

# Brownfields Success Story

## Strong Roots in Professional Growth Chicago, Illinois

OAI, Inc., provides environmental health and safety education, workforce training and employment opportunities to disadvantaged communities in Chicago. Their mission is to provide training that leads to safe, meaningful employment while helping companies and communities to thrive. Each year, the nonprofit serves approximately 4,000 residents, more than 85 percent of whom are placed in a job upon graduation.

Two OAI programs, Chicago Greencorps and LYTE Solar Pipeline Training, are funded in part by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under its Environmental Workforce Development and Job Training grant program. As a grant recipient since 2002, OAI has demonstrated how the program can help transform lives and advance economic opportunity in places where it is needed most.

### Serving Communities in Need

Although OAI programs are open to all Chicagoans, the organization recruits primarily from underserved populations, including the formerly incarcerated, minorities and veterans living in the west and south sides of the city. Candidates there face chronic unemployment and may have limited work history, training and skills. The unemployment rate has been as high as 28 percent, and the poverty rate, nearly 35 percent.

Residents are also disproportionately affected by exposure to hazardous wastes, a residual effect of past industrial pollution and the recent increase in landfill waste. In fact, Chicago's South Side has the largest concentration of garbage landfills in the U.S. Midwest. An estimated 120 brownfield sites are in and around the program's target communities.

"Part of our programming helps individuals become more literate in environmental issues so they can become advocates within their own community and families," says Mollie Dowling, executive director at OAI. "We want to train them to preserve and strengthen the communities where they live."

### Supporting Green Jobs

For more than 16 years, OAI has partnered with the City of Chicago on Greencorps, a green industry job training program for individuals with barriers to employment. Greencorps enrolls more than 30 Chicago residents each year who earn a wage for their work on ecological improvement projects throughout the city and Cook County. Graduates have gone on to work for contractors involved in environmental



**EPA Grant Recipient:**  
OAI, Inc.

**EPA Grant Type:**  
Environmental Workforce  
Development and Job Training

**Job Placement Rate:**  
85%

**Average Starting Hourly Wage:**  
\$11.00

#### Core Training:

- Basic Carpentry
- Chicago Wilderness Burn Certifications
- Defensive Driving
- First Aid and Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation
- Forklift Operations
- Hazardous Waste Handling
- Illinois Pesticide Certification
- Midwest Renewable Energy Association Solar Site Assessor
- Occupational Safety and Health 40-Hour Hazardous Waste Operations and Emergency Response (OSHA 40-Hour HAZWOPER)
- OSHA 10-Hour Construction Safety
- Solar Installer



Greencorps participants learn to operate chainsaws, chippers and brush cutters as part of their ecological restoration and natural resources training.



In celebration of Earth Day, Greencorps trainees and staff participated in cleanup activities at a large forest preserve in Cook County, Illinois.

**“As a recruiter, it has been great to help students in the Chicago Greencorps program get their foot in the door with green jobs. Together, we have helped start many careers in the environmental industry.”**

*Brian Howard,  
Recruiter,  
Aerotek*

**For more information:**

Visit the EPA Brownfields website at [www.epa.gov/brownfields](http://www.epa.gov/brownfields) or contact Linda Morgan at 312-886-4747 or [Morgan.Linda@epa.gov](mailto:Morgan.Linda@epa.gov).

remediation, mixed industrial and commercial corridor revitalization, new residential projects and green space and wetland restoration.

Victor Short graduated from the program a few years ago. Raised in the projects of Chicago’s South Side, Victor had been struggling to make ends meet as a single dad of seven children. He knew he wanted to make a change but didn’t know where to start. Three of his brothers had completed the Greencorps program, and so he applied. “I just needed a job,” he says. “I didn’t realize until later all the skills and certifications I would gain through the program and all the doors it would open for me.”

Today, Short is earning well over the minimum hourly wage as a field supervisor of ecological restoration work at public parks around the city. “I learned that if I applied myself, I could succeed,” he says.

## Training a Solar Workforce

OAI’s LYTE Solar Pipeline Training is a 12-week course that prepares students for entry-level employment as a designer, installer and maintenance technician for solar-photovoltaic power systems. Students also learn hazardous waste-handling skills and safety, life skills and basic computer literacy and receive professional development training.

Dowling notes the training, which draws roughly 20 individuals per cohort 2–3 times per year, is well-rounded. She says, “After going through the training, if an individual decides not to focus their career in the solar industry, they will still have a path to employment in other green jobs.”

## Teaching Power Skills

Both programs teach participants what OAI calls “power skills” to help them successfully keep employment. Training is held during typical working hours—from roughly 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.—and includes lessons on conflict resolution, decision-making and interpersonal communications.

The programs use a blended learning model with classroom instruction, e-learning, gamification and peer-to-peer training. Short says that trainers made it easy for him to learn new skills. “My trainers had a background that’s similar to mine and explained things in a way I could understand,” he says. “They taught me how to be professional and network with people.”

## Collaborating with Employers

OAI works with local employers to create training that suits the labor market. Employers speak at OAI classes about what’s expected on the job, and participants can meet with employers at forums hosted by the organization.

“Greencorps has provided numerous qualified candidates to assist with full-time and seasonal work,” says James Melledy, senior consultant and principal at Cardno, a global environmental company. “Having trained personnel ready to work on day one of the season is invaluable and helps our business save training time and money.”

And the solar pipeline training was developed in response to Illinois’s 2016 Future Energy Jobs Act (FEJA), which promotes a “clean energy economy” by creating jobs and providing training for the future workforce.

“FEJA has injected millions of dollars into the solar industry in Illinois,” Dowling says. “There are huge solar projects all over the state—and they’re hiring.”