

# Camden trainees making transition to jobs

[Phaedra Trethan](#), @CP\_Phaedra Published 8:53 a.m. ET March 30, 2017 | Updated 22 hours ago



Training programs are helping Camden residents work on construction projects in the city Phaedra Trethan

CAMDEN - It is not, Bob Schiavinato said, a social welfare program.

"It's a social justice program," he said, sitting in a construction trailer outside what will soon become Camden Prep, a Renaissance school rising on Haddon Avenue in the city's Parkside neighborhood. "It's getting everyone to the same starting line."

Schiavinato was talking about the Camden Construction Careers Initiative, and about the Union Organization for Social Service (UOSS), and efforts to make sure city residents benefit from the many construction jobs at projects all over the city.

Announced Sept. 8, the CCCI has been touted by Mayor Dana Redd in her State of the City address as a way to put city residents to work and give them a stake in their own future. Funded by the city, the Cooper's Ferry Partnership, Rutgers University, Liberty Property Trust and the Cooper Foundation, it's a response to a question posed by George E. Norcross III at the initial news conference: "For decades and decades, we've consistently heard the question from community leaders: How will this benefit the residents of Camden?"

For Shimon Donaldson, the benefits are clear: His work as a construction laborer has gotten him off the streets and into a stable life.

"Oh, yeah, I had some trouble," he said, acknowledging past brushes with the law. Working as a union laborer since 2004, though, he's been able to provide for his three daughters, ages 15, 6 and 3.

"I love it when they say, 'Daddy's working!'" The 37-year-old said he's told his friends about union programs that offer training in construction trades. He's grateful for the second chance that Building and General Construction Laborers Local 77 gave him.

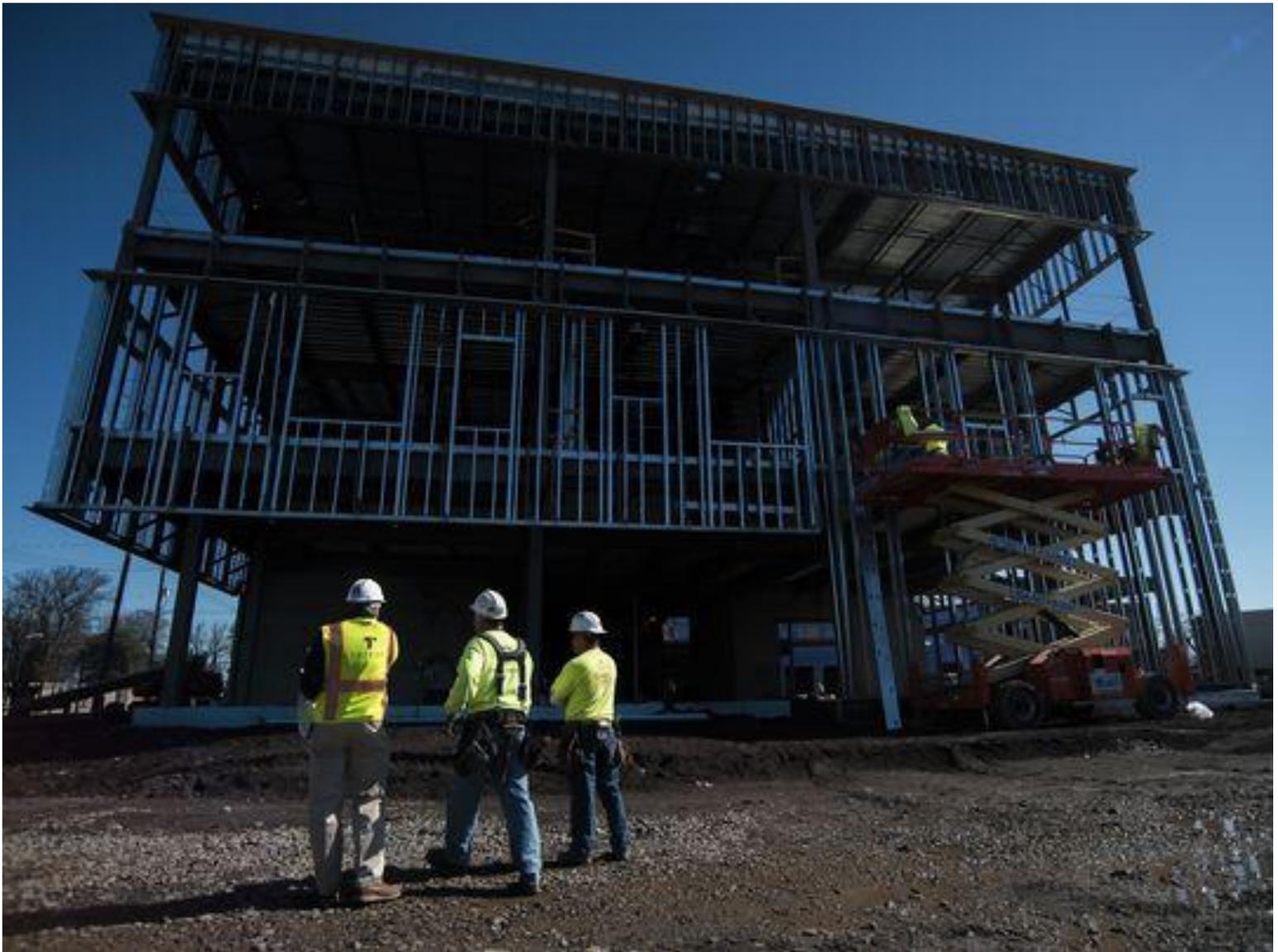
"They're good guys, and they show up with the right attitude, ready to work," said Bob Cattalo, a foreman with R&M Masonry. "And it's good for the community. It really seems like they're working to put as many local guys to work, and we're going to need them, especially when you look at all the work that will happen here over the next five years."

