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High School Graduates attracted to Skilled Trade Careers near Home

(EAU CLAIRE, WI - May 23, 2023) The demand for skilled trade workers and the attraction of working in their hometowns has many of Wisconsin's 65,000 High School graduates turning to careers with municipal utilities. Apprenticeship programs, such as one for Electrical Line Workers offered in partnership by the Municipal Electric Utilities of Wisconsin (MEUW) and the Wisconsin Technical College System, are showing the increase in class sizes.

"My classes keep getting bigger and bigger in this apprenticeship program," says Kendal Schmidt, Electrical Line Worker Apprenticeship Instructor at Chippewa Valley Technical College (CVTC). During a recent hands-on, underground electrical equipment training session, Schmidt said he typically has close to 30 students per class in the four-year program. Next school year, he says, that number has grown by 50-percent to more than 45 second-year apprentices. "During COVID, hiring was down," he says. "After COVID, when work picked back up, we're seeing everybody making up ground and continuing to move forward."

Nationwide, the Bureau of Labor Statistics says more than 4-million skilled workers are needed to replace those lost during the pandemic and from a retiring baby boom generation. The demand, the lure of working in the communities where they grew up, and paid on-the-job training and technical college instruction is enticing many Wisconsin graduates.

"Being able to contribute, turning the lights on, that's the main reason I've chosen my career path," says Sam Turner, Line Worker Apprentice, Sauk City Utilities. "Plus, you're getting paid to go to school and learning things you are going to use when you're at work." The fourth-year apprentice says being able to have a positive impact on his community was key to his decision to apply to work for his municipal utility. It's a common theme for students in the program, which requires one week of training each quarter at the technical college along with about 8000 hours of on-the-job training over four years.

"You're not sitting in school for 9 months out of the year," says Tyler Strey, a third-year Line Worker Apprentice for New London Utilities. "It's go for a week, bring what you learned at school back to the workplace, teach the other guys," says Strey. "It's kind of cool to know what you did here and bring it back to work and use it."

Andy Goettl, a Line Worker Apprentice from Marshfield Utilities, says he likes the real-life training scenarios in a safe environment before he takes it back to the daily work he enjoys. "It's something different every day," says Goettl. "You're doing one job one day and the next day you're doing a whole different thing."

Schmidt says the partnership between MEUW and CVTC allows the municipal utilities to join together and share the cost of the Apprenticeship Program. "The program is very valuable for MEUW." Apprentices like Turner say it's beneficial to everyone involved, "It's a win-win in my eyes."

Formed in 1928, MEUW is the state association providing safety services, leadership and management training, advocacy, and member support to 81 municipal electric utilities across Wisconsin. Collectively, these public power utilities distribute more than 11 percent of the electricity in Wisconsin and most have century-old roots in serving their communities. Municipal utilities operate on a not-for-profit basis overseen by a local governing board composed of local citizens and elected officials. To learn more, visit meuw.org.

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