

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## **Winners Announced for inaugural *Illinois Job Honor Awards***

**Initiative aims to employ disadvantaged jobseekers by celebrating “A New Kind of Hero”**

LISLE, IL — The Illinois Job Honor Awards, a new initiative aimed at recognizing Illinoisans who overcome barriers to employment, has announced its top honorees for 2016.

The awards were presented in partnership with the Illinois Chamber of Commerce and Illinois State Council for the Society for Human Resource Management (ILSHRM) at their annual New Laws Forum at the Hilton Lisle/Naperville hotel in Lisle. Business leaders from across the state assembled to witness the ceremony, in which biographical videos described honoree efforts to win life-changing jobs.

“Illinois employers are always looking for the next great hire,” said Todd Maisch, president and CEO, Illinois Chamber of Commerce. “It’s no secret that Illinois has a great workforce as one of its greatest assets. But it’s also no secret that many employers have trouble finding qualified employees. These awards will help demonstrate success and show Illinoisans the potential for those who have barriers to employment.”

One of this year’s honorees is Henri Jordan, a former gang member who grew up in Chicago’s inner city. After five trips to prison totaling 17 years — nearly half his life — Jordan concluded “I was designed for something greater than the streets and spending my life in the penitentiary, so I had to make some choices.” He requested entry into a drug rehabilitation program and later completed training at Greencorps Chicago, a job training program for people with barriers to employment. Jordan is now employed with Forest Preserves of Cook County, where he helps care for public land as a resource technician. Jordan is committed to helping others escape the streets: He volunteers as a mentor with Greencorps and has recruited 15 people to join the program.

Sharing employee honors is Lee Tewell of Bloomington. Diagnosed with cerebral palsy soon after his birth, experts predicted Tewell would never attend school or live independently. Defying the odds, he graduated from high school on the honor roll and earned a degree in criminal justice. Despite these accomplishments he struggled to find a job. “Nothing that he was doing wrong,” says his father, Richard Tewell, “It’s getting employers to look past the walker and see the person. And that’s what they wouldn’t do.” Tewell sought help from Marcfirst, an agency in Normal supporting people with disabilities. Marcfirst provided coaching and encouraged him to apply at AFNI, a contact center in Bloomington. Tewell was offered a job and has excelled there, earning Employee of the Month honors in April 2016.

Also receiving honors this year is Veronica Flores Diaz, whose family immigrated to Chicago when she was 16 to escape poverty and violence in her homeland. She set aside her dream of attending college in order to provide for her family, working in a low-wage factory job. Flores Diaz completed Healthcare Bridge training at Erie Neighborhood House, a social service agency working primarily with low-income immigrant families in Chicago. She went on to become a Certified Medical Assistant and now works at Esperanza, a healthcare clinic primarily serving Chicago’s Latino community. Her bilingual skills enable Flores Diaz to support patients who are struggling to adapt to a new language and culture. “I’m happy to give back to the people of the community,” says Flores Diaz, “because I was in the same place when I got here.”



Jordan, Tewell and Flores Diaz each received a \$500 cash award and engraved crystal trophy.

In the employer category, COUNTRY Financial of Bloomington was honored for their commitment to hire disadvantaged candidates including people with developmental disabilities. In partnership with Marcfirst in Normal, the company has implemented an internship program that allows both employer and the intern to assess for a competitive job match while Marcfirst provides coaching and other supports. "COUNTRY Financial has been a leader in hiring people with disabilities," says Laura Furlong, CEO of Marcfirst, "They've been a model for our community." Emily Foley, the program's first intern, has been employed at COUNTRY Financial for nearly nine years. "I don't know of any other company that does what COUNTRY does and gives the type of opportunities that COUNTRY gives," says Foley.

Kyle Horn, founder and director of America's Job Honor Awards, congratulated this year's honorees. "Illinois is celebrating a new kind of hero," says Horn. "These amazing honorees demonstrate that Illinoisans who overcome patterns of failure or challenges such as disability are not only highly qualified employees, but frequently they demonstrate remarkable work ethic and loyalty." Honoree Lee Tewell adds his own words of encouragement to Illinois employers: "Just know that we are normal people, and we have as much right to work as anybody else. You don't know until you give us a chance."

Honoree videos can be viewed at the organization's website, [www.JobHonor.org](http://www.JobHonor.org).

**About the Illinois Job Honor Awards:**

The Illinois Job Honor Awards celebrates Illinoisans who overcome barriers to employment, and the employers who hire them. ILJHA's mission is to rekindle hope and energize the work ethic across Illinois, through the celebration of a new kind of hero. [www.JobHonor.org](http://www.JobHonor.org). Lead sponsor of the Awards is **ManpowerGroup**, world leader in innovative workforce solutions.

**About the Illinois Chamber of Commerce:**

The Illinois Chamber of Commerce has been the unifying voice for Illinois business since 1919. The Chamber advocates for and promotes prosperity and a pro-business climate in Illinois. [www.ILChamber.org](http://www.ILChamber.org)

**About Illinois State Council for the Society for Human Resource Management (ILSHRM)**

The Illinois State Council for the Society for Human Resource Management (ILSHRM) is dedicated to serving the needs of SHRM chapters in Illinois by representation to the National Society of SHRM and assistance in achieving each SHRM Illinois Chapter's highest potential. The ILSHRM promotes professionalism in human resources and adds value to the SHRM membership. The ILSHRM Board is made up of volunteer representatives across Illinois who serve to advance the human resources profession. [www.ilshrm.org](http://www.ilshrm.org)

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