

Weld to Work: A Fast Path Forward

A four-week program turns skill into employment in Chattanooga's growing welding industry



Left: A welding pathway graduate, Cam Bell, practices gas metal arc welding.

Top: Instructor Chad Suttles works on a proper butt joint layout with welding student Jessica Gabriel Domingo.

In the heart of Hamilton County, a bold initiative is reshaping the future of workforce development one weld at a time. Chattanooga 2.0, in partnership with Chattanooga State Community College in Tennessee, AWS, Plumbers and Steamfitters UA Local 43, and local industry leaders, has launched Viable Pathways to Prosperity in Welding. It is a transformative program designed to equip recent high school graduates with the skills, certifications, and confidence to enter the welding workforce in just four weeks.

A Fast Track to Opportunity

The program is a model of efficiency and impact. Over the course of 80 hours of hands-on training, students learn the fundamentals of welding, safety protocols, and industry-standard techniques. Upon completion, participants are eligible to take the AWS Certified Welder (CW) test, a nationally recognized credential that opens doors to immediate employment.

But the program doesn't stop at technical skills. Students also receive 30-plus hours of soft skills training, covering everything from financial literacy and résumé writing to conflict resolution and profes-

sional networking. This holistic approach ensures graduates are not only job-ready but life-ready.

Removing Barriers, Building Futures

One of the most powerful aspects of the program is its accessibility. Thanks to Chattanooga 2.0's funding, students receive a \$250 weekly stipend to help cover food and transportation costs, critical support for those who might otherwise be unable to participate (Ref. 1).

In a major boost to workforce development, the BlackRock Foundation has awarded a \$500,000 grant to Chattanooga 2.0 to expand its Viable Pathways to Prosperity initia-



◀ **A welding pathway graduate, Landon Turner, receives his diploma from Dr. Patrick O'Hagan, Dr. Keri Randolph, Albert Curtis, and Suttles.**

tive (Ref. 2). This investment directly supports the region's growing need for skilled tradespeople, including welders.

The grant enhances existing career pathways, most notably welding, by funding critical wraparound services such as housing, childcare, transportation, and tool stipends. These supports help remove barriers for learners, enabling more individuals to complete training and enter the workforce job-ready. Additional funders include the Benwood Foundation, TVA Workforce Invest, Community Foundation of Greater Chattanooga, Tennessee SCORE, and American Water.

"This training was built to provide a clear and direct opportunity for economic mobility for underserved and underrepresented young adults in our community," said Dr. Andrew Hudson, previous director of Viable Pathways to Prosperity at Chattanooga 2.0. "It's an accelerator for students who are not on a traditional college path to quickly gain skills and enter the skilled trades."

Meeting Industry Demand

Tennessee's welding industry is hungry for skilled craftsmen. According to the Chattanooga Chamber of Commerce, Ham-



Students Carlos Balderas and Noah Perez prep weld coupons for a weld test.

ilton County needs to fill over 100 welding positions annually (Ref. 1). With Chattanooga's employment in production and maintenance industries outpacing the national average, the timing couldn't be better.

Employers are not just observers; they're active participants. Local companies are committed to interviewing and hiring program graduates, many of whom are invited to take hire-in welding tests immediately after completing the course. This direct pipeline from training to employment is a win-win for students and industry.

A Model for the Future

Chattanooga 2.0's Viable Pathways initiative aims to create ten career pathways by 2027, with welding, linework-

ing, data analysis, and dental hygiene already in motion (Ref. 3). Each pathway is designed to lead to a thriving wage job, defined as a starting salary of \$50,000 or more with benefits and growth potential.

By aligning education with employer needs and removing financial and logistical barriers, Chattanooga 2.0 is preparing students for sustainable careers.

Final Thoughts

In just four weeks, a young person in Chattanooga can go from high school graduate to certified welder, ready to contribute to the local economy and build a future of financial independence. That's not just a viable pathway; it's a powerful promise. [WJ](#)

References

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2. The BlackRock Foundation awards grant to Chattanooga 2.0 to expand career pathways for local students. 2025. Chattanooga 2.0. Retrieved from chatt2.org/blackrock-pathways-grant.
3. Viable Pathways. 2024. Chattanooga 2.0. Retrieved from chatt2.org/viable-pathways.

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