Media Contact: Carl Shaw (202) 343-6031; Greg Shaw (202) 343-4576
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A Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) investment that created three "business opportunity centers" last September is paying off with real jobs for Indian people.

The Rensselaerville Institute of Rensselaerville, N.Y., one of the three new centers, has been working with tribes and individual Indian entrepreneurs across the country. It has created and saved a total of 84 jobs.

"Our focus for these centers is on creating jobs," said Ross Swimmer, the Interior Department's assistant secretary for Indian affairs and director of the BIA. "We certainly encourage major industrial development but I think it's the jobs created by individual entrepreneurs and small businesses that will add up to success for Indian Country."

Swimmer announced last fall that the BIA had awarded $250,000 contracts to three organizations that proposed to create 1,081 jobs over a three year period. In addition to Rensselaerville, those centers are the Fairbanks Native Association in Alaska and the United Indian Development Association (UIDA) in California.

Their method is to link the resources of Indian Country with the needs of industry.

That approach has worked on both the Seneca Nation's Cattaraugus Reservation and the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation in upstate New York.

Rensselaerville had been meeting with managers at Eastman Kodak Company and learned that a number of small contracts were available through the company for skilled craftsmen.

David Gordon, executive director of the business opportunity center, contacted the Seneca Nation and found that a BIA vocational training program was nearing the completion of classes and 13 tribal members with metal working skills would be out of a job.

The business opportunity center brought Kodak and the Seneca Nation together to sign a contract in which the Tribe will hire the 13 members to refurbish metal storage bins, which require sand blasting, welding and painting skills. There is a potential for nearly 25 jobs.

"Their work is very good," said Kodak's Dennis W. Zink, the investment recovery manager in the manufacturing resources division. "It meets company needs, it helps Kodak, and I'm certainly pleased that this relationship is helping create jobs for these highly-skilled people."

Bob Hoag, president of the Seneca Nation, also is pleased with the results and looks forward to future successes.

"This gave us an opportunity to keep the people going, and able to subsidize themselves. That's the name of the game. There is a lot more to be done. It’s strictly up to us to prove we can compete in the outside world, Hoag said.

The BIA-funded opportunity center did much the same thing on the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation, where the tribe had trained five wood workers that needed jobs.

The Mohawk tribe now is employing five tribal members to build precision wood parts for Kodak.

The students were unemployed, going through training and had no place to go," said Gordon. This was a case where we found a training program that was about to end and brought jobs to the people that were consistent with the skills they had learned."

In New Mexico, Rensselaerville conducted an extensive study of the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque. The center was in the process of foreclosure.

Gordon, working with local BIA credit officials, recently recommended a comprehensive management plan that includes management reform, consolidation of debt and BIA loan guarantees for property renovation.

Those recommendations could save up to 66 jobs, according to the cultural center's Chief Executive Officer, George Wickett.

He said the BIA stepped forward last fall to make an interim loan that kept the center open until a complete business plan could be written. Rensselaerville's business opportunity center worked with Wickett to produce the plan.

It took an outside professional to take a fresh look at our project. It was very instrumental to our staying open," said Wickett.