For John Hollis, UOSS provided a grueling, but ultimately rewarding, way to a better life.

A Centerville resident and father of a 2-year-old daughter, Hollis talked about the math-intensive curriculum the program required and how, after working in warehouses and as a forklift operator, he was now on a path to "a career, instead of just a job."

"It's definitely had an impact," he said. "The work is much more consistent."

The current class at UOSS has 38 people in training, with 18 graduates now working on various projects throughout the city, Schiavinato said – a pace a bit quicker than the 10 people at a time initially announced. "The city wanted to put us on steroids to get this thing going," he joked.



Construction continues at the Uncommon Schools construction site on Haddon Avenue in Camden. (Photo: Joe Lamberti/Staff Photographer)

The construction careers program offered through UOSS gives city residents training in a variety of construction trades, including masonry and bricklaying, carpentry, electrical, ironwork, painting, pipefitting, sheet metal and roofing. But in addition to pre-apprenticeships to lay the groundwork for a trade, the program also includes training in so-called soft skills, like financial and computer literacy.

Participants first learn basic construction math, tool handling and job site safety. They are evaluated on their work habits, proficiency and other criteria before being matched with a trade.

Camden County Freeholder Jonathan Young, who is also on the board of the Northeast Regional Council of Carpenters, said despite decades of unfulfilled promises for Camden residents, there is a concerted effort to make sure economic growth makes its way to those who need it most.

"There are legitimate projects happening now," he said. "We've really never seen a building boom like this, and there's a true commitment on the part of the (Redd) administration to make sure people who live here are part of it.

"Every county needs a metropolis. Why shouldn't ours be Camden?"

