



Center Rail Strategies

Spanning the Gap: Blocks of Blight to Blocks of Bright

The implementation of this Blocks of Blight program across all development projects in a community would address multiple complex challenges. The downstream impacts are numerous and reach beyond the imagination for generations to come.



Increased U.S. Skilled Workforce to improve construction industry levels of qualified candidates.



Influence long-term career advancement by reducing barriers and increasing opportunities for those with the attitude, aptitude and ability to help themselves build a better future.



Improve communities with increased property values, decreased crime, and increased taxable incomes.

Center Rail Strategies

Powering Movement. Creating Positive Change.

Phone: 301.712.8765
Email: yvette@centerrailstrategies.org
WEB: centerrailstrategies.org



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D. Yvette Diamond

In Summary

The implementation of this Blocks of Blight program across all development projects in a community would address multiple complex challenges. The downstream impacts are numerous and reach beyond the imagination for generations to come.

- Expand benefits of trade programs
- Effective workforce development introducing experienced labor into the industry reducing the labor shortage challenges and providing future team leaders, supervisors and managers.
- More skills create additional opportunities for increased income resulting in less reliance on social programs, increased investment in the community, and increased taxable income.
- Improved property values for the renovated block and the surrounding neighborhood.
- The potential for homeownership gives additional incentive for employee to stick with the program and excel at their trade.

- Pride
in

workmanship. More than most industries, the construction industry allows its employees to see the results of their labor in fairly quick order. To see the beauty, the accomplishment fills an individual with pride and a desire to share and replicate that emotion over and over.

- “The CornMaze Effect” – once other members of the community witness the success of the employees, they too will want that for themselves.
- A permanently altered lower socioeconomic corn maze equates to less burden on public resources, decreases in crime, contributions to society and creates endless possibilities for future generations.

The Purpose:

The purpose of this program is to provide a solution that helps to address multiple issues simultaneously. It is but one prong in the larger cog that can be the ripple that sparks waves of change.

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- Industry wide labor and management shortage. The construction industry has long struggled to identify, educate, motivate and retain a strong workforce. There is an inherent need for programs that *span the gap* between the untapped labor pool of the un- and under- employed and the industry with severe lack of qualified, interested and trained workers.
- Untapped natural American resource of the un- and under- employed. A percentage of whom, when provided proper assessment, guidance, support and education, would prove to be a dedicated, hardworking and skilled long-term solution.
- Once thriving neighborhoods are now plagued by blight. Entire blocks have been abandoned, left in ruins and wasting away rather than producing revenue, increasing property values and inspiring strong communities.

The Challenge:

- (1) Standard labor practices over the past decades have contributed to the current lack of skilled and semi- skilled labor as well as a gap in middle and upper management across the nation.
- (2) Communities with entire blocks in blight decrease surrounding home values, provide an environment for heightened crime, and reduce potential for taxable incomes that contribute services to the community. These result in deficiencies in education, after school programs, safety services, health care and others in neighborhoods that need it most.
- (3) While there are great training programs providing under-served communities opportunities to learn trade skills, they fall short of preparing graduates in part because on-the-job opportunities are sparse, however employer demands for proven skills are high.

The Corn Maze:

The Corn Maze is a visual model for the world one is born into. To illustrate the realities of lower socioeconomic communities, one can imagine this particular corn maze exists in a challenging and defeating environment in which the multi-generational, underserved, unemployed, and underemployed community lives. The corn maze has its own culture, societal rules, linguistics, and expectations that prevent individuals from entering the working world with equal skills, support, education, and guidance. The only thing rich in this corn maze is its history of rejection and inequality and its only sign of abundance is despair and disappointment.

As with all corn mazes, the exits are limited and, by design, difficult to find. Few leave their established surroundings but those who attempt it cannot do so successfully without guidance, role models, assistance, and a bit of grace.



Perhaps more influential to the trajectory of one's life is the reception experienced upon exiting. With each failed attempt, a retreat further into their familiar corn maze is inevitable and future attempts unlikely. Conversely, when at the exit one is met with open arms, mentors and coaches to guide, abundant opportunities for education and personal growth, and clearly identified paths, dedication exudes and a desire to spread the joys of one's experiences influences others to explore adventures outside the maze. This is the CornMaze Effect.

