

# Transcript

Janet Michael

Hello and welcome to the Valley. Today, I am your host, Janet Michael. It is Laurel Ridge Community College Day, so I'm back on the Zooms with Dai Curtis. He is Director of Marketing for Laurel Ridge Community College. Joining him today, returning today, is Anna Jane Whitaker. She is a program manager with Workforce Solutions, and we have a newbie on the screen. with us. Derek Dehaney is going to join us. He is a recent grad of the Power Line Worker Program, which Guy Curtis, I understand is what we're going to talk about today because it's a new program, fairly new program at Laurel Ridge.

Guy Curtis

That's right. We're working on our second cohort. We had tremendous success last fall and graduates like Derek are getting jobs in our region. It's a high demand field with great pay locally. And certainly with the bad weather we've had and the conditions across the country and even the East Coast, it's a tremendous career to get into. And so we're super excited to share this program today.

Janet Michael

Anna Jane, before we jump in and talk to Derek about his experience, can you give me an overview of the program? What is it? How long does it last?

AnnaJane Whitacre

Yeah, the program is 14 weeks in total. Within those 14 weeks, students earn seven industry recognized credentials. A couple of those credentials are classes and programs that we already offer. we packaged into this power line worker program due to the industry's request. And then a couple of them are new specific to the power line worker program. So those seven credentials are CDL class A. So the first four weeks of the program, the students do get their CDL. They also do heavy equipment operator training, which is a program we've had at the college for a long time, very successful program. They also do BDOT, work zone intermediate traffic control. As you know, you see a lot of power line workers working on the side of the road, so they need to get training on how to do work zone flagging when their crews are operating alongside roadways. They also get OSHA 10, CPR first aid, and then they do a power line worker level one credential. and power industry fundamentals. Power industry fundamentals talks about the power industry as a whole, the differences between generation, distribution, transmission, and then they also, as a

part of that, get core craft skills, which is basic safety, all the different hand tools, power tools that we go over in all of our other trades classes. And then the power line worker level one is where they get into the really specific curriculum to do with the power line worker field, which is the climbing, working with the wires, all the safety, operating the different trucks, the Digger Derrick truck and the bucket truck and all those pieces. So it's a lot crammed into 14 weeks. They do go full time. So it's a little bit different than some of our other programs in the fact that they go Monday to Friday, 8am to 5pm during CDL, their hours are even a little bit longer than that. So we can get everything in in those 14 weeks.

Janet Michael

Sounds crazy comprehensive, like literally, and this is going to be one of my questions I'm going to ask Derek here in a minute, as you walk out of that class and you are ready to walk right into a job.

AnnaJane Whitacre

Yes. This cohort graduated December 18th, I believe it was the Friday right before Christmas. And I had some of them that were starting jobs right after the first of the year. Several of them had start dates in January into February a little bit. But yeah, they're pretty much ready to walk on and start as either groundsmen with electrical utility companies or as apprentice line workers.

Janet Michael

So I mentioned earlier, Derek Dehaney is joining us. He is a recent grad from the Power Line Worker Program. Derek, what was it that drew you to this program to begin with?

Derrick DeHaney

The main thing was just expanding my career. I initially went to Laurel Ridge to enter the CDL program. And as far as lineman work, I went and did some research on YouTube and Google and just looked around and see what it really entailed because I've never really heard of it or I've never really been a part of lineman work. So I was like, wow, these guys are climbing poles. That looks like fun. Working outside is something that I already do. I've been in the construction field pretty much my whole life as far as working. And I fell in love with the guys that were in the class with. They were a little younger than me, but it was no problem for me to keep up because that's just what I've done all my life as far as working hard and doing stuff that young men do. I play travel football, still play travel football. So Me being able to do this work wasn't going to be a problem at all. I was just in love with it. First sight, I seen it. I said, this is something that I'm 1,000% going to love. It just was for me. And a lot of guys that were in the class would be thinking to contest to it. They were

like, yeah, this is it. I can't see myself doing anything else. It was just love at first sight for me. I'm just glad that Little Ridge was able to provide this program for us. The first guys to graduate, the 1st 12 to 13 guys to graduate. It's amazing. It just feels good to be a part of this.

Janet Michael

Anna Jane mentioned that so many of them had jobs as they graduated. We were talking a little bit before we started officially recording for the show. You're actually starting a new job on Monday with Dominion Power.

