

Testimony to the Senate Finance Committee
Marcia Brown, National Center for Appropriate Technology
July 15, 2010

Chairman Baucus, Senator Grassley and Members of the Committee, I am Marcia Brown, Chief Operating Officer of the National Center for Appropriate Technology and am honored to speak to you today about my organization's efforts and success in retaining and recruiting "encore" employees, those who are working beyond retirement. I am particularly honored to be here with my own Senator, Chairman Max Baucus.

First, let me tell you a little about the National Center for Appropriate Technology. NCAT is a national non-profit organization headquartered in Butte, Montana. We maintain regional field offices in Des Moines, Iowa; Fayetteville, Arkansas; Davis, California; Shavertown, Pennsylvania; and Hammond, Louisiana and are in the process of locating a new office in San Antonio, Texas. Our mission is to promote sustainable, small scale, local solutions in the fields of agriculture and energy with a particular interest in helping people who are economically disadvantaged.

NCAT has a highly educated and passionate staff committed to promoting our mission. We have a large diversity of both staff and projects but are perhaps best known here in Congress for our ATTRA project, the national sustainable agriculture information service that provides technical services to farmers, ranchers, market gardeners, educators and extension agents. That project, which is funded by USDA's Rural Business Services provides toll-free hot lines, a dynamic website, publications and in-person training to help family farmers, limited-resource farmers and others in agriculture learn how to produce crops, raise livestock and market their products in the most sustainable manner. Our agriculture staff is made up of a mix of agronomists, horticulturists, marketing specialists, livestock specialists and organic specialists.

Our energy staff members are equally committed to helping people by reducing their energy consumption using alternative energy, energy efficiency measures and conservation. They too, are highly educated, and include a large number of energy engineers, analysts, marketing specialists and architects.

Maintaining such a highly educated and experienced workforce along with operating a nonprofit organization that is entrepreneurial in developing new projects and work has required that NCAT adopt practices that allow for various ways to recruit and retain workers. Those methods have helped us meet and sustain our own mission. NCAT was proud to be the recipient of a Civic Ventures 2009 Encore Opportunities award for engaging people over 50 in creative ways to help our organization meet our mission.

I was asked to address the three areas specifically where NCAT has been successful in retaining and recruiting older workers: employing “adjunct staff;” accessing senior training programs; and recruiting from diverse populations, including older workers who have retired or been laid off.

Employing adjunct employees

One highly successful method we have used is allowing employees who retire or take new jobs elsewhere to be classified as “adjunct employees.” This allows senior employees who are no longer regularly employed at NCAT the opportunity to come back to work on specific projects for a specific time period. Our adjunct employee policy allows NCAT to retain a pool of educated and experienced staff that can be called in as needed for projects with time limits that would not allow for a full outside recruitment process. It is cost neutral - in fact it saves us money in recruiting and hiring costs - and is a great benefit for the organization and for our former staff. Many of our former employees work occasionally for us as adjunct employees. For example, one of our long-term older employees left NCAT several years ago to concentrate on raising flowers and vegetables for her local Farmers Market. She continues to do so but works during the winter months as a horticulturist for NCAT’s ATTRA sustainable agriculture project. NCAT has an investment in the education and training of our staff. Being able to bring them back easily allows us to retain their expertise after they retire, saves us from having to hire and train temporary staff and assures that we maintain the high quality of work for which we are known.

Rose Sullivan, NCAT’s librarian, was a retired school teacher when she started working at NCAT in 1978. She retired as our librarian in 1992 and returned to work as an adjunct employee in 1997. She has been converted to regular status and serves as our head librarian on a very limited work schedule of 12 hours per week. Rose says that she “flunked retirement”. She orders, catalogues and tracks NCAT’s vast library resources. She is trained on all the newest software and provides support to all of our staff

whether they are located in our Montana headquarters office or in any of our regional offices. NCAT provides technical information on sustainable agriculture and sustainable energy to thousands of people every year and it is imperative that we have current and accurate library resources for our technical specialists to access. Rose ensures that we can do so and continues as our librarian even as she reaches age 90 this month. She loves her work at NCAT and we love her! She is an inspiration to all of our staff, young and old.

Using senior worker training programs

NCAT also takes advantage of older worker training programs such as Experience Works (formerly known as the Green Thumb Program). Experience Works trains low-income seniors for jobs that serve their communities. NCAT has participated in Experience Works for more than eight years training older workers to assist on our National Energy Assistance Referral Hotline helping low income consumers find assistance paying their energy bills. Several of our Experience Works trainees have become regular NCAT employees and many others have gone on to work in our community. NCAT takes pride in the training these enrollees receive and we have benefited greatly from the opportunity to make those trainees NCAT employees. It does require that we put time and resources toward the training of these Experience Works Members. However, in the long run we have trained people who gained the experience needed for the very job we need to fill. Our staff members who were previously Experience Work trainees are excellent employees. They appreciate our living wage and our benefits. They are always on task and very dedicated to helping our clients on the NEAR hotline. I cannot stress how positive the Experience Works program is for organizations such as mine. I will note that one of our employees who came from the training program is limited to the amount of time she can work due to restrictions on her Social Security benefits. She would be eligible for more work should that limitation be changed.

Targeted recruiting

NCAT recruits nationally for many of our positions. We use the traditional recruiting resources at colleges with schools of agriculture and engineering, newspapers, alumni bulletins and websites, advertising in trade journals and with professional societies. However, when we had the opportunity a few years ago to conduct energy efficiency audits of commercial, industrial and governmental buildings in Montana, we needed to staff up more quickly than our normal recruiting process would allow. There are a limited number

of experienced energy engineers in the Montana employment market. NCAT targeted our recruitment to a group of experienced energy engineers, all over 50, who previously worked for our local utility and were either retired or laid off. The core staff of five experienced energy specialists hired during that process has now grown to more than a dozen members of the team with our experienced staff serving as mentors to the younger engineers and architects. Targeting older workers in our recruitment process really paid off for NCAT.

Barriers to Older Workers

For NCAT, most of our retired workers supplement their Social Security with NCAT pay. There are some older employees who must limit their work because of the Social Security limitation for taking early retirement.

The biggest barrier for older workers from our perspective is staying current on new technologies, either computer or cutting edge technologies in their professional field. NCAT works to alleviate this by providing training and professional development opportunities for all employees regardless of age.

NCAT has an excellent reputation and it is due to our excellent staff. We have a multigenerational diverse workforce of eighty-two regular staff. Thirty-six of them are over fifty years of age. Many have been at NCAT for more than 20 years; others have been with us for less than a year. At NCAT we value experience and expertise and make every effort to remove any perceived barriers to the employment of “older” workers. We work to keep staff by giving them options for work such as reducing their hours as they make changes in their personal lives. Many of our staff are working in “encore” or second careers. I myself started at NCAT just a few months before my 50th birthday. This is my encore career. My past professional life was as a staff member for the late Senator Lee Metcalf, and former Congressman Pat Williams. NCAT did for me what we do for all of our employees – make certain that training and professional development opportunities are available. One of those opportunities includes my testimony today, nearly 40 years after my first employment here in the US Senate. Thank you so much for the opportunity to testify and to put on the record the great benefits our organization has reaped from using employees who have “retired.”