workforce pipeline and create 600,000 jobs by 2050. Our ultimate vision is to convene a regional consortium of public and private organizations, academia, and also government, to ensure that we are taking full advantage of the green job space and making sure that individuals have the skills that they

need to be able to seamlessly transition into these high road employment opportunities. The only way it's going to happen is if we have this consortium where everyone is working off the same green job definition, and also making sure that we keep track of all of the positive outcomes to be able to continue to be able to utilize this data to support our claim that green jobs are the future. In fact, they're the present future. That's really our vision for workforce development and being able to provide meaningful, high paying green jobs to local communities.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What is your definition of a green job?

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and we hope that eventually it would be updated, but as of right now, there are two working definitions for green jobs. One is an actual company that has sustainable practices to be able to create a green product, and then the other, of course, is just an actual company that has a green product to be able to help to reduce greenhouse emissions and pollution.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Do you see any movement in that Bureau of Labor Statistics definition change? We talk a lot about it here at Working Nation, trying to figure out what is exactly a green job and why has that definition not been expanded?

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

We definitely do see hope. We're working actively with our leaders on local federal level to encourage that change to happen. We definitely believe that it will happen with continued support and continued conversation. We were definitely optimistic about seeing that change.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've had this conversation with a lot of nonprofits, workforce development groups, the tech industry has not always been seen as an inviting industry to people of color, women. How important is what you're doing to change that perception?

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

It's really important for the tech industry to realize that there are hidden treasures within local BIPOC communities that have the talent, the skills in order to be able to help to grow companies and to have these meaningful roles. Giving startups exposure to our talent pipeline and seeing how well they can actually develop an idea and be able to work for an organization is really helping to change that narrative. Then also, it's important for our startups and even our founders and our workforce development participants to realize that this green economy is for everyone. We want to be able to open up the door, the opportunity for folks to see that. I'll also say, not to mention, that our senior vice president of enhancing community in our leadership team, really the mission is to be able to show diversity, equity, and inclusion amongst our founders and also our workforce development participants as well.

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

Diversity, equity, and inclusion is very important to us. In fact, enhancing community are particular pillars that houses workforce development wants to ensure that underrepresented groups are engaged at every cleantech stage, from ideation, workforce and employment, to not only within our LACI ecosystem, but also in our local communities as well. We want to make sure that we not only touch those in our ecosystem, but those in local communities so that we can bring them into our ecosystem to get the exposure they need.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So, Daniel, if anybody would like to know more about the fellowship program, what should they do?

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

They can reach out to us via email, at workforce@laci.org, workforce@laci.org. They can visit our website, which is [laci.org\apcfellowship](https://laci.org/apcfellowship), and they can learn more there and reach out to us, and we'd be happy to share more information.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I will put those links on the article that goes with this podcast. Daniel Ferguson, director of workforce development at Los Angeles Cleantech Incubator, thank you so much for joining us.

Daniel Ferguson, LACI workforce development director:

Thank you, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor in chief of working nation. Thank you for listening.