Derrick DeHaney

Yes, I've applied. I applied for Dominion as soon as we graduated December 19th. I got a call back immediately. They told me just be patient with us because our background check and everything that we do takes what they need to wear from four to five weeks. So I was like, oh goodness, I'm ready to work now. But the wait was worth it. Like I told you before. before I start 16th next Monday. Couldn't be more happy. This is a great opportunity for me and my family. I have two little kids. When I started the program, first couple of weeks, I'm like, man, I don't know how I'm going to do this. So I picked up jobs on the weekend. I did some security and it worked out very well. Like she said, it's full time. Like Anna Jane said, class is full time. You got to have your ducks in a row. I struggled at some points, but it was worth the struggle. And I don't know anybody that has went to school that hasn't struggled within that period of time. So like I said, if anybody is looking for a new career, this is it. If you're a hard worker and you like to work outside, this is it. I mean, it's so overwhelming. Glor Rich has changed my life and Anna Jane and her co-workers have done for me. Making sure we graduated and make sure that we have careers because they had people come in, all these companies. Novak, Dominion, CW. I mean, they had people come in, do mock interviews and put us in positions to already work before we even graduated. So the hard work and the love that they showed us, it doesn't go unnoticed at all, especially for me. I really appreciate it.

Janet Michael

And Jane, you talked a little bit about the curriculum for the class, but Derek brings up a good point because that's not the only thing that you do when you have these programs. You do bring these companies that are looking to hire these students immediately. do those interviews because you want to make sure it's a very well-rounded education that they get.

AnnaJane Whitacre

Yes, for sure. So we actually started building this program because industry came to us and said, we need these workers. We are facing a shortage of line workers in the very near future, and we need to start building out the future pipeline. So out of those initial conversations that started in February of 2024, so we're almost two years from the initial conversation of there's a need for this program. We developed the Northwestern Virginia Power and Energy Consortium. So Laurel Ridge and Dominion were the two founding members. And then we also pulled in all the local co-ops, several of the contractors. I'm not going to list everybody because we've been gaining new members, which is great, but I don't want to leave anybody out. But very comprehensive support from all the different employers within this space. They helped advise us through starting up this program. When we gave them a launch date of early 2027 for the program. They said, that's great, but can you do better? And that's how this fall cohort came about in the first place. On the flip side of the support they've shown us, they have access to our students. So we set up lunch visits where the employers that are in the consortium can come and have the students lunch hour. The employers have to bring lunch. So they have to buy the students pizza or subs or whatever, and then they get the whole lunch hour to talk to them about employment opportunities that they their companies or organizations. And then at the end of, towards the end of the class, we also did an interview day where companies were invited if they had current openings to come in and do onsite interviews with our students. So they weren't just mock interviews. They were real interviews. Some of the companies did ask for follow up interviews after the fact because they were brief on that day. But yeah, so we actually let them come in and do interviews. Several of the students had offers or at least follow up interviews shortly after after graduation or even before graduation. We really want to make sure the students have that pathway to employment.

Janet Michael

Yeah, Curtis, we talk about this a lot across all of the programs that Laurel Ridge offers is that you are never putting together a program just for the education. It always has to check all of the other boxes because the education isn't always the only thing that's needed.

Guy Curtis

Yeah, that's right. In terms of just the opportunity to work in the region, the employer connectivity is super huge, especially with this program. We're always trying to find what's in demand in the region, how to support our local employers. Obviously, Derek's a huge piece of that. We're helping the individuals, our local economy in so many different ways. As we were talking, I was just thinking about the energy and the excitement that he brings to this program and those who are thinking about this career. Annually, there's a couple hundred jobs that are open. The range that starts out around 50K a year and high

experience workers could make up over 6 figures. But I know that doesn't tell the full story. So I'm curious to know from Derek's perspective, Anna Jane, where are the job opportunities locally? Obviously, employers are here, but when emergency arises, like there's going to be opportunity to make more funds, more money if you're able to travel and if you have that flexibility in your schedule.

Derrick DeHaney

As far as traveling, I'm not sure how Dominion does it. Like I said, I haven't started yet. I start next week, but I'm all for traveling. I'm all for helping people. I want everybody to be able to flick their light switch on if something was to happen. I know a lot of companies, they work as a buddy system, whether it's Dominion, Novak, River City, especially if it's a catastrophe or something bad and power lines are down, they work together. They'll go to North Carolina or anywhere in the United States. They'll go together and work together to get everybody up and running again. So yeah, I'm all for traveling.

Janet Michael

In the past, I've talked with a couple of linemen from Rappahannock Electric Cooperative. So I know that there are a lot of opportunities for you just starting out to then get more credentials to move up. And the longer you're there, the higher your pay scale goes. And they all, in my opinion, are in a class with first responders. They're the ones that when the power goes out because of a storm, you're the one that's going to be going out there at some point and getting the power restored. How cool is that to say that that is your job?

Derrick DeHaney

It's a bragging experience for me. It's really cool. I've never bragged about a job. It's awesome. It's really awesome.

Janet Michael

And Anna Jane, it speaks to just the upward mobility of jobs like this as well, right?

