



Utility workers from public and private electrical companies practice their technique at the annual Mesa Hotline School in Grand Junction. The school started Monday and runs for two weeks.

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SPECIAL TO THE ROCKY

Linemen update skills at utility school

Two-week course provides training, emphasizes safety

By James Paton
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The students enrolled at the Mesa Hotline School are learning about power outages, high voltage lines, electric burns and the potential perils of meth labs.

The two-week course in Grand Junction is designed to teach utility line workers additional skills and provide training on new equipment.

The school, launched in the late 1960s, usually attracts about 400 people a year and was expected to draw a group of a similar size this

time. It has attracted workers from as far away as Alaska.

But interest in the profession is insufficient to offset the rising number of older veterans retiring, according to organizers.

Despite good pay, the tough and dangerous labor at odd hours and sometimes in stormy weather turns off young workers.

"It's a demanding job," said Jim Clare of the San Luis Valley Rural Electric Cooperative. "When the lights go out, it's not usually in the middle of the day."

Still, it's a vital role with starting pay at \$22 an hour, Clare and others said.

Randy Beckes, who is demonstrating tools at the Mesa Hotline courses that began Monday, said safety is a top priority and injuries have decreased over the years.

They do still occur, however. Xcel apprentice lineman Andy

Blood fell from a pole in Adams County in 2004 and was left paralyzed. The phone pole was owned by Denver-based Qwest.

A jury last year awarded Blood nearly \$40 million.

Beckes, who works for Hubbell Power Systems, said he decided to focus on training after a friend in the business died in an accident in the late 1980s.

"Accidents really hit home to any lineman," he said. "Even if you don't know the guy. You really feel for him and his family because he does the same work."

Beckes said there's much less climbing than there used to be because of new technology. Safety issues continue to be high on the school's agenda, he said.

Other classes in Grand Junction over the next several days are devoted to transformer connections, troubleshooting, rope splic-

ing and handling underground cable.

Students also "will learn how to spot potential meth labs and the potential dangers of meth labs to employees," according to the Web site.

Participants will climb poles outside and listen to instructors inside. Most of the students are young to midcareer linemen — and women — hoping to develop more expertise.

Demand for linemen is rising at the same time the demand for power is increasing.

About half of the workers in the utilities industry are eligible to retire in the next five years, while 85 percent are eligible in the next 10 years, according to estimates cited by Jim Hunter, director of the utility department at the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers.

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"There's a massive bubble of retirements coming up," he said.

When it comes to utility linemen, there is a pipeline of workers that should ease the problem, "but the problem is attracting people to the job."

He figures between 40 percent and 50 percent of new linemen drop out in the first week.

"It's a tough job," Hunter said. "You cannot have a fear of heights. Plus, it's dangerous. It takes a unique individual to do it."

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