The History:

- (1) Despite the massive semi-skilled and skilled labor shortage in most industries, and specifically in construction, businesses depend on employees to be prepared to work on day one. For the majority, training, understandably, is not their core competency and not a planned expense in their budgets. Adding more complexity, at the sub-contractor level, where most of these employees would be hired, the profit margins are the tightest so increasing costs would eliminate any competitive edge that may currently exist.

As with all widespread problems, employers sought comprehensive solutions and decades ago found them outside U.S. borders. The Federal Government created workforce visa programs that brought skilled and semi-skilled labor forces from other nations. These programs have limitations that industries have learned to live with; specified terms (9 months at a time is standard), annual applications by employers, limited total number of workers allowed to participate and set guidelines for pay, housing and transportation.

For the decades these programs have been in place, industry and government have not invested significant dollars for the development of a U.S. labor force that would replace the visa programs, so we have become more dependent upon them. What seemed like the perfect solution and has allowed for the growth of construction, in hindsight, is fraught with challenges that undermine both the industry and the nation.

While these people come from other nations legally and ready to work, there are language barriers making communication difficult. The programs have set requirements for hourly rates, working conditions and living arrangements not unlike those required by entry level U.S. laborers. Additionally, the programs are complex and often require the investment in third party consultants to help businesses access the visa labor programs so these factors over time continue to erode direct cost savings.

Like their American citizen counterparts, the workforce does pay U.S. taxes but the money they earn in their paycheck is not invested in our economy. Like all humans, they work to support their families, so the bulk of their money is sent home.



The nature of the agreement does not foster growth into middle and upper levels of management which over time has left a gap the industry struggles to fill. This issue has been further impacted by the economic downturns that forced up-and-coming leaders to leave the industry and never return. More recently, these visa programs, that were once the savior of the industry, have been redesigned and restructured in ways that caused loyal program users to be shorted by the number of workers they receive and left with no way to replace the labor they depend on for projects they were awarded years prior. The ripple effect of this has been a direct hit to the profitability of small to mid-size companies who (a) pay additional over-time in an attempt to keep up with workload (b) risk injury due to worker fatigue and (c) increase risk of litigation costs without enough manpower to cover their commitments. Overall, the impact to the nation is higher costs for construction and potential decreases in quality of workmanship.

In response to the Pandemic, the current administration has shut down the visa programs sighting a desire to reduce competition for U.S employees seeking work due to Covid-19 shutdowns. On the surface, this appears to be a wise strategy but does not take into consideration that many of these jobs do require a background and skill to hit the ground running. Instead of providing opportunities to this new sidelined workforce that is not yet qualified for the jobs, it has further crippled the industries who need labor now.

- (2) Over this same decades long timeframe, the nation shifted its focus to a college centric education format and strayed from vocational options. This may have been needed to compete in the advancement of science and technology but left voids in traditional, good paying, and needed jobs. Additionally, this shift impacted individuals who may not have the desire, ability or funds to attend college and without guidance and public curriculum, have no way to explore skills that would lead to non-college required career paths.

This has created an upside for the potential applicants and a downside for consumers. With homes, cars and infrastructure still needing to be maintained and the number of trained experts in decline, these trade jobs are now in high demand and paying top dollar and those costs are being passed directly to the consumer.

- (3) The causes of the blocks of blight are numerous, complex and historic. What challenges the solutions are high construction costs and low property values. This automatically reduces investor interest because the potential profits are low, so the blocks sit, their condition worsens, and the vacuum sucks more surrounding blocks into its vortex.
- (4) Non-profit training programs are well intentioned attempts to fill the gap created by our nation's "college only" focus. They are developed to provide community members with



a career starting point. The expectation has been that, the industries they serve, will graciously provide the next steps in the plan but government and businesses have not been able to invest in the infrastructure to support the development of human capital in a comprehensive manner that would result in strong candidates.

