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Posted on Sun, Jul. 25, 2004

## Camden job seekers get details on school projects

The city is set to receive \$500 million from N.J. Residents are learning how they can benefit.

By Dwight Ott  
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It had been some time since Larry Barnes, 22, sold drugs on the streets of Camden.

Hands jammed casually into his pockets, he stood at the back of Mount Calvary Baptist Church on Penn Street yesterday, expressing optimism about his future. He had survived seven months in jail, and now he was ready to begin a new life.

"I had to leave high school because my mother became sick," he said. "McDonald's wasn't helping much, so I had to do what I had to do to help my family survive..."

"Now I see there is another way," said the bearded young man.

He was talking about a conference, sponsored by the Camden Board of Education, the New Jersey Schools Construction Corp., and the Camden-based Don Todd Associates Inc., designed to prepare Camden residents to take advantage of a statewide \$8.6 billion school construction project, the largest construction program in state history.

A half-billion dollars of that money is coming to Camden, and a wave of construction is expected to hit the city in its aftermath.

That construction boom, combined with the state's pledge to invest \$175 million as part of Gov. McGreevey's five-year rescue plan for this impoverished city, has local leaders scrambling to find a way to help Camden residents capture some of the money.

"How do we get justice out of all the money being put into Camden?" activist Roy Jones asked.

"This is to get everyone on board and ready for the coming school construction and whatever the city is going to do," said Keith Jones of the Schools Construction Corp., a state agency formed by Gov. McGreevey to expedite school construction.

"That \$500 million [in Abbott funding] should be reflected in this city," Kevin Willis, of Don Todd, which provides Project & Construction Management Services, told the packed room of close to 60 job seekers and contractors inside the church. "The question is: How is it going to get done?"

It is an uphill battle in Camden, which has special problems.

A report by the Annie Casey Foundation, a Baltimore think tank, said recently that 49 percent of Camden's residents are considered "functionally illiterate," compared with an average of 21 percent in New Jersey.

Only 68 percent of Camden's students complete high school, and fewer than 10 percent go on to college, according to the report, which also showed that students who drop out of school often enter the workforce without basic skills required in today's job market.

The Casey Foundation report said many Camden residents are immigrants who have not become U.S. citizens, have language barriers, or have criminal records - all hurdles in gaining employment.

Nearly 16 percent of the labor force living in Camden reported themselves unemployed in the 2000 census - more than three times the rate of unemployment for those living elsewhere in Camden County.

Those Camden residents who do qualify will be vying for a limited number of construction jobs set aside for union

apprentices.

"We plan to have one of these forums quarterly," said Karen Hunter of Don Todd Associates. She said the next one would be held in September or October at 10th Street Baptist Church.

"I want to prove people wrong," Barnes said as he left the conference. "I learned here that even being an ex-offender you can get credit and loans. There are a lot of kids out there like I was."

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