AnnaJane Whitacre

Absolutely. So I found out when I started exploring this program, obviously I know graduates out of this program can go on and become linemen. The journeyman process to become a line worker, it takes four or five years. So once they leave our program, they start out as either grounds worker or apprentice lineman, depending on where they end up. company wise and how they start their entry level folks. Then it takes them four or five years of on the job experience and continued training to reach that journey workers level. But outside of just your traditional overhead line worker, I had no clue all the different split

offs they could take, especially with some of the bigger companies like Dominion or some of the bigger co-ops. they have opportunities to go into transmission work, which is like the really high power lines that you see, like with the towers. That's a whole other division of line work. They can also specialize in underground, so they may never climb a pole if they decide to specialize in underground after they get started in the industry, which is very prevalent in urban settings because more of the electrical run underground. Those are just two small examples. There's Fiber, so all the telecommunications side, they hire line workers as well. BIOS and all those trucks you see doing fiber, they have aerial lines run, so that is relevant as well. So while the initial training and that entry level point is focused on distribution line work, which is the just regular power lines, it opens up a lot of doors to lots of different opportunities for advancement, both in that track and other areas of the electrical utility industry, it's true. a very, very fruitful industry with lots of opportunity.

Janet Michael

Derek, you mentioned early on that you were intending originally to get your CDL and then heard about this program. So once you're sitting in these classes and learning all of these different options and finding out all of these other things, and I'm guessing you were probably a lot like the rest of us, that you knew power went through the polls and you knew people had to work on them. How much did you learn that you didn't even know you needed to know?

Derrick DeHaney

Oh, it's crazy. I learned so much. And like Anna Jane said, it's so many different things you can do as far as power and underground and transmissions. I've learned so much that I didn't know. Now all I do is look at power lines when I'm driving or whenever I'm outside. So I'm like, oh, that's not right. I learned that's that could cause a fire, any little thing, because our instructors were so amazing. They taught us everything that we needed to know, everything that is right, everything that is wrong, and some things are done different ways. I've learned more than what I would ever know if I didn't join this class. This was a great experience for me. It's just so eye-opening as far as broadening your horizon and broadening your career. If you just take a simple 14-week program, and to some people, 14 weeks is a long time, but to me, it's less than four years. I just feel like in them four 14 weeks I learned so much from, like she said, CDL all the way down to power line worker one. It's awesome, very awesome.

Janet Michael

And this is literally going to be a career path for you. This isn't take a class and learn how to do this one thing. Taking this program is really going to set you and your family up for a really solid future.

Derrick DeHaney

Absolutely, yes. I agree with that wholeheartedly. My kids' mom, she's a dental hygienist, so I've always worked hard and always maintained a job. My, her tax bracket is way higher than mine. So I just felt like I needed to at least pull my own weight as far as that's concerned. Like I said, I can't thank Laurel Ridge more. As far as a community college is concerned, they are top tier, 100%. The instructors that they provide, the services that they provide, the campus is great. They can provide you with computers if you need them. Everything was just great. Like I didn't have any complaints. I was very happy. Like I said, there was ups and downs. Like anybody would have ups and downs whenever you're in class or you're in college, but it was all great. It was all fruitful and I really appreciate them.

Janet Michael

And Jane, are there funding mechanisms in place, scholarships? Does this program qualify for fast forward or G3? How do some of your students pay for these classes?

AnnaJane Whitacre

It is one of our more expensive workforce programs, but it bundles all seven of those programs together and CDL on its own comes with a significant price tag. It is eligible for Fast Forward funding as well as G3 and FANTIC. So all three of those state funding mechanisms. We also have some scholarship funding available, especially this year, we've really been on top of advocating for additional scholarships, especially even some local scholarships for different counties, residents and things. Sometimes that's a fluid fluid situation, so definitely check in with our office, but they have a really great financial assistance quick form as part of our registration packet, and then our great folks in our operations office will screen each student for what they're eligible for. But yes, there are opportunities for funding through some of those state funding assistance programs, as well as some other more localized scholarship opportunities.

Janet Michael

Right, Curtis, we were talking about how this particular class that Derek was a part of graduated in mid-December. I know you've got a new class that's starting in April. Typically you guys do info sessions where people can learn a little bit more about what the class is like and how long they're going to run and what the investment is. Do you have any of those scheduled for this program?