- (5) Now more than ever, the funding for training and support services is tight and the market for them highly competitive. These conditions are ripe for mission creep, agenda conflict and potential for the misinterpretation of success. Funders rely on recipients reporting to determine the impact of their donations. Funders must closely analyze the data to ensure key factors are results driven and are tracked short and long term for a complete ROI picture.
- (6) Municipalities across the country have implemented incentives for developers to hire and train local residents on projects funded with government funds. Especially in towns where development is immense, the numbers of interested applicants are lacking. Without consistent recruiting, assessment and placement efforts, community members may not know of or understand the opportunities presented. This low response falsely appears like disinterest and causes industry members to request waivers from the source requirement thus eliminating the benefit altogether.

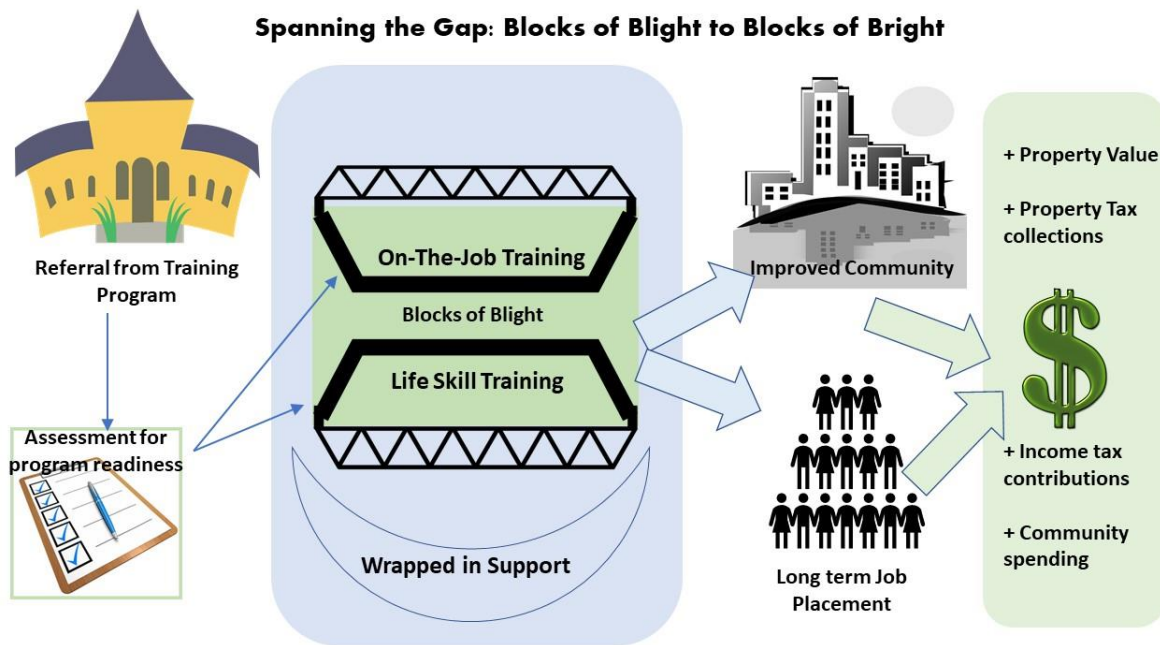
Remembering every action has a reaction is key to strong problem solving and must be accounted for in sustainable solutions. Constant evaluation, change and review is required to maintain growth for a person, organization, and nation. A central command point focused on weaving together the numerous components is the missing link to the current scenarios.

The Non-Partisan Opportunity:

Center Rail Strategies proposes a full solution that includes A-TOPS:

- Assessment and career coaching to ensure the individual's path aligns with their personal skills, abilities interests and experiences to better ensure their long-term success.
- Training program placement in the career path defined during the assessment phase.
- On-the-job experience to apply learned skills from training to real world scenarios spanning the gap to job placement.
- Placement in a strong company dedicated to the further development and success of its workforce.
- Support to the individual and their employer from the assessment stage and through their new hire probationary period to create a smooth transition into the new environment. This includes the coordination of wrap around services from community programs that help to remove barriers of success like transportation, childcare, housing, health care access, and other essential service needs unique to the individual.





