



# The great TEXAS talent search

How the industry can  
invest in the future

*By Allison Deerr*

**T**It's no secret that the plumbing industry workforce is aging while the demand for skilled workers continues to grow. How are industry organizations and individual contractors working to solve this challenge? We talked to Texans about what avenues of entry to the plumbing there are in the Lone Star State.

As in the past, there is the path of total on-the-job training, says Alicia Dover, executive director of the Plumbing Heating Cooling Contractors - Texas. She says a newly-hired apprentice works under the supervision of a master plumber. Hours are logged and, upon completion of 4,000 hours, a tradesman license can be obtained; upon completion of 8,000 hours, a journeyman's license may be acquired. Further hours logged in are required to obtain a master's license. The labor unions offer five-year apprenticeship programs, a combination of on-the-job training and formal training.

"Another alternative is working as an apprentice for a plumbing company and attending a four-year Department of Labor-approved apprenticeship program either at night or in special quarterly classes," Dover says. "This program, in conjunction with the on-the-job process, allows apprentices the opportunity to apply what they are learning and acquire additional hours towards their licensing requirements by completing the program."

An individual can become a registered apprentice in the state of Texas at age 16. This allows many to obtain part-time employment, apprenticeships, and internships while still in high school. If they are also enrolled in some sort of construction trades program in high school, some of those hours can count towards ultimate licensing as well, Dover explains.

"Yes, we often reach out to local high schools where our contractors reside or do business," she says. "They are working diligently to build a 'pipeline' of future industry workers. The sooner we reach them the better! Several high schools in Texas already have full-fledged construction trade programs, vocational education, and specific programs geared towards plumbing, HVAC and electrical."

Texas State Technical College has placed itself as a premier partner in providing instruction for these high demand careers. They currently play a crucial role in providing that "dual credit" piece high schools are seeking for their student, Dover notes.

"Further, they will continue to grow in their partnerships with us as they often have the labs, instructors and curriculums in place that will allow us to easily create and maintain a viable trades' education program. Their growth plans are making a way for this to happen more widespread in Texas."

Should we do more as an industry? "Absolutely! Texas is large and has more than 1,200 school districts. That being said, PHCC just makes pebble-sized drops in the area of trades' promotion," she says. "It is our goal and long-range plan to create a means whereby the districts know we exist and what information and resources we can offer those schools or students considering a career in construction related fields."

Until the passage of House Bill 5 in 2013, "we had not had this sort of thing on our radar," Dover says. This bill allowed schools to create endorsements and pathways for their students. Students can begin to choose career interests at a much earlier age and take courses that will lead them to that career choice upon graduation. "This was huge in terms of getting the trades back in the schools. PHCC would like to be the leader in showing school districts how to create programs that relevant, inviting and specific to what a student needs to enter the field of plumbing and HVAC."

Currently, there are the traditional plumbing, HVAC, welding and electrical programs in area high schools. Students may spend two hours or more each day learning basic construction, safety, tool usage and construction math. Further, they often learn through textbook and lab time, as well as special community projects that allow "real world" learning. Also, a high school may partner with other schools in their area so that only one school has the trades program and the other schools transport their students to that school for part of their day.

Some districts even have created high schools that are trades only and all schooling is done on these campuses, Dover says. PHCC members, as well as contractors in general, contribute supplies, technology, what you must know, and know-how to these students. "They may do talks, share stories and assist them in their projects. Many of these students actually hold part-time jobs at local contractors' businesses, giving them real world experience."

The industry can raise awareness through career fairs, resources provided to school counselors, web sites that show



TX executive director Alicia Dover says the organization is working with local schools to create a 'pipeline' of new talent to the industry. PHCC – TX photo.



There are plenty of great career opportunities in the plumbing business beyond running service calls, according to Josh Hollub, a supervisor with Modern Plumbing Co., in Pasadena, Texas. Modern Plumbing photo.



