



National Career Readiness Certificate

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Initiative tests county workers – St. Clair

Program allows employers to match tasks to abilities

By STEPHEN TAIT
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St. Clair County's effort to build a stronger factory work force begins with No. 2 pencils.

Like college-bound high school [students](#), manufacturing workers have been sharpening pencils and taking tests to prove exactly how good they are.

The WorkKeys Foundational Assessment -- conducted by the same group that does the ACT college admissions test -- judges a person's ability to perform manufacturing jobs.

"It is meant to be one of our many county programs to spark hiring," Shaun Groden, St. Clair County administrator, said, "so people will consider you for employment."

Workers are tested in three disciplines: applied mathematics, reading for information and locating information. The testing can earn them a National Career Readiness Certificate, which can make it easier for workers to find and keep jobs.

The testing program helps employers, too, by making it easier not only to find qualified workers but also to make the best fit for particular tasks.

"A resume can look really good," Kristine Tremble, human resource manager at ALD Thermal Treatment in Port Huron, said. "But if you have that WorkKeys test to go with it" it helps in determining an applicant's ability to fill a position.

Tremble said about two-thirds of the facility's 75 workers will take the test. ALD heat-treats parts for General Motors.

The county is spending \$25,000 to conduct about 560 examinations, which are conducted in collaboration with St. Clair County Community College and the county's Economic Development Alliance.

The county expects the investment to pay off.

Quantifying the number and quality of skilled workers in the area can help attract new employers to the county, Groden said.

"It says, 'Hey, these workers have the skill sets that we need in our plants,'" he said.

Such testing has proved successful in western Michigan and elsewhere. The WorkKeys system is used by businesses, educational systems and job [training](#) programs across the country.

Some companies require the credentials as part of hiring, Groden said. Even for those that don't, the results can give tested workers an advantage over other applicants. After passing the tests, many job-seekers add the results to their applications and resumes.

So far, more than a dozen local residents have taken the tests, said Rene Stephan, the business retention and community services specialist for the EDA.

Of those, about 80% have passed at bronze, silver or gold levels. Those who get the highest scores on all segments of the tests win gold medals. The levels are designed to tell employers how to place employees based on their skills.

The next test date is Dec. 18. Other testing dates are Jan. 8, 20 and 27 at the SC4's M-TEC building.

Groden said he will work to get another \$25,000 for the tests once money for the first installment runs out.

Stephan, who traveled to west Michigan to learn about the program, said the county will target three groups to take the tests: employed workers, specifically at growing companies, unemployed workers and workers who recently have been incarcerated.

Some businesses in the county have said they will accept the WorkKeys credential for hiring in place of a high school diploma or GED, Stephan said.

She wouldn't identify the companies.

Stephan said the tests should benefit the entire county, not just [manufacturers](#).

"If you want to bring in companies to diversify and strengthen our tax base, we have to promote a skilled work force," she said. "(The test) increases the career readiness for our residents."

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