Blocks of Blight is a program that helps to fill the O – On-The Job Training requirement as an extension to an existing training program or as part of other community support services. The program marries neighborhoods in need with program graduates seeking a training ground and provides the construction industry a structure in which to influence and develop strong skills required to fill long term positions.

Framework:

- ✓ Developer or landowner, wanting to contribute to the evolution of a community, to provide the block.
- ✓ General Contractor and their Sub-contractors whose corporate missions include the desire to participate in human capital development would bid for the project and the proposals would include a segment on training for each major trade.
- ✓ The trainees would gain additional training and on-the-job experience that would prepare them for long term placement within one of the project organizations or ones outside the program.
- ✓ The wrap around support services and coaching would be provided by existing community programs.

Selecting the block:

The communities where these blocks of blight exist are motivated to solve the problem and should be part of the solution. Working with the local community foundations and other non-profits to identify the potential blocks and team members will aid in the project's success.

The right block has community buy-in, local government support, low acquisition cost (perhaps supplemented by local government, local investors and/or the community foundation), permit ability, and a location desirable for a qualifying resident. Additional considerations include the purpose of the block such as... Is it mixed use that provides multiple streams of revenue and how will that be managed long term? Is it residential to be sold or rented? Is it commercial and what companies would find it desirable and does that community need that type of company in that location?

The Program:

Workforce development programs are often offered by community colleges and other non-profits. The best programs provide not only trade specific coursework but also life skill training (financial literacy, problem solving, communications, etc..). Additionally, they provide wrap around support to help the trainee manage all the barriers to their success until they are working full time in their new trade. Childcare, health care, transportation, life coaching, etc... Another key differentiator for strong programs is success measurements. Those truly motivated to change lives focus on and track outcomes beyond graduation.

Graduates of these programs have displayed a dedication to their career and future, so they pass the first round of qualifications to participate in Blocks of Blight. Recommendations from their trainers as well as from community leaders should also be components of their application.

The goal is successful completion of a project, so all barriers need to be considered in the selection process. Either on their own or with help from community organizations, they must be free of distractions so the efforts of others to help them is maximized. This includes transportation to and from the site, family care to raise attendance levels, and a drug free lifestyle to ensure on-the-job safety.

The Contactors:

Not all general and sub-contractors will be interested or qualified to participate but those who share the social vision and have the bandwidth could apply. The standard competitive bid process would be followed but would include training line items.

Project expectations would include additional time for training and slower performance in support of the mission. Project gets awarded and commences.



The Training:

As part of their role, the GC would be responsible for training oversight to ensure trainees are comprehending the instruction provided by the subs, that the sub-contractors are prepared and understanding training methods, and that both sides are communicating openly through the process.

After hours training should include life skills like financial literacy, communications, anger & conflict management, work ethics & expectations, problem solving and relationship development. Additionally, tool skills, math & measurement, and best practices should be incorporated.

As part of the bid requirement, all training sub-contractors should include training assessments to ensure the skills have been taught and learned so adjustments can be made to ensure the outcomes are as expected.

Program Completion:

In order to graduate from the program, the individual must meet or exceed previously established time and attendance requirements, successfully complete the training assessments to prove competency, attend and participate in the after hour courses, and meet all requirements of the commitment.

Graduates should be actively marketed to the industry for job placement immediately upon graduation.

About the Author:

D. Yvette Diamond is a solutionist with a mission to remove barriers and build paths for all American's to have the opportunities to meet their full potential.

She is the founder of Center Rail Strategies; a Maryland based thinking firm dedicated to the development of ideas to solve some of today's biggest challenges. Human capital development is a key component to any sustainable solution because of its direct impact on the income potential that drives all other life factors.

Many of the program components outlined here can be applied to other industries as well. Yvette and Center Rail offers collaborative services to aid governments, communities, and organizations in the further development and implementation of any or all of the components in the solutions they develop. To explore further, visit CenterRailStrategies.org.



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