

One STEP at a Time: New Long Beach Program Creates Direct Path From High School to IBEW 11 Career

When IBEW Local 11 Executive Board Member John Harriel Jr. talks about the Seniors to Electrical Program (STEP) launching in Long Beach this September, he is already thinking far beyond its first class of high school seniors. He is thinking 50 years ahead.

STEP is a first-of-its-kind partnership between IBEW 11, the National Electrical Contractors Association (NECA), the Electrical Training Institute (ETI), the Port of Long Beach, and Long Beach schools. Harriel hopes it becomes a model for introducing generations of high school students to the electrical trades and strengthening the pipeline into union electrical careers.

The program will initially serve about 25 seniors from three Long Beach high schools. Students will attend high school during the day while completing first-year electrical apprenticeship curriculum after school. Those who successfully complete the program, meet its requirements, and graduate from high school will have a direct-entry pathway into IBEW 11's apprenticeship program.

Where the Idea Started

The idea behind STEP took shape decades ago while Harriel was incarcerated. Harriel grew up around gang activity, dropped out of high school, and went to prison. While incarcerated, he began educating himself. As his reading improved, so did his understanding of himself, his community, and the kind of life he wanted to build. A fellow incarcerated man named Ernest Cornes became a mentor to him.

"One day we were talking, and he said, 'Hey, young fella, you know that a journey of a thousand miles starts with one step,'" Harriel recalled. "I kept that in my head."

That lesson stayed with Harriel as he rebuilt his life and eventually began a career with IBEW 11, an opportunity he credits with changing his trajectory. Harriel built a successful career in the electrical industry and became a union leader. Along the way, he began helping others enter the trades, particularly people who might not otherwise know how to navigate the apprenticeship process. His mentoring goes beyond career guidance. Harriel leads life skills sessions addressing self-esteem, family challenges, workplace expectations, attitude, punctuality, and accountability.

Harriel took the word "step" that his mentor had given him years earlier, turned it into a memorable acronym, and began figuring out how to launch the program. Part of the inspiration came from the Veterans Electrical Entry Program, which helps transitioning service members begin apprentice-related training before leaving the military so they can move more directly into electrical careers.

"If they can do it for the veterans, let me do it on the other end for young people," Harriel recalled thinking. "Why wait until after graduation for young people to discover the trades? Why not allow motivated seniors to begin apprenticeship training while they were still in school?"

Building the Partnership

Harriel brought the concept to leaders throughout the union electrical industry, including Billy Powell, International Representative for the IBEW 9th District, Local 11 Business Manager Robert Corona, and management partners. He developed a budget and worked through how students would be selected, how instruction would operate, and how the program would maintain the standards expected of apprentices.

After an initial effort elsewhere did not gain traction, Harriel received a recommendation from NECA Chapter Manager Emeritus Jim Wilson to speak with Long Beach leadership. From that recommendation, Harriel's connection to Long Beach came through IBEW 11 Business Development Representative Tommy Faavae, who saw the program as a natural fit. The union electrical industry already has strong ties to the city, and the Port of Long Beach has emphasized developing the local workforce needed to support future infrastructure. When Harriel presented STEP, he said the response was immediate.

"They knew it was lightning in a bottle," he said.

The Long Beach Board of Harbor Commissioners approved the initiative in May, with the Port supporting an initial class of about 25 students beginning this fall. That support helped bring together IBEW 11, NECA, ETI, and Long Beach education partners to turn the concept into a formal program.

Opportunity, Not a Shortcut

Direct entry does not mean easy entry. Harriel stresses that STEP students will have to earn the opportunity. Prospective participants will be evaluated before selection, including their academic history, attitude, and willingness to take on the commitment. Families will also be part of the process so parents and guardians understand the expectations.

Once enrolled, students will balance high school during the day with electrical training after school. Harriel compares the commitment to that of a student athlete attending class and then going to practice. Expectations will remain high throughout the program. Students will be expected to attend consistently, arrive on time, complete their work, and meet program standards.

"This is a career," Harriel said. "It is a process. It's accountability."

Another Avenue to Success

At the heart of STEP is a larger message Harriel wants young people and families to hear: College is one path after high school, but it is not the only one. A union apprenticeship gives students the opportunity to develop valuable skills, build a career, and learn alongside experienced members of the trade.

"There is nothing against college," he said. "This is just another avenue to success."

For Harriel, the benefits extend beyond learning electrical work.

“Being in the trades taught me self-esteem,” he said. “It taught me how not to give up.”

Those are the lessons he hopes STEP students begin learning while they are still in high school. He also believes the first cohort can have an impact beyond the students enrolled. When young people see their classmates beginning a successful career path, the possibility becomes more tangible. One class can influence another. One school can influence another, and one community can become a model for others.

Looking 50 Years Down the Road

Harriel’s long-term vision includes expanding opportunities to young people in foster care, continuation schools, and the juvenile justice system. He also wants to see more young women enter and advance in the electrical trades.

By next June, Harriel hopes to watch members of the first cohort walk across their high school graduation stages knowing they have also taken a significant first step toward their careers. For Harriel, that is what leadership is supposed to accomplish. He remembers the mentors who invested in him when his own future seemed uncertain and the opportunity IBEW 11 and Morrow Meadows gave him to build a different life.

Now, he wants to do the same for the next generation.

“I’m a product of people who invested in me,” Harriel said. “I just want to invest in other people and show them the way.”