

Trading guns for tools is a win-win

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Approximately 50 retired military personnel have already accessed the New Brunswick wing of the Helmets to Hardhats program announced by the Alward government a few weeks ago.

The program is a national project geared to connecting men and women transitioning from military life to the civilian workforce through apprenticeships in the construction trades. About 30 different trades, everything from electricians to brick-layers to pipe-fitters, fall under the umbrella of “construction trades.”



Gary Ritchie, Pres. of NB BTC. Photo: Jackie Muise

Here in New Brunswick, Gary Ritchie, president of the N.B. Building Trades Council in Fredericton, says the program is a win-win situation.

“In the construction trades industry,” says Ritchie, “most of the people working in the province are nearing retirement age, and so that has changed the demographics ... and puts us in the position where we need younger people.”

Ritchie says that shortage will be compounded by construction growth, anticipated for the near future, as a result of the Energy East Pipeline. But it's also part of a larger phenomenon where high unemployment across the country exists alongside real labour shortfalls in certain sectors.

General Gregory Matte is the executive director of H2HC in Ottawa. Matte says, in addition to the obvious benefits realized by the private sector economy, the program helps to reduce barriers experienced by transitioning veterans.

Military people accessing the program range in age from 20 to 40. They are not retiring, but changing careers. Combat or training injuries preclude them from further military work, while others are simply ready for the stability of civilian life.

Whatever their reasons, Matte says the job of sorting out and gaining official recognition of transferable military skills to civilian trades, is what H2HC has worked on since it began about 18 months ago.

Detailed individual documentation of military experience and training are matched to required qualifications within any given trade. Credit to the apprentice applicant is granted based on that documentation.

Matte says, typically, shortcuts toward full apprenticeship can be by half or even more, where the program is officially recognized.

In New Brunswick, Gary Ritchie says that process is well underway. As the representative body that oversees all building trades' issues in the province, including unionized qualification specifications and legislative issues, Ritchie says they have fully embraced the program.

"What happens," says Ritchie, "is that the military person contacts the Helmets to Hardhats program through the website, and then they are referred with their information to us, for those that want to work in New Brunswick, and our office connects them to the appropriate apprenticeship program."

That website is www.helmetstohardhats.ca.

*Edited by Kaylee Moore



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