Craig Lewis, a co-owner of R.E.C. Industries, says making 'work cool again,' is incumbent on the industry. R.E.C. photo.

what a career in the trades can provide, financial data and job outlook, videos that appeal to kids and so much more!, Dover adds. "Further, we need to bring this message to parents. They are extremely involved at this point in the student's life about what they will do next. As I mentioned earlier, we are new to this process. We don't know how schools are run, so navigating this field has been a challenge. Our job here at PHCC is to learn the ropes, as they say, educate the contractors of their options, and encourage them to get involved."

PHCC not only monitors educational legislation, but also is instrumental in creating bills in the Texas Legislature that make entering the trades more attractive, she notes. "We feel it is our job to assist educators as they seek to prepare students for their next steps as they graduate high school. It has become more than college readiness. It is now career readiness."

### Residential perspective

Modern Plumbing Company in Pasadena, Texas, is a fourth generation, family-owned business established in 1956, now led by brothers Albert and Eddie Hollub. The company, with 44 employees — 13 of whom have been with the company 20 years or more — offers residential, commercial and industrial services from simple stoppage calls to entire hotel repipes, from high pressure hydraulic lines to lift station installation and repairs.

As Mike Rowe says, too many people have that image of the butt crack plumber, says Josh Hollub, a supervisor at the company run by his dad and uncle. "We have to educated people that plumbing is not as backbreaking anymore, that there's a lot more technology involved, and that there are many career paths like any other business outside the construction industry. We need to let them know that there are guys making annual salaries in the \$60,000-to-\$80,000 range four years out of high school."

What skills does Modern Plumbing Company look for? Most of the mechanical skills are acquired being on the job and in the PHCC apprenticeship program, Hollub says. "The skills I see lacking are self-motivation and manners. It's hard to find someone motivated enough to go out and clean a truck without an order to do so, or dig a nice straight trench without someone managing them and making sure they do it. It's the generational

issues we fight on a daily basis. We need hardworking men and women in our industry. We need them to be involved in this huge adjustment our industry is about to go through, as we say goodbye to the largest workforce we've had, and say hello to the biggest shortage we've ever seen."

MPC takes employee recruitment and training seriously, Hollub says. "For the past two years, our company has actively been going to the high schools and meeting with Ag teachers, and welding shop teachers, and becoming involved in the school job fairs and career day activities, showing our vision for our industry and the passion we have for what we do, and it's been very promising in return."

"We've successfully recruited seven high school graduates directly from their respective high schools, but it's becoming very difficult to find good solid candidates. The best reason for this in my opinion is our image as an industry and the lack of communication to the public about this opportunity. We've got to reach our high school men and women, and we also need to be going after returning vets. Our country owes them every opportunity, in my opinion, but besides that, these men and women are trained to work hard, take orders, go out and get it done every day hot or cold, and they have a mental toughness you won't find in most civilians. We have a lot of opportunity in both of those places, we just need to start going after them."

The company typically hires with little to no experience. "We have found that bringing them up through the system builds loyalty and camaraderie. A new high school kid who comes to work for us would normally work three to six months on a truck, as an apprentice, to understand the daily process and safety guidelines we practice. If a guy becomes promising to his manager, he can recommend that the apprentice be looked at as a potential service tech. In which case, he is asked to attend the PHCC apprenticeship program.

"This program is fantastic. We've had six graduates through the class, currently have five enrolled, and one ready to be put in a class. It is one week a quarter for four years. If you're in Texas they offer it in San Antonio or Dallas. It's been great for myself and our team as we continue to grow. After four years, the potential service tech can test for his journeyman license. When they

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pass the test, and become a licensed service tech, they get their own truck along with a heavy pay increase. They, then run calls in various places — industrial, residential, and commercial — and find what best fits them.”

MPC has different levels of advancement. When you start, you are an apprentice. From apprentice you either begin to learn and advance to a potential service tech or you stay an apprentice, Hollub says.

As a potential service tech, you are afforded the opportunity to be sent to school, “all paid time while there at school, your food, your travel, your class, and your wages, which are now higher than that of an apprentice. In two years, he or she could test for a tradesman license, which is a pay raise, allowing them to do residential work legally on their own.

