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Metro hopes to train a few good utility linemen

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Troy Sharp likes being outside.



Metro Community College students practice climbing utility poles as part of the Utility Line Technician Program offered at the school's south campus. The Omaha Public Power District says there is a need for qualified line technicians.

So the 21-year-old decided studying to become a utility lineman was a better choice for him than nursing, his original major in college.

Sharp, who is from Fullerton, Neb., decided to pursue the work after talking with some friends who were studying to be linemen.

He now attends Omaha's Metropolitan Community College. The Utility Line Technician Program takes about a year to complete, including an internship

Starting in March, the program will offer weekend classes for people who work full time during the week. Students using that option should be able to complete the online and outside lab curriculum in about a year and a half.

The need for linemen became more evident after the recent ice storm that knocked out power to thousands of people in central Nebraska.

At the height of the storm, about 30,000 customers were without power. All homes and communities have been reconnected to the electrical grid, and utilities are now focusing on permanent repairs.

Within the next five years, the Omaha Public Power District estimates that as many as 20 percent of its 150 linemen technician positions will need to be filled, an OPPD spokesman said. Because of that, increases in workload and other issues, OPPD decided to create a partnership with Metro and pay for its employees to go through the program. Currently, 12 full-time OPPD employees are studying to be linemen.

The Nebraska Public Power District isn't having problems recruiting linemen, according to an NPPD spokeswoman, but the utility might need to begin hiring new linemen within the next three to five years.

Metro's program allows for about 40 students to be enrolled at one time. The current class, which started this past fall, is near capacity, said Rich Newcomer, one of the program's full-time professors.

At a recent class at Metro's south Omaha campus, students were outside practicing climbing poles. They were decked out in all the proper equipment - hard hats, boots, gloves and tool belts.

The students are trained in various aspects of the job, including roping and rigging techniques, installation and maintenance of overhead and underground lines, handling equipment and safety.

Newcomer said about 75 percent of the curriculum is done outside. The other 25 percent is classroom work. Once students have completed the coursework, they do an internship.

The work pays well: Starting pay for an intern is around \$12 to \$14 per hour. An apprentice can make about \$17 to \$18 per hour, and linemen with experience can make \$25 to \$30 per hour.

James Hinrikus, who is 30, was a farmer before joining the Metro program. He travels home to Doniphan, Neb., on the weekends to see his wife and two children.

"It takes a while to get back into learning," Hinrikus said. "Once you get back into it, it gets easier."

Erik Conrad, a 22-year-old Omahan, said he can't wait to complete the program.

Conrad said he appreciates being taught by people who have had hands-on experience and can relate to what he will be doing on the job.

An important aspect of the job is not being afraid to climb the poles. Conrad said he was afraid of heights when he first started the program, but now he has a "just do it" mentality.

"Start at the bottom of the pole and get to the top."

World-Herald staff writer Nancy Gaarder contributed to this report.

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