

More Green Jobs Are Coming to Georgia. Will Black Residents Benefit?

Clean energy companies like Qcells, Rivian, and Hyundai operate in industries that have struggled to recruit and retain minority talent.



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In 2020, Black workers represented only about 8% of the national clean energy labor force, which includes jobs in solar energy as well as electric and hydrogen fuel-cell vehicles. (Moodboard/Getty Images)

Qcells employee Kimberly Richardson is trying to help the South Korean solar panel manufacturer recruit more Black folks like her to work at its expanding factory in Dalton, — but there’s a problem. Less than **5%** of the people living in Dalton are Black. Additionally, the city is located about 89 miles northwest of Atlanta, where an estimated 29% of Black residents **don’t own an automobile**.

Richardson, an assistant recycling manager, typically spends 45 minutes driving to work during the week from her home in Chattanooga, Tennessee. She’s talked with other Black folks there about working at Qcells, but it’s a commute the 56-year-old says others in her community either aren’t able or aren’t willing to take.

“A lot of people in Chattanooga are saying 45 minutes is too far,” Richardson said. “If you want a job, Qcells has the jobs available, but you have to be willing to come down there.”

Elected leaders, including Gov. **Brian Kemp** and U.S. Sen. **Raphael Warnock**, expect clean energy companies such as Qcells and electric vehicle makers **Rivian** and **Hyundai** to play major roles in Georgia’s workforce future. Nearly a year ago, Qcells CEO Justin Lee said in a **press release** that “Georgia has become the clean energy manufacturing heart of America.”

In 2020, Black workers represented only about 8% of the nationwide clean energy labor force, which includes jobs in solar energy as well as electric and hydrogen fuel-cell vehicles. Many clean energy jobs tend to **pay more** than the **state median wage**, which is critical for Black folks living in and around the nation’s **most unequal major city**. Industry experts say Georgia’s Black population is at risk of missing out on these emerging clean energy workforce opportunities unless something changes dramatically.

The opportunities

Working at the Dalton plant has been an economic game changer for Qcells production manager Blake Thomas. Thomas was born and raised in Dalton. He currently lives just outside of Chattanooga in Ooltewah.

“Before I was working at Qcells, I didn’t own a home,” the 33-year-old Thomas told Capital B Atlanta. “Since I got my position at Qcells, I’ve been able to purchase a house, which is great, and provide for my two kids.”

Thomas oversees the production processes and coordinates production activities and operations. He says he sees diversity at work, but there is still work to be done.

“I would love to see more African Americans on the job,” he said. “And I think it’s not only Qcells’ responsibility, I think it’s my responsibility, Kim’s responsibility, to get out in the local community.”

In January, Qcells announced plans to hire **2,500** people to work in the state's clean energy sector. Richardson and Thomas are two of the roughly **650 people** Qcells tapped to work at its Dalton solar panel plant — the largest of its kind in the Western Hemisphere, according to Qcells — which opened for business in 2019.

Rivian has said it intends to hire more than 7,500 individuals to work at a developing factory near Social Circle — about an hour east of Atlanta — which is scheduled to begin production next year.

Rivian said it expects the average annual salary range at the plant to be around \$56,000, and the region's "talented and diverse available workforce" is one of the reasons the company chose the location.

"We want to provide well-paying jobs, forge new partnerships with local businesses and institutions, and provide a sustained local career path for talented young people," Rivian spokesperson Peebles Squire told Capital B Atlanta via email.

Hyundai expects to employ about 8,100 workers at an EV and battery-making plant set to open in 2025 in Bryan County, roughly 30 miles outside of Savannah.

Last year, Warnock, a Savannah native, helped **secure passage** of a bipartisan jobs and competition bill before President Joe Biden **signed** a finalized version of the legislation into law.

The measure allocated funding for HBCU and technical college training for alternative energy careers to help ensure marginalized communities in Georgia can compete fairly to land clean energy jobs.

Warnock told Capital B Atlanta he's spent the last couple of years urging companies like Hyundai and Qcells to recruit more people from Georgia's marginalized communities after enticing them to open factories in the state.

"Now my work really, having passed the bill, is oversight," Warnock said. "Part of the promise that I have from them is that they are going to hire people in these communities. ... I will continue to hold them accountable to those promises."

Road blocks

Workplace proximity is one of the major challenges for Black residents in Atlanta pursuing careers in the state's burgeoning clean energy industry, according to Jamarah Dudley, an enrollment counselor at Atlanta Technical College. ATC is one of the Technical College System of Georgia schools that specializes in training older, nontraditional students looking to change careers.

Dudley said nearly all ATC students are Black, and many don't have the resources to travel far to work.

“Most of [them] get around [using] public transportation,” he said. “So it's one thing to know that jobs like that are coming and how beneficial they could be. But when you really think about it realistically, [there's] only a small percentage of people that'll be able to take advantage of that.”

Lack of awareness of clean energy career opportunities among Black folks is another barrier to entry, according to Erika Symmonds, vice president of equity and workforce development at the Solar Energy Industries Association, a national trade group.

Symmonds says her organization has partnered with groups like the Georgia-based Black Owners of Solar Services (B.O.S.S.) to increase the number of Black and brown entrepreneurs pursuing careers in the solar industry.

Unintended biases among recruiters for employers is another hindrance, according to Adrienne Rice, founder and executive director of Sustainable Georgia Futures.

Rice said many of Georgia's clean energy jobs are going to non-Black suburbanites and employees moving here from other parts of the country. “What you have is people who are used to recruiting people who look like them,” she said.

Qcells spokesperson Marta Stoepker says the company is making efforts to increase Black recruitment.

“We know that we've got to do more, and we're working to do more, which is why we are in talks with the Department of Energy to do additional outreach at HBCUs,” she said.

Rivian says it's working with community organizations and schools, including the local Boys and Girls Club, the NAACP, Georgia State University, and Newton High School in Covington to create “as broad a pool of future applicants as possible” to work at its factory when it opens.

“We plan to work with these organizations as we get closer to staffing up the plant,” said Squire, the spokesperson. “When it's time to start staffing up, we will conduct local and regional recruiting through existing and new connections and partnerships.”



Qcells assistant recycling manager Kimberly Richardson introduces Kamala Harris during the vice president's visit to the solar panel company's plant in Dalton, Ga., on April 6. (Jenn Finch/Zorzi Creative)

Last week, Richardson helped introduce Kamala Harris during the vice president's trip to the Dalton plant. During her visit, Harris announced Virginia-based commercial solar company Summit Ridge Energy's **landmark deal** to purchase millions of Georgia-built Qcells solar panels.

"Behind the scenes, she was very sweet, kind and respectful, and very encouraging," Richardson said of the vice president.

That encouragement is something Richardson and Thomas are pushing to other Black people with aspirations of joining the alternative energy workforce in the state.

"I think that with the new factories opening up and it being a little bit closer to the Atlanta metro area, I think that it should be more enticing to get African Americans to come work," Thomas said.