Guy Curtis

Yes, we do. We have an upcoming information session on February 26th. It's from 5 to 7 P.m. at our Middletown location in our student union building. So if you can pre-register, that's great. Visit our website, [lorridgeworkforce.com](http://lorridgeworkforce.com) to learn more about that info session. And it's gearing up to answer questions for the April 13th start. So we have a class that's beginning another new cohort, power line worker program on April 13th, and that's going to run to July 17th, roughly. It is a full-time program. It's A Monday through Friday course. like Derek mentioned, you are putting your time and energy into it, but knowing that schedule, you could do evening and weekend work and hopefully you have a supportive family environment to get you through it. But come to the Power Line Worker Information Session on February 26th from 5 to 7 here at Middletown, and that'll help hopefully answer your questions. And the key thing that Anna-Jane was talking about, because some state funding limitations, we do have a lot of other scholarships that are out there. So regardless, let us help you navigate those funding options that are out there. So I think it's worthwhile to just investigate, learn more, talk to Anna-Jane herself and others for potentially considering the class. Certainly Derek's a great example of how success comes forward through a bit of time and energy. And so I love what he said, and there's a bit of effort where... It's not going to always be perfect, but I think the positives and the outcomes and the course of his career that he's moving forward with is going to be tremendous for him and his family. So I think that is so super exciting and very rewarding for us to hear.

Janet Michael

Derek, I think it's going to be a situation where in five or six more years, you're going to have to come back and talk to the class. You're going to have to come back and be one of those speakers.

Derrick DeHaney

Absolutely, I sure will.

AnnaJane Whitacre

I already warned them at graduation. I said, just wait in a few years. I'll be calling y'all again.

Janet Michael

Do you have any advice, Derek, for someone who's listening now that's thinking maybe this is something I could consider, but I just don't know? What would you tell them to do?

Derrick DeHaney

Run to it. Go in, sign up. Laurel Ridge provides some funding. I'm not sure if you'll get the whole thing paid for. Fill out everything you can. Even if you do have to pay a little bit of money, whatever a little bit of money is to certain people to take this class, it's 1000% worth it. You'll get that money back the first time you apply for a job and they accept you. You get seven different credentials and Anna Jane went over them earlier in the show. I don't know where you can get this amount of credentials and certifications within this 14 weeks. I don't know where you can get it from. I've heard of it before. And when I went and applied and filled out all my information, I'm like, after these 14 weeks are over, I'm going to be so ecstatic because this is when I don't see me going to school for four years beating this. I just don't see it. Some people, they're four years, they want to do whatever they want to do, become a lawyer or whatever. That's fine. That's cool. But this right here is for me, for people that work outside, for people that want to get their hands dirty. This is for me and this is for whoever's listening to this. That's teeter-tottering, 50-50 in, 50-50 out. If you listen to me, go 100% in. And Laurel Ridge will make sure you graduate. Every instructor was top tier for us. made sure we passed the class, they made sure that we got the knowledge, and if we needed help, they would literally stop class and help that individual and would tell everybody in the class, hey, let's help this person understand what it is that they don't understand. And I just, I've never been to, not even in high school. So I can't, I just, I can't, I just can't speak highly enough for what I went through. This is my personal experience, but I just can't speak highly enough for Laurel Ridge and what they've done for me and my family and my career. I just can't be more thankful. So I'm hoping whoever is on the fence about it, please go and do it. The waiting list should be out the door. It really should.

Janet Michael

I wish you a lot of luck, my friend. And from now on, whenever I'm driving around town, I'm gonna look up just to see if maybe it's you on the power.

Derrick DeHaney

Hey, there you go. And make sure ain't nothing dangling down. We don't want that.

Janet Michael

Anna Jane, thank you for taking the time today as well to give us some background and history on this program. I appreciate it.

AnnaJane Whitacre

Thank you for having me. And I can't thank Derek enough for being willing to join us and his whole class. They were a great first class and I'm excited to see what the future holds with this program.

Janet Michael

Right, Curtis, tell me one more time. Where can people go get more information about the info session?

Guy Curtis

Visit [lorowidgeworkforce.com](http://lorowidgeworkforce.com). Just search through the site and look for the upcoming power line information session. If you Google it, should be available. But February 26th, here's the Middletown campus from 5 to 7. Pre-registration is requested, but not required. And it'll be actually in our student union building. So stop by there, come when you can, just to learn more about the program.

Janet Michael

Fantastic. And I understand you and I, Guy Curtis, are talking AI next month. I am very excited about that.

Guy Curtis

Yes, We have a Laurel Ridge AI Summit on April 1st. It's a morning event. And so it's open to the public. We're going to have a lot of college staff here and faculty members learning more. We're always learning about AI because obviously it's always learning about us. And so to keep up with it, our college's mission is to showcase the latest and greatest technology. And it's a great event to come to network and learn how others are using it in our community. So that is the Laurel Ridge AI Summit, April 1st.

Janet Michael

Thank you for taking the time today. I appreciate it.

Guy Curtis

It's always so rewarding to be here. And thank you for having us again, Janet.

Janet Michael

I will be back tomorrow with a brand new episode of The Valley today, just a few minutes after noon. So meet me here then.