

Returning veterans find career support with energy tech course

Sierra College partnering with California Conservation Corps to provide training, work experience

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Courtesy
Eric Juhnke, a former Army medic who served in Iraq, wires an outlet during hands-on training at the California Conservation Corps Placer Energy Center in Christian Valley.



conservation corps veterans crew in the state focused on energy efficiency.

"Working with other veterans, I see the work ethic and commitment to quality," Juhnke said.

Joining in December and committed to work for the conservation corps through June, Juhnke said he's already considering pursuing further studies in solar energy at a community college in Southern California.

Out of the military after serving as medics, ammunition specialists and security forces, a small group of returning troops has found support and training in a new Sierra College course overseen by the California Conservation Corps.

Eric Juhnke, 22, said he may have found an avenue to the future after sometimes struggling since leaving the Army in early 2010. A medic who served much of his time in Iraq with a scout patrol, Juhnke returned to the United States with no intention of staying in the medical field.

"I didn't want to go into the medical field, with all that sickness and misery," Juhnke said. "I want to be out in the sun making things work better."

His morale plummeted on his return when civilian peers considered him a "robot" for enlisting while he tried to convince them he was a patriot, Juhnke said.

But Juhnke said he has found a possible future and a chance to train in a field he's interested in through a partnership between the California Conservation Corps' Placer Energy Center in Christian Valley near Auburn and Rocklin's Sierra College.

Juhnke was one of nine veterans who graduated Friday from an intensive three-week course in energy technology and lighting systems developed by Sierra College's Center for Applied Competitive Technologies. They'll now go on to work on the only

"I believe in the solar energy field and would be happy helping to push the world forward," he said.

Auburn's Alexandra Warner, who served as an ammunition and explosives specialist in the Army, happily accepted her certificate at a ceremony Friday at the Christian Valley center.

"I'd recommend this for anybody, especially a female," Warner said. "Now I want to get my hands on some solar paneling and learn some more. This program was much more than I expected."

Carol Pepper-Kittredge, director of the college applied technology center, said the partnership is going to benefit the regional economy. Over the next six months, the group will be working in Department of Motor Vehicles offices in Southern and Northern California, modernizing lighting systems. After that, veterans who are part of the program will have a skill set that will help in their careers, she said.

"This program puts veterans to work while they gain electrical skills that are transferable to a variety of careers," Pepper-Kittredge said. "Businesses become more competitive by employing these skilled corps members who've acquired practical experience through this program."