“Fast forward two more years: you can test for your journeyman. Again, another pay raise and more responsibility, as he or she can now run commercial and industrial jobs on their own. As they get more endorsements and licenses, it’s more money. Then of course, over time, like anywhere, you have a potential spot in management or at a supervisor position. Our current residential field manager, Thomas, is a long-time service plumber turned manager.”

### Commercial & HVAC

R.E.C. Industries, with locations in College Station and San Antonio, Texas, has been in business since 1981, and is co-owned by Craig Lewis, Scott Cook and Catherine Anderson. R.E.C. focuses on institutional plumbing and HVAC work and some residential HVAC, also acting as prime contractor subbing out to other trades such as electrical, sheetrock, painting and concrete. A major component is school renovation plumbing and air conditioning. The company has 130 employees, and seven service trucks devoted to smaller construction plumbing and HVAC jobs.

“Work has to be cool again’, to quote Mike Rowe. It is cool, but we’ve got to get that out there,” Craig Lewis says. When it comes to recruiting to the trades, “it is difficult to find people; no question about it. The hardest part, in my opinion, is that there is such a lack of the skilled training anymore. We get lot of our guys from word of mouth, referrals from our employees.

“When we do find someone, we’ll try them out for six months to a year and if they have good work ethic, we’ll ask them if they’d like to be in the apprentice program,” Lewis says. “We really invest there; it’s not just the thought. PHCC-Texas has a great apprenticeship program for the plumbing side and we pay for these guys while they are in school during the day. It’s not the typical program where you go to school after work.”

R.E.C. has two programs. “One four-year program is the new style where we send the kids to school and we pay for their time.

They are in school during the day. We put them up in a hotel, and pay for their tuition while they are in class. We call it about a \$32,000 scholarship.” In San Antonio, the company has the classic type of apprenticeship program, also four years. Students go to school after work roughly from September through May.

“We have about 15 apprentices between the two schools right now.” The way the PHCC program is set up, it helps with the funding for the classes, Lewis explains. “I like to quote a good friend in the industry: ‘Why do you train them if they might leave?’ Lewis’ answer: ‘What if you don’t train them and they stay?’ We have had some who we’ve trained and they left to work for the competition, but I still think it’s a good investment.”

R.E.C. looks for a good work ethic “where they show up on time, care what they’re doing and like to work with their hands. Lewis notes that the trades do need to do a better job of educating young people, especially on how important it is to have a work ethic and to appreciate that many of the job benefits offered today were hard earned and should be valued. “Two times a year we have a dinner to acknowledge our apprentices and the graduates. We always try to keep tabs on them and how they are doing. We also try to show the apprentices that there are plenty of different career paths in the plumbing industry.”

One of the ways they try to spread the word is at career fairs at area high schools. “We tell them: ‘Hey, it isn’t just about digging and putting pipe in. Here’s some really cool technical equipment that you use every day in the field.’ It’s not just in the field. They can advance into the office where they can work with AutoCAD and modeling systems. Some of our guys who are doing that now were actually plumbers or sheet metal guys in the field,” Lewis says. “There’s no question about it that they can provide a good living for their families and it’s fun. It’s hard work—I’m not saying it’s a walk in the park — but it is an enjoyable way to have a career, provide for their families and enjoy what they do. And, there’s room for advancement if they are willing to work.”

“We’re looking for guys—and ladies—who like to be out of the office on a call or a job site. They have to like to work with people because—it’s an old cliché, but all of our trades have to work together. They don’t just sit in a cubicle. They have to work with electricians, painters, carpenters.

R.E.C. urges plumbing and heating companies of all sizes to check out the resources in place to recruit, train and retain employees. As national chair for the PHCC Education Foundation, Lewis notes, “We’ve got some great programs that are national. We put out a brochure jointly called ‘Conquer the Work Challenge.’ We’ve made it available to contractors. It has all kinds of ideas and examples of what people have done and what was successful.” Also in Texas, for example, Sam Dowdy, one of the owners of S&D Plumbing in Taylor has offered a program for high school students who earn credits to transfer to a technical school, Lewis cited. “They get a head start because if their high school classes and because they work summers while still in high school.” **RJ**

