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New Banner Center Seeks to Address Demand for Skilled Energy Workers

SUMTERVILLE — Helping to grow the skilled energy workforce is the aim of the new Employ Florida Banner Center for Energy that has been launched with a \$500,000 grant from Workforce Florida, Inc.

The center, which will focus on developing curricula and increasing training opportunities for electric utility line workers and power plant employees, is based at Lake-Sumter Community College's Sumter campus. It is a joint initiative with Indian River Community College in Fort Pierce. Today, state and local workforce and economic development leaders, education partners and energy sector executives gathered at Lake-Sumter Community College to outline plans for the Banner Center that will address a critical workforce need in Florida.

"If you want to know just how important it is to maintain a well-skilled electric utility workforce, just flip on a light switch. We all do so every day expecting the lights to come on," said Katherine E. Wilson, Chairman of Workforce Florida, prior to today's kickoff event. "Yet, as service demands increase and its aging workforce moves closer to retirement, Florida's electric utility industry is beginning to feel the effects of the nationwide energy sector's technical talent shortage.

"Through this workforce, education and industry partnership, the Banner Center will ensure Florida continues to lead the way in developing a pipeline of highly skilled utility workers now and in the future."

The Employ Florida Banner Center for Energy is one of 10 such centers created under a year-old, \$6.2 million initiative to develop the state's workforce in several key Florida industries. These centers increase opportunities for cutting-edge training for Florida workers while supporting high-wage, high-growth sectors — a priority of the state's economic development plan. The centers also are a top strategic priority of the entire workforce system, including Workforce Florida, the Agency for Workforce Innovation (AWI) and the state's 24 regional workforce boards and nearly 100 One-Stop Career Centers.

"Florida has a rapidly expanding infrastructure that creates demand for new energy supplies," said Monesia T. Brown, Director of the Agency for Workforce Innovation. "This creates incredible employment opportunities in our energy sectors but in order to meet Florida's needs, we must prepare a workforce that is fully skilled for these opportunities. This Banner Center will allow us to do just that."

The Banner Center for Energy builds on Lake-Sumter Community College's already successful Electric Utility Institute, which trains electric utility workers in Central Florida. Through the Banner Center, Lake-Sumter Community College courses such as one that trains workers in using rubber protective equipment while installing, maintaining and repairing power lines, will be available statewide to update line technicians' skills. The Banner Center also plans to recruit its first class of 20 people interested in becoming line technicians and it will help these entry-level workers find jobs in Florida. Under this initiative, Lake-Sumter Community College is slated to begin training incumbent workers and prospective new hires in the industry next month. The average annual wage for electrical power line installers and

repairers in Florida last year was \$48,623 — compared to the average annual state wage of \$36,804, according to Labor Market Statistics in the Agency for Workforce Innovation.

Additionally, Indian River Community College will take the lead on offering training and developing new curricula for entry-level and experienced power plant workers. It will do so by expanding the reach of its Power Plant Technology Institute. In-demand jobs in the area of power generation include power plant operators and maintenance mechanics. The average annual wage for Florida power plant workers last year was \$56,347.

"This is what community colleges do — team with industry to create workforce training to meet its needs and provide access to high-wage, high-demand careers for Florida residents," said Dr. Charles R. Mojock, President of Lake-Sumter Community College. "We are indebted to SECO and the cities of Bushnell and Leesburg, whose early support made it possible to bring this exciting Banner Center for Energy to Sumter County."

Creation of the Employ Florida Banner Center for Energy is welcome news for Florida's electric utilities. The center will work closely with utility companies and state industry associations to develop new curricula for training. More than half of the nation's current utility workforce is expected to be eligible for retirement during the next decade, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Industry representation on the Banner Center for Energy's Advisory Council includes executives from the statewide Florida Energy Workforce Consortium, created last year to address the critical workforce needs of Florida utilities. Among the industry supporters are the Florida Electric Cooperative Association, Florida Municipal Electric Association, Florida Power & Light Company, Gulf Power Company, Progress Energy, Sumter Electric Cooperative (SECO) and TECO Energy.

"This partnership of businesses, education and workforce shows Florida is not only committed to maintaining its strong economy by building a better-skilled workforce, but also committed to building stronger communities," said Susan Story, President and CEO of Gulf Power Company.

The Employ Florida Banner Center for Energy is the second Banner Center to be based in Central Florida. Valencia Community College has taken the lead role in establishing the Employ Florida Banner Center for Health Sciences. Other centers have been created to expand training for entry-level and advanced workers in aviation and aerospace, biotechnology, construction, financial services, homeland security and defense, logistics and distribution and manufacturing. There is also an Employ Florida Banner Center based in Okaloosa County charged with improving career education in Florida high schools.

All of the Employ Florida Banner Centers are part of the Employ Florida network of state and local workforce partners that provide workforce development services and programs. For more information on Employ Florida Banner Centers, please go to www.EmployFlorida.com.

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Workforce Florida, Inc., (WFI) is the state's chief workforce policy organization and principal architect in the efforts to meet the current and future workforce needs and challenges of Florida's businesses and citizens. WFI is a state partner, along with the Agency for Workforce Innovation, in the Employ Florida affiliate network of 24 business-led regional workforce boards and nearly 100 One-Stop Career Centers that provide employment solutions throughout Florida. Learn more about Florida's workforce resources and solutions at www.EmployFlorida.com.

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