

## **BFAAM Unveils Its Apprenticeship Program: Q&A with Dan Decker**

The Burglar and Fire Alarm Association of Michigan is pleased to unveil its Apprenticeship Program which has already been authorized by the US Department of Labor. The program will kickoff and begin accepting its first applicants in 2010. To address the many questions for the membership and industry, BFAAM included the Apprenticeship Program among the topics at the 2009 Fall Conference and the 2010 Spring Conference, and Dan Decker of Safety Systems Inc. lead both topics. To help address any remaining questions or to provide answers to those still learning of the program, BFAAM sat down with Dan Decker to discuss the ins and outs of the Apprenticeship Program.

### **BFAAM: What is an apprenticeship and how do they generally work?**

**Decker:** An apprenticeship is a combination of on-the-job training and related classroom instruction through which workers learn the practical aspects of a highly skilled occupation. Apprenticeship programs typically are sponsored by individual employers, joint employer and labor groups, and/or associations. Nearly 900 occupations are approved for apprenticeships. Most programs require four years and at least 8,000 hours to complete. A large chunk of those hours, say 6,000 hours, are devoted to on-the-job work experience under the supervision of a journey level craft person or a trade professional. The remaining hours are the related classroom instruction usually provided at a community college or apprenticeship classes.

### **B: How does an apprentice typically start out?**

**D:** Most apprentices must be at least 18 years of age and possess a high school diploma or its equivalent. Because an individual must be a full-time or near full-time employee of the company to which he/she is apprenticed, he/she will earn a wage while they acquire on-the-job training.

### **B: What credentials does an individual earn through an apprenticeship?**

**D:** When the apprentice successfully completes the apprenticeship, that person will receive from the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Apprenticeship a Certificate of Completion that is recognized throughout the United States.

### **B: Why did BFAAM create its Apprenticeship Program?**

**D:** Public Act 217 of 1956, also known as the Electrical Licensing Act, requires individuals installing, altering, repairing, servicing or maintaining a fire alarm system to be a Licensed Journey or Master Electrician, a Licensed Fire Alarm Specialty Technician, or a Registered Apprentice working under the direct supervision of a licensed individual. Fire alarm licensing requirements were added to the law June 30, 1992.

### **B: So what has changed? What does this mean for the fire alarm industry in Michigan?**

**D:** A lawsuit filed by a trade group resulted in a "temporary" injunction from the court preventing the State of Michigan from enforcing the requirements for apprentice enrollment in approved programs. Consequently these requirements have not been

enforced in Michigan. On September 16, 2008, (sixteen years after the case was filed) the judge ruled against the trade group and lifted the injunction.

The Electrical Division of the State Bureau of Construction Codes (within the Department of Energy, Labor and Economic Growth [DELEG]) subsequently announced a schedule when enforcement of the various requirements will begin. Beginning April 1, 2009, DELEG will enforce jobsite ratios for licensed individuals to apprentices. For our industry, that means a maximum of 2 apprentices to 1 fire alarm technician as the acceptable ratio. Beginning August 1, 2010, DELEG will begin enforcement of the requirement that apprentices be enrolled in an approved training program. Current registrations expire in August, and will not be renewed without proof of enrollment in an approved program.

**B: So with the injunction lifted, BFAAM had to act to make sure the industry was compliant and that is why BFAAM created the Apprenticeship Program?**

**D:** That is correct. Under the new regulations, an individual employed as a fire alarm specialty apprentice technician must register as an apprentice within 30 days after employment. The DELEG Electrical Division will issue a certificate of registration to a person seeking registration upon satisfactory proof of the person's participation in a bona fide approved apprenticeship training program. The BFAAM program will enroll fire alarm apprentices in a US Department of Labor database, and the State Electrical Division will check that database prior to issuing certificate of registration.

**B: So tell us about the BFAAM Apprenticeship Program. It meets the US Department of Labor requirements, right?**

**D:** (laughing) Absolutely! In fact, the BFAAM Apprenticeship Program has been approved, authorized and certified by the US Department of Labor.

To apply for the apprenticeship program, BFAAM had to demonstrate its program included qualifications for apprenticeships, a term of the apprenticeship (2 year program or 4 year program, for example), a schedule of on-the-job training, a schedule of classroom training, skill progression of the apprentices, and wage progression of the apprentices. The BFAAM program met all those requirements and was officially approved by the US Department of Labor on October 19, 2010.

BFAAM will coordinate the overall apprenticeship program, sponsor and host the classroom trainings, keep track of the paperwork, register both sponsoring employers and their apprentices, and provide the certificates of completion.

**B: Going forward, what does this mean for fire alarm companies in Michigan?**

**D:** First, because BFAAM offers an approved training program, fire alarm companies in Michigan can begin applying with BFAAM as can their apprentices. The BFAAM Apprenticeship Program provides for a two year apprenticeship program with a "Work Process Schedule" based on learning skills required for NICET Level II Certification in Fire Alarm Systems. The employer provides the on-the-job training and time for classroom training. The program provides the required classroom training for the

apprentices. There is minimal paperwork for the employer. The employer simply signs a one page "Employer Participation Agreement." The employer establishes the wage rates and wage progression schedule, and determines apprentice progress and completion of objectives.

**B: On the flip side, what does this mean for fire alarm technicians and employees?**

**D:** In order to perform any work on a fire alarm system, an individual must either be licensed or a registered apprentice under the direct supervision of a licensed individual. Individuals desiring to register as an apprentice must document their enrollment in a formal apprenticeship training program approved by the US Department of Labor. The BFAAM apprenticeship program is a 4,000 hour program (2 years) with 4 periods with specific objectives covered in each period. The ultimate objective is for the apprentice to pass NICET II and obtain a Michigan FAST license on completion of program.

So the employee must complete the two year apprenticeship program, take and pass the NICET Level II certification test, obtain NICET Level II in fire alarm systems, take and pass the Fire Alarm Specialty Technician licensing exam, and obtain the FAST license.

**B: So will BFAAM still offer NICET Prep Courses?**

**D:** Not as a stand alone class anymore. The material covered in the NICET Prep Course will now be part of the classroom training that goes into the ultimate completion of an apprenticeship.

**B: Ah, I see! So how does one get started in the Apprenticeship Program?**

**D:** With that August 1 deadline quickly approaching, BFAAM is now developing its application. The employer will need to register with BFAAM as a participating employer, and then register the apprentices who wish to be enrolled in the apprenticeship program.

After that, the employer will provide the on-the-job training, make sure the employee is progressing, follow their written wage progression scale as the apprentice reaches the pre-defined experience and skill levels, and allow for apprentices to take the classroom training. Generally the wage and skill progression is on a 1,000 hour (6 month) schedule, where the apprentice needs to demonstrate mastery of defined skills, and when the employer certifies the progress, the wage rate is increased according to the employers schedule. Typically an employer identifies the wage rate for a FAST licensed technician, and a percentage of that wage rate at the 6, 12, 18 and 24 month intervals of the apprenticeship program.

The apprentice needs to show progress at work, complete the required hours, take the classroom instruction, and ultimately pass the NICET and FAST tests.

**B: Makes sense! Thank you for your time, Dan!**

**D:** You're welcome. Thank you.