

WorkAdvance Center opens in Tulsa

by D. Ray Tuttle

Published: February 1st, 2012



Angie Buchanan, vice president of safety and human resources at Melton Truck Lines, speaks at the opening of the Transportation Connection WorkAdvance Center in Tulsa. (Photo by Rip Stell)

TULSA – Jordan Moore had worked as a diesel mechanic for the Air National Guard in Tulsa.

But when Moore answered a classified ad for pair training, she ended up at Melton Truck Lines as an intern. Moore is one of 80 people in training, or working, at 14 businesses across Tulsa as part of the Transportation Connections WorkAdvance program.

The initiative, designed to plug unemployed and under-employed people into aviation, aerospace and trucking sectors, has a \$3.2 million, five-year budget, said Christopher Bernhardt, the

Transportation Connection WorkAdvance program director. The WorkAdvance Center, which is a career advancement program that provides low-income people with technical training and job placement in the transportation and aerospace industries, opened on Wednesday. Bernhardt, a program director for the New York City-based Madison Strategies Group, a nonprofit workforce development organization, will operate the program in Tulsa.

“The WorkAdvance program will eventually move more than 400 people into technical training and career coaching,” Bernhardt said on Wednesday. “We hope to partner with 30 employers by the end of the year.”

While in the Air National Guard, Moore worked on diesel engines.

“But they were smaller and it was specialized equipment,” said Moore, who is paired with a master mechanic while on the semi-tractor-trailers at Melton.

Working at Melton is a whole other range of experience, Moore said.

“This is like starting all over,” Moore said. “I wanted the opportunity to work on larger engines and now have that chance to get a diesel mechanic education.”

Moore entered the WorkAdvance program in December. She will work as an intern through the end of June and then will have an opportunity to go to work full time.

Tulsa-based Melton, a flat-bed long-haul trucking company, has a fleet of 900 trucks and plans to buy 350 new trucks this year, said Angie Buchanan, vice president of Melton Truck Lines.

“Tulsa is brimming with raw talent that needs a little training and development,” Buchanan said.

WorkAdvance will become a job growth pipeline, Buchanan said.

“WorkAdvance understands that fact and is able to meet the need and fuel our growth,” Buchanan said. “Interns actually provide value to companies right away.”

Moore said the WorkAdvance initiative gave her helpful information, especially on how to write a resume.

“And I was prepared for my interview,” said Moore.

Mary Smith, executive director of the Oklahoma Aerospace Alliance, said her goal is to get people from the WorkAdvance initiative in front of area aerospace companies.

"There are a lot of small and medium-sized companies that do not have the staff to recruit," Smith said. "They do not have the big name, like Spirit AeroSystems might have."

WorkAdvance will provide the training and coaching at cost to the companies, Smith said.

"Which is a huge impact on these companies' bottom line," Smith said. "People going through the program provide value and do some good for these companies that do not have that reach."

The initiative is aimed at helping companies in Tulsa's transportation sector become competitive by building better employee pipelines, said Mike Neal, president and CEO of the Tulsa Metro Chamber.

Tulsa Mayor Dewey Bartlett said he meets with small business owners and operators throughout Tulsa on a regular basis.

"And the common thread to all those meetings is them telling me, 'We cannot find enough people to employ,'" Bartlett said. "The people that run the program understand the significance of the job creation opportunities."

Transportation is critical in the economic development universe, Neal said.

"Aviation, the port (of Catoosa), rail, trucking and the wheel transportation services group all play an important role in commerce," Neal said.

Program funding is being provided by the Tulsa Community Foundation, the George Kaiser Family Foundation, the Social Innovation Fund, the Corporation for National and Community Service, the Center for Economic Opportunity and the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City.

The WorkAdvance program is being launched in several cities across the U.S., including Tulsa, New York City, Cleveland, Ohio and Youngstown, Ohio.

"WorkAdvance is an example of the public-private partnership working to bring employment services to low-income individuals that need an opportunity," said Phil Lakin, Tulsa city councilor and CEO of Tulsa Community Foundation.