



Contact: Ellen Tolley or Scott Krugman (202) 783-7971
tolleye@nrf.com or krugmans@nrf.com

RETAIL SKILLS CENTERS OFFER OPPORTUNITY FOR RETAILERS, EMPLOYEES

Washington, DC, August 4, 2004 — New Orleans is taking steps to upgrade its customer service and create career opportunities in the process. The New Orleans JOB1's Customer Service Skills Center officially opened today.

The New Orleans Customer Service Skills Center initiative is the twelfth center of its kind in the nation. The Skills Center has been developed in partnership with the NRF Foundation and through support from the U.S. Department of Labor. The Center will provide citizens with state-of-the-art customer service training and will offer the new National Professional Certification in Customer Service assessment, a credential endorsed by employers that signifies skills and knowledge to provide excellent customer service on the job.

“Retail Skills Centers expand options for retail employers and the retail workforce,” according to Katherine Mance, Vice President of the NRF Foundation. “By linking employers with the public workforce system, we pave the way for working Americans to enter and advance in the exciting and diverse world of retail related industries.”

The New Orleans Customer Service Skills Center is a newly developed Skills Center and project of the President’s High Growth Job Training Initiative focused on the retail industry. The Skills Center will be operated by Dress for Success and will build capacity for training and job placement. Training at the Skills