

Coloradoan

Estimated printed pages: 3

June 17, 2008

Section: BUSINESS

Page: A7, A8

HVAC professionals to discuss worker shortage *PAT FERRIER*

By PAT FERRIER

PatFerrier@ coloradoan.com

Jeff and Mike Allen plan to double revenue and add between 25 and 30 jobs at their Fort Collins plumbing, heating and service company in the next five years.

With luck, they'll be able to find trained workers.

With an average retirement age of 55 in the heating, ventilation and air-conditioning, or HVAC, field, the industry is bracing for the loss of about one-third of its work force in the next 10 years.

The shortage, which has already started to surface, will be a key topic when the Allens host a national meeting of their peers next week.

About 40 independent HVAC contractors from throughout the U.S. will be in Fort Collins on June 25-27 to learn about the Allens' business model, observe best practices and discuss industry trends, including the shortage of workers.

"The challenge is how to find younger people who enjoy working with their hands, are mechanically inclined and enjoy working with people," Jeff Allen said.

"There are a lot of people out there for whom a traditional four-year school route may not be appropriate ... there are other viable options such as going into the trades."

The Colorado Department of Labor and Employment estimates about 300 openings per year in the field, with 82 percent of those because of growth and 18 percent because of replacements.

The median hourly wage for HVAC mechanics and installers in 2005 was \$18.41 with a median annual wage or salary of just more than \$39,000, according to the labor department.

Impending retirements coupled with low enrollment in HVAC training programs is compounding the problem.

Front Range Community College's HVAC program has struggled with low enrollment despite the shortage of workers, said Sharon Robinson, dean of instruction for career and technical programs.

"We try to push that it's a very good wage-earning position," Robinson. "But we have difficulty getting students to come in."

Enrollment in the program, which runs out of Thompson School District's Learning Center, averages about eight students per class, about 75 percent of what FRCC typically likes to have in a class.

"I'm carrying lower enrollments to keep the program going," Robinson said. "But I'm puzzled by the low enrollment. I don't think there is an understanding of what it is, how much money can be made and how conducive it is to women in the field."

Part of what the Allens will demonstrate to the peer group is a commitment to providing two to three hours of customer service and technical training for their staff every week.

In addition, they will talk about their strategy for doubling revenues during the next five years and adding between 25 and 30 workers to their 70-member work force.

The Allens, whose parents Marion and June, started the business 46 years ago, were chosen to lead the peer group

meeting by Nexstar, a business development and best practices organization that delivers business training, systems and support to independent home service providers.

"Typically they pick members of organizations that are hopefully well run so that when other members participate, we are able to learn a lot from each other. ... They come in and really scrutinize a business and offer ideas and glean ideas from the other members.

"Through the process you exchange ideas and learn from each other," Jeff Allen said.

Copyright (c) The Coloradoan. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Gannett Co., Inc. by NewsBank, inc.