

Hands-on training gives residents skills needed to join the solar workforce



BACKGROUND

This case study illustrates how TCC-funded job training has prepared residents of the project area to enter the clean energy workforce. It highlights Mario Fuentes, a solar panel installation trainee who gained critical skills and industry exposure in a field he is passionate about. To learn more about the GRID Alternatives training program, see page “Workforce Development Plan” on page 48.

Interviews for this story were conducted in September 2022 and February 2025.

Mario Fuentes shows a training tool used to learn about solar panel installation. Photo courtesy of Mario Fuentes.

MARIO FUENTES has lived in the City of San Fernando with his wife and two children for nearly 10 years, having moved from North Hollywood in 2015. He appreciates his neighborhood for its peace and tranquility: he says, “I know my neighbors; they know me. We support each other. So it’s sort of a real community sense.” With a background in community and labor organizing, Fuentes is now a pastor in his community.

In 2022, Fuentes was ready for a career change. So when he saw a Facebook post from GRID Alternatives advertising the TCC-funded solar panel installation job training program, his interest was piqued. With a strong interest in electrical work and a philosophy that everyone should make an effort to help the environment, Fuentes was immediately motivated to join the program. “I wanted to be employed in an industry that is fast-moving and expanding, and that is making an actual impact on the lives of people. This is something I really want to pursue for the common good — and professional growth and income.”

He did research to make sure the opportunity was legitimate. Once he read up on GRID’s track record, he knew it was for real. “I saw that GRID was a serious community organization that has been there for a while. So I had no hesitation; just gratitude to GRID for bringing me in.”

Fuentes has developed a wide array of skills necessary for installing solar panels. He learned the process of installing the panels themselves, as well as how to do the wiring to connect them

to the home’s electricity system. Crucially, the training covered safety measures that are important for the installation process.

GRID has helped Fuentes and his fellow trainees prepare for the job search with resume editing and other support.

“If you gave me the materials, I know what to do with them. I know how to install panels at your home. I feel prepared to go in with the knowledge and capacity to do the job of an installer.”

MARIO FUENTES

“For some, they’ve never had a resume. For some, like myself, they’ve helped to update my resume. It’s been rather helpful for GRID to help us with the tools that are needed to secure employment.”

GRID also offered a stipend of \$13 per hour — about \$3600 over 13 weeks of part-time work — as well as a bus pass or gas card to help them get around. “It was really helpful for myself and other participants to get from where we live, in different parts of the county, to the GRID offices for hands-on training,” Fuentes said.

Fuentes is in the early stages of launching his career in the solar sector, and while he hadn’t transitioned to working in that sector quite yet, he thinks the GRID training will prepare him to achieve his long-term goals. He wants to

direct his own solar installation training institute, either alongside GRID or independently. “I want to direct a group of trainers, training the next generation of technicians that

come from the most poverty stricken households. I want to give these youth an opportunity, so that they can improve themselves and improve their families.”

SANDRA LOPEZ has been a Pacoima resident for over 12 years. She is the mother of two children – ages 17 and 23 – who attended schools in the neighborhood. Lopez’s favorite part of her neighborhood is the local park she frequents and her tight-knit community of neighbors she has known for many years.

Lopez has held a variety of jobs, such as serving in a restaurant, working for a film production company, and most recently as a machine operator at a company that manufactures utility-related infrastructure. When she was laid off in April of 2024, Lopez sought help at Meet Each Need with Dignity (MEND), a local nonprofit organization in Pacoima that offers health and wellness programs and resources to low-income families.

A service worker at MEND introduced Lopez to the TCC-funded GRID Alternatives’ Installation Basics Training program. Shortly thereafter, in the summer, Lopez enrolled in the inaugural cohort of 14 trainees to learn at GRID’s new training center located in Pacoima. Lopez was particularly pleased that the training was not far from her home. “The training center [in Pacoima] was very close to my house, approximately a three-minute drive. It was very convenient for me to attend the training.”

Lopez noted that despite the training being offered in English, a personal translator was available. Additionally, Lopez was able to take many of her tests in Spanish. When that was not possible, her bilingual peers helped her translate. When asked if there were any language barriers to completing the program, Lopez stated that it was difficult at the beginning, but as time went on, it became easier to understand and she learned English along the way.

In addition to providing Lopez with a supportive environment, the GRID training program also offered her financial relief during a difficult time. “[The training program] has helped me a lot because the program arrived at my doorstep during a time I really needed it the most, being recently unemployed. I didn’t know it would be a paid training, I thought wow how great that I learned about this program at this exact time, and I get to learn.” Lopez was able to continue paying her rent, buy food, and cover some utilities using the GRID stipend in addition to her savings.”

After her completion of the GRID program, Lopez was highly interested in working in the solar industry. However, due to her financial circumstances, she needed a job immediately after her graduation. She reached out to her

“Apart from learning how to hold and use tools better, I also earned OSHA and CPR certifications. So, when I heard my former employer was rehiring again, I leveraged my new certifications to prove that I have more skills than when I left. The hiring manager saw that and was really impressed.”

SANDRA LOPEZ



Sandra Lopez, GRID Trainee, at the GRID Training Center.

Photo courtesy of GRID Alternatives.

As a machine operator, Lopez was no stranger to hands-on work, and was excited about the physicality of solar installations. “The program called my attention because I was amazed by the technology. And I was already working with my hands before the training program ... so it felt like something I could do.”

network of former coworkers who let her know that the company that previously laid her off company was recruiting. She submitted her application and was hired three days later. Lopez believes the GRID program helped her get rehired because she came back with more knowledge and certifications.

Now that she’s working, Lopez’s personal goals are to enroll in English classes and finish her GED. She believes that the GRID program helped her begin the journey to reaching her long-term goals by allowing her to get more comfortable reading and writing in English in a professional setting.