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## **‘Project Second Chance’ Helps Veterans Gain Workforce Skills**

***Program participants earn pay and guaranteed job placement***

**PEARL** — Veterans returning from active duty or serving time in prison often face challenges that can hamper their ability to find stable employment. That’s why the Mississippi Construction Education Foundation (MCEF) has launched “Project Second Chance,” an innovative workforce training program designed to provide a pathway to success for veterans while addressing Mississippi’s shortage of skilled workers.

“We believe veterans who have served their country with honor but have fallen on difficult times deserve a second chance at life,” said Mike Barkett, MCEF president. “Returning veterans and those who are incarcerated are significantly disadvantaged in the job market. By teaching them a skilled trade, we are helping them become contributing members of society again.”

“Project Second Chance” is a skills-based carpentry program that MCEF developed in partnership with the Mississippi Department of Corrections (MDOC) and Mississippi Veterans Affairs (MSVA). Classes began February 8th at MCEF’s training center in Pearl, and participants must follow rules for attendance and punctuality and pass random drug tests to stay in the 12-week program.

The program provides tools, clothing, steel-toed boots, hard hats and books, as well as lunch each day. Participants earn \$300 a week along with job placement upon successful completion. For incarcerated veterans, these funds are held in escrow until they are released from prison.

Graduates also receive level-one national credentials from the National Center for Construction Education and Research and can keep their program-issued tools and clothing.

By the 10th week of training, participants will have an opportunity to work on a Habitat for Humanity home-building project to gain hands-on experience.

Courses are led by a retired carpentry professional with more than 40 years of experience who agreed to donate his time to “Project Second Chance.”

“We’ve received a great deal of support and encouragement from the construction industry,” Barkett said. “Many contractors who are familiar with MCEF’s rigorous training standards have voiced an interest in hiring program graduates.”

In the future, MCEF will seek funds from the Legislature to expand “Project Second Chance” to include plumbing, HVAC, masonry and electrical — all skilled trades in high demand.

“Mississippi needs more than 80,000 craft professionals to meet the needs of the state’s growing construction industry,” Barkett said. “We know veterans have the discipline, drive and commitment to get the job done. With ‘Project Second Chance,’ they’ll be able to learn new skills that will benefit them in the future while helping strengthen our construction workforce.”

In recent years, Mississippi Veterans Affairs (MSVA) has worked with the MDOC to assist incarcerated veterans. The Central Mississippi Correctional Facility in Rankin County includes a housing unit for military veterans that offers counseling, job training and programs emphasizing discipline.

“There are many reasons veterans struggle with career and life stability,” said MSVA Executive Director Stacey E. Pickering. “Whether it’s self-medicating through drug and alcohol abuse or mental health issues resulting from combat experiences, many veterans need help to get their lives back on track. ‘Project Second Chance’ is one way we’re investing in their future through training and workforce development.”

B.R. Hawkins, director of the Mississippi Statewide Incarcerated Veterans Program – Housing Unit for Military Veterans (HUM-V) agreed.

“It may seem like a peculiar deal on the surface, but the concept makes perfect sense when you think about it,” she said. “Project Second Chance is training incarcerated veterans in a way that will truly change their trajectory upon release. These individuals are not evil; they made some bad choices, are doing their time and will soon have an opportunity to start over.”

MCEF is a non-profit educational foundation that provides NCCER craft training and credentialing in 112 career and technical programs across the state. The foundation’s mission is to train individuals for the construction and manufacturing industries in Mississippi.

MCEF also offers workforce training and credentialing in construction, industrial maintenance and manufacturing trades. Learn more about MCEF at <http://mcef.net>.

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