

TRAINING AND PLACING GRADUATES AT UTILITY-SCALE SOLAR FARMS IN VIRGINIA



SOUTHSIDE VIRGINIA
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With large companies across the US looking to purchase renewable energy as part of their sustainable business strategies, the need for solar power has grown considerably. Virginia and its citizens are well placed to take advantage of the rapidly growing need. The solar industry may deploy as much [as 500 MWs of solar per year over the next five years](#). This could mean tens of thousands of jobs for the Commonwealth, but to take advantage, they need to have the skilled workers necessary to support the growing industry.

Preparing skilled workers to take advantage of solar jobs

The SHINE Initiative (Solar Hands-On Instructional Network of Excellence), a public-private partnership hosted by the Maryland-DC-Delaware-Virginia Solar Energy Industries Association (MDV-SEIA) and its nonprofit partner the [Solar Research Institute](#) (SRI), is a first-in-the-state curriculum and training program for the utility-scale solar industry. Microsoft is providing funding for scholarships; curriculum development and

management; the lab; industry mobilization; and general program needs. The initiative prepares the Commonwealth of Virginia and its citizens to realize the benefits of utility-scale solar market growth, including increased employment and community development.

As part of the leadership council of this unique public-private partnership between the solar energy industry, local businesses, and leading higher education, Microsoft has an active role in the design and growth of the Initiative. Responsibilities include providing input and advice on the direction and programs of the Initiative, and participation in priority recruiting opportunities that the Initiative drives.

Pilot classes starting for underrepresented students

Southside Virginia Community College partnered with businesses to develop and operate the training program and the Virginia Community College System and the Tobacco Region Revitalization Commission along with other founding partners provided funding. SRI also worked with the [Solar Foundation's Solar Training Network](#) for guidance on the curriculum and implementation of best practices for workforce development.

"The Virginia Solar Workforce Initiative [now named SHINE] is an exceptional example of a public-private partnership," [said Dr. Al Roberts, president of Southside](#)





[Virginia Community College](#). “These jobs represent an excellent opportunity for Virginians to be a part of this dynamic, high-growth industry, and we’re excited to partner with industry leaders in the utility-scale solar field, the Maryland-DC-Delaware-Virginia Solar Energy Industries Association, to create this program.”

The initial pilot classes are designed to train 56 students and expand to approximately 200 students over its second year of operations. For potential students, the SHINE initiative targets veterans, formerly incarcerated individuals, and citizens from rural communities with higher unemployment and fewer career and training opportunities.

Opportunities abound for graduates of the Initiative

Graduates of the training program will be qualified for well-paying jobs and positioned to advance to career ladders with higher-than-average incomes. The individuals’ incomes will have additional economic development impacts for the communities in which they work (such as more dining out, more groceries purchased, and more gasoline purchased). The growth of the utility solar industry in Virginia will support small business development in the electrical, civil contracting, landscaping, and engineering fields. Solar power plants constructed by these graduates will support environmental sustainability in Virginia by decreasing carbon and particulate matter pollutants from other sources of

electricity. Much of the electricity generated by utility solar projects in Virginia powers data infrastructure critical for broadband access, online commerce, and cloud-based information systems utilized by businesses, first responders, and private citizens.

The majority of industry members in the SHINE Initiative are local and national solar developers whose success is intertwined with successful engagement of city councils, economic development councils, county supervisors, and other related institutions, ensuring that the Initiative receives inherent attention through their ongoing activities. In addition, the academic partners, general public, and policy stakeholders will be engaged in the program marketing process (student recruitment, for example), making the case that “solar is now” in Virginia, that good jobs and related economic benefits flow from utility solar’s growth in the Commonwealth, and that the SHINE Initiative training programs enable the pursuit of such jobs.

Looking ahead

The plan is to grow the program at Southside Virginia Community College, and to later replicate the program in other Southside and southwest Virginia markets. Labor demand and program results could lead the partnership to scale up across the Commonwealth of Virginia.