



# Corps Competency

*BY JEFFREY LEE*

NAAEI's partnership with Job Corps can provide apartment managers with enthusiastic, qualified maintenance employees.

**F**rom the window of a vacant two-bedroom apartment on the 23rd floor at Skyline Towers, one can see the U.S. Capitol and the Washington Monument rising in the distance above the strip malls below. The Falls Church, Va., apartment community is a long way from Ethiopia, where Nadhi Muhammed lived until he was 18.

Now 22, Muhammed is a star performer as a Maintenance Technician for the 939-unit community, which is owned and managed by Equity Residential. He was awarded with Equity's 2008 Above & Beyond Award for demonstrating extraordinary service beyond expectations in his maintenance role. But it was his time at a federally funded education and job training program called Job Corps that helped Muhammed integrate with American society and find the path to apartment maintenance excellence.

Through a promising partnership between the NAA Education Institute (NAAEI) and the National Job Corps Association (NJCA), some students in Job Corps are being placed at apartment communities to continue their education with on-the-job training. The partnership has already had some successes. A number of Job Corps graduates in the greater D.C. metropolitan area, where a pilot program is based, have taken full-time jobs in the apartment industry. Although there are always challenges to overcome, in time the program could become a reliable source for enthusiastic and qualified entry-level maintenance workers.

## **Growing Success**

Enrolling in classes and learning a vocation wasn't an option for Muhammed in Ethiopia. When he came to the United States, his brother, already a U.S. citizen, suggested Nadhi attend school. At 18, Muhammed was too old for high school, but another brother was in Job Corps and recommended the program to Nadhi. He went to the Keystone Job Corps Center in Hazleton, Pa.

At the time, Muhammed couldn't speak English, but he quickly learned it through his weekly classes and by having an English-speaking roommate. He enrolled in plumbing classes, learning to put a water line in the ground, how to replace dishwashers, garbage disposals, showers and toilets. He earned a high school diploma and a driver's license. Just as important, he learned patience and how to get along without his family. "Job Corps was very much about how you get along with people," he says.

At the end of his time at Job Corps, the Home Builders Institute, an organization that partners with Job Corps to train and place graduates in the residential construction field, referred Muhammed to Equity. He came to a job fair and was hired by Equity as a construction technician, working with a team that was replacing all of the windows in Skyline Towers. After the project, he was promoted, becoming one of the community's five maintenance technicians.

## **Problem Solver**

Tall and goateed, with a bushy mound of hair, Muhammed is quick with a smile, warmly responding to residents when they greet him in the elevator. In the vacant unit on the 23rd floor, he walks from room to room describing his tasks: replacing appliance parts, servicing faulty plumbing, tightening the track of a



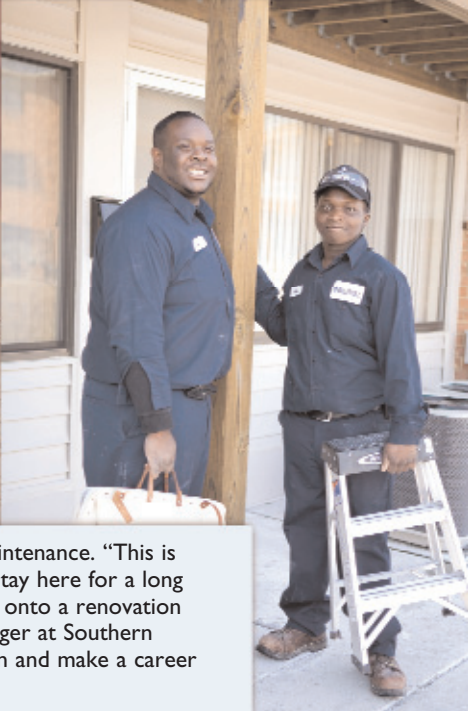
(Left) Potomac Job Corps Center electrical instructor Kenneth Fletcher instructs students on a switch and receptacle mock-up board. Students start with a textbook, move to the board and then go to a building mock-up, where they install cable. (Right) Job Corps graduates Alpha Mansaray and Eric Lewis prepare cabinetry for installation.



(Left) Potomac Job Corps Center facilities maintenance instructor William Leake instructs two newcomers to his class on the installation of commercial vinyl flooring. "You have to work with students one-on-one a lot," Leake says.



(Left) Facilities maintenance students Keith Wilson, 24, from southeast Washington, D.C., and Unique Harris, 18, from Norfolk, Va., install vinyl flooring at the Potomac Job Corps Center. "Coming here helped me out a lot," Wilson says. "I grew up from a boy to a man. I learned things that my peers don't have a clue about doing."