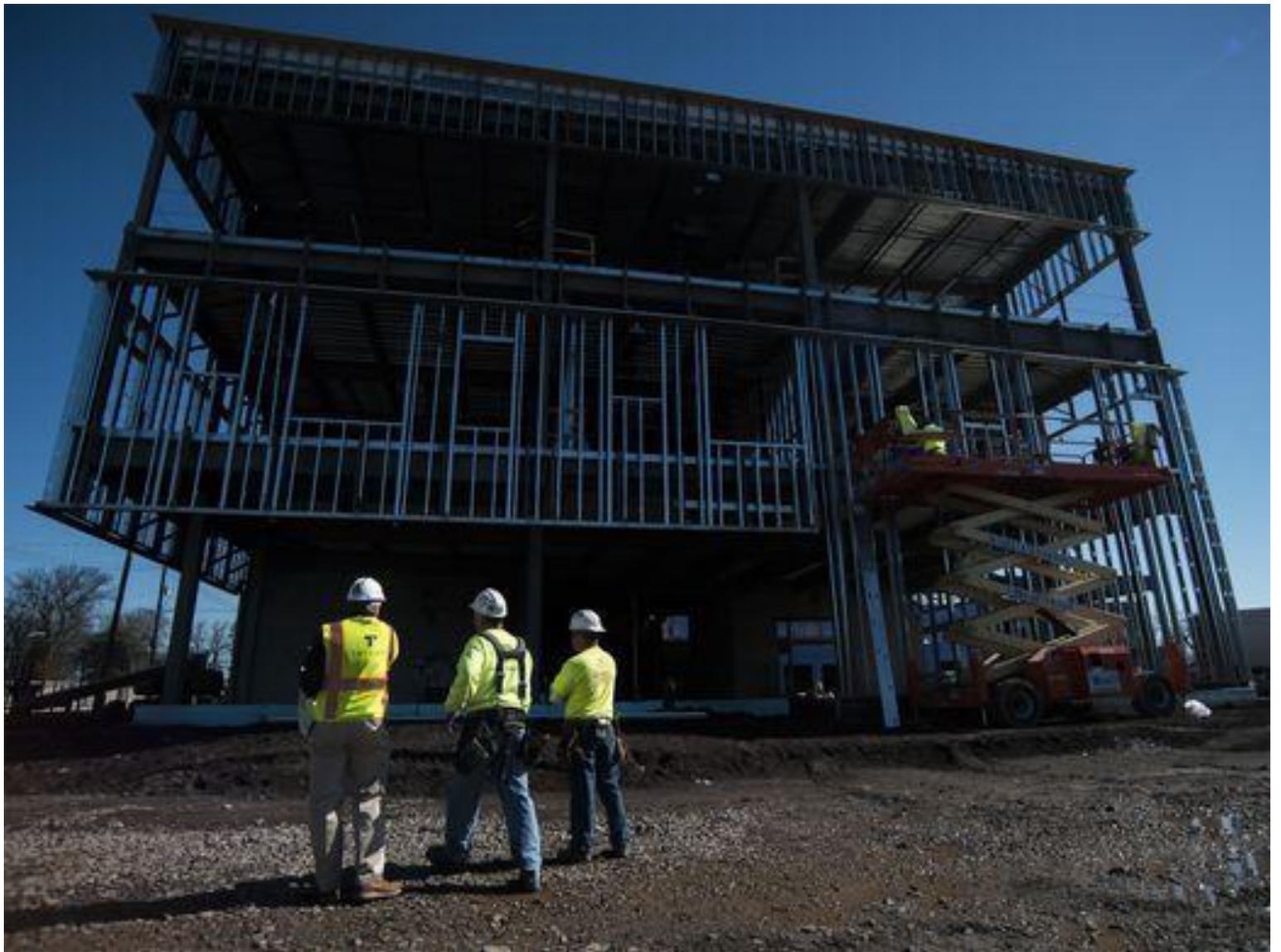
Union jobs are key drivers to financial stability, he said, something Norcross also noted in September, but training has to be provided to those who need it.

"We know that there aren't that many city residents who are members of the trade unions," Norcross said last fall. "To increase participation and get people union jobs, we need to train them."

"You can have 2 or 5 billion dollars in new construction, but if you don't have people properly trained, there are no opportunities. In the last number of months, the city administration has decided to create these opportunities."

Young added that offering jobs to city residents isn't just "the right thing to do," it's the smart thing, helping residents buy homes, raise families and move toward the middle class. It's also important for unions: "We will be diverse. We will look like the communities we work in."

Maireni Pimentel worked odd jobs, including as a cook, before getting into a pre-apprenticeship program through New Life Ministries, just down Haddon Avenue, five years ago.



Construction continues at the Uncommon Schools construction site on Haddon Avenue in Camden. Joe Lamberti/Staff Photographer

The East Camden resident, wearing a San Francisco 49ers hardhat that drew good-natured teasing from his co-workers, is nearing journeyman status in Carpenters Local 255 and calls the work "the best thing that's happened in my life."

"I was basically messing around in the streets (before training as a carpenter)," he said. The father of a toddler and an 11-year-old said the steady work allowed him to marry and provide for his sons, and he plans to buy a house soon.

"This was life-changing," the Cramer Hill resident added. "I don't know what I'd be doing with my life."

*Phaedra Trethan: (856) 486-2417; ptrethan@gannettnj*