(Left) Mansaray plans to stay in apartment maintenance. "This is my career right here," he says. "I'm going to stay here for a long time." (Right) Lewis and Mansaray were hired onto a renovation crew by Michael Lowman, Construction Manager at Southern Management. "Both of them are eager to learn and make a career out of this," Lowman says.

closet door. Many of the tasks are similar to work he did at Job Corps. He enjoys responding to resident requests. “You have to just have a good attitude to give residents what they need,” he says.

In turn, Equity is thrilled to have Muhammed on its staff. When one of its communities had a temporary rodent problem during ongoing construction, Muhammed took on the job of hunting the pests daily.

“I cannot tell you how many of them that he eradicated with his ongoing diligence,” said his supervisors, Deborah Reiswig, General Manager of Skyline, and Michael Owens, General Maintenance Director at the community, in a nomination for the Above & Beyond award. “Had we had to call our pest control company for every one of these removals, we would have paid thousands of dollars in additional service calls. He never complained, and he never wavered. . . . With Nadhi’s help, we were able to get our issue under control.”

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## Productive Partnership

Hoping to create many more successful placements like the role Muhammed has found with Equity, the NAAEI has partnered with the NJCA, a national association of Job Corps stakeholders, including Job Corps Center operators, to make it easier for students in the Job Corps’ facilities maintenance track to find a career in the apartment industry.

The two organizations have developed a memo of understanding that standardizes paperwork and procedures and spells out the requirements for Job Corps centers and apartment communities to participate in Work-Based Learning, a form of internship in which students complete their training requirements while working onsite in apartment maintenance.

With the agreement in place, the organizations have begun a pilot program involving four Job Corps centers and several apartment companies in the D.C. area. The program could be a great opportunity for the apartment companies involved, says Maureen Lambe, CAE, Executive Vice President for NAAEI.

“Students come out of the facilities maintenance training with the basic skills that will make them successful as apartment maintenance professionals,” Lambe says. “If you bring these students aboard for work-based learning, you have the opportunity to try before you buy. We look at it as a pipeline of skilled maintenance employees.”

It’s important to attract future maintenance workers to the apartment industry, especially as vocational programs in schools continue to diminish, says Olivia Hunter, Recruitment Manager for Southern Management, a Vienna, Va.-based property management company with about 25,000 apartments in the Mid-Atlantic. The company has at least 30 employees who attended Job Corps and has hosted 11 students in Work-Based Learning since the program started in November 2007.

“We have jobs, but we need the people,” Hunter says. “Finding a group of young people that is interested in facilities maintenance and that is receiving basic training in a wonderful, federally funded program is a great find.” Furthermore, the students “are interested and hungry for this work experience and opportunity.”

Apartment companies, Hunter says, “have the opportunity to take an entry-level maintenance team member from the ground up to train, mentor and shape the person for the industry.”



Olivia Hunter

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## Career Building

Two Job Corps graduates being shaped by Southern Management are working at Campus Gardens, a 444-unit community made up of two-level buildings less than two miles from the University of Maryland in Hyattsville, Md. Southern Management is repositioning the community and renovating the apartments, hoping to attract college students and local military.

In the midst of a renovation of one of those apartments, Job Corps graduates Alpha Mansaray, 23, and Eric Lewis, 21, are installing cabinetry. Now on the renovation team at Campus Gardens, both began their professional careers as maintenance trainees in the Work-Based Learning program at Southern Management before landing full-time jobs at the company.

The skills they learned in Job Corps made it easier for them to excel in the company's Maintenance Training Academy (MTA), says Reggie Andrews, MTA Instructor for Southern Management. "Both of the guys were pretty knowledgeable in all of the basic stuff," he says. The average high-school graduate fails the class about half the time, he notes, but Lewis and Mansaray passed on the first try.

"They're more motivated to succeed," Andrews says. "These guys know, 'When I finish, I need to be able to prove to someone that I can do this job.'"

While the two bring different abilities to the job, both have a strong work ethic, says Michael Lowman, the Construction Manager who oversees the renovation and supervises Lewis and Mansaray and hired them to his crew. "Both of them are eager to learn and make a career out of this," he says. "They're open to feedback and constructive criticism." Both have been promoted twice, from trainees to the Maintenance 3 level. Mansaray has even lost about 80 pounds, Lowman estimates.

"Both of them, for their age, have been exceptional," Lowman says.

Quick to open up with a wide smile, Mansaray was born in Sierra Leone but moved to the United States in 2000. He didn't have a car when he started work with Southern, but his uncle would drop him off on time every day—sometimes, because of their different schedules, leaving Mansaray to wait for a ride after work.

Mansaray is clearly thrilled to be working at Southern. He appraises his skills as "excellent" in electrical work, but "ok" in plumbing. He loves the feedback he gets from residents, and the confidence he's earned from others' support (in a conversation, he insists that he thank his aunt, uncle and nine others). "At first, when they said to repair drywall, I said, 'I can't do this.' I didn't believe in myself," he says. "But someone believed in me."



(Top) Born in Ethiopia, Equity Residential maintenance technician Nadhi Muhammed learned English in Job Corps. In 2008, he was awarded Equity's Above & Beyond Award for demonstrating extraordinary service beyond expectations. (Bottom) Muhammed received the award from Robert Grealy, Area Vice President (left), and Chris Reilly, Senior Vice President of Property Management.



## Partner With Job Corps

**I**nterested in working with your local Job Corps center to create a pipeline of skilled maintenance employees?

Go to [www.naahq.org/NAAEI/JobCorps](http://www.naahq.org/NAAEI/JobCorps) to learn the steps to creating a successful partnership with your local Job Corps center. You will be able to search for the nearest Job Corps center and determine whether that Job Corps center offers facilities maintenance training. If interested in a partnership with Job Corps, NAAEI provides a contact at the National Job Corps Association who will put you in touch with key personnel at your local Job Corps center.

Lewis, barrel-chested with a chin-strap beard, earned a job at Southern after repeatedly calling Hunter, the recruiter. Finally she told him, “You’re very persistent. We have a property for you,” Lewis recalls. He says moving into his own place and paying the mortgage, gas, electric and water bills was a big challenge, but that Job Corps helped him prepare. He’s grateful for his opportunity at Southern, but he has even greater goals.

“I would love to own a property like this so I’m making my own money,” he says. “I just dream big.”

## Corps Values

Operated by the U.S. Department of Labor, Job Corps was established in 1964 as part of Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society program. The residential Job Corps centers are operated under contract to the federal government by a variety of for-profit and non-profit companies. With an average length of stay for students around nine months, the 122 active centers serve 60,000 to 70,000 students each year. Eligibility is based on income requirements: students must be aged 16 to 24 and economically disadvantaged.

“They’re young people that don’t have the credentials most young people have,” says Jose de Olivares, Vice President for Strategic Partnerships for the NJCA.

Most students live on campus (some centers allow local, non-residential students) and receive academic instruction, vocational training, health care, recreation, food and clothing. Students get an individual training plan tailored to their needs. Some need a GED or a driver’s license or just vocational training. Training is competency based and geared toward industry standards for certification. Even classes take an applied academic approach. Students might learn math through measuring for carpentry, for instance. Job Corps also is responsible for students

for a year after they graduate, providing career transition services and help with job searches, housing or day care.

When students first arrive at the center, they go into a four-week career preparation program, during which they develop career goals and a résumé, schedule classes and decide on a trade after visiting several of the programs. At the Potomac Job Corps Center, which trains about 400 young men and women on a gently rolling campus in southwest Washington, D.C., facilities maintenance is one of 13 trades offered.

William Leake, the center’s facilities maintenance instructor and a former instructor at Southern Management, says he draws on his own experience and videos, including material from NAAEI, in helping students decide whether facilities maintenance is right for them.

“I try to tell them what facilities maintenance is all about,” Leake says. He warns them about potential pitfalls, such as working outside or politely handling irate customers. “Not everyone can take someone in your face hollering and screaming. You might have to shovel snow. You’ll certainly have to pick up trash.”

Leake’s maintenance work in the apartment field helps students relate. “It seems to sit better when I say, ‘I did this,’ ” he says. “They can relate to the real world.”

## Training Time

The facilities maintenance curriculum is based on the Training Achievement Record (TAR), a document that includes line items that students must complete. It includes basic electric, dry-wall repair, carpentry, blueprint reading and much more (one line reads, for instance, “Complete 10-hour OSHA training course in Construction Safety and Health”).

Job Corps recently toughened the program, bringing the TAR from 40 pages to more than 100 and adding two textbooks. The program is self-paced, so the length varies, but the course now takes about a year instead of six to eight months, Leake says. While the TAR is non-negotiable, Leake says he tries to tailor training to jobs students might land, including those in the apartment industry.

“When I have time to network with some of the community managers, I say, ‘OK, what are some of your concerns?’ ” Leake says. “If a person is set to go to Southern Management, and they do a lot of hardware or drywall, I try to cater to those needs.” Because students come into Job Corps on a rolling basis—there is no set first day of classes—Leake must work with a lot of students individually. “The challenges are dealing with the students one-on-one, because all of them are different,” he says.

Beyond technical proficiency, Leake also teaches students the employability and customer service skills, such as record keeping, reliability and respect for customers and their property, that are crucial in the apartment industry.

Making a commitment to Job Corps students will mean extra work for apartment companies. But with the right commitment from key employers, these companies will develop a new stream of maintenance talent. See “Partner With Job Corps” for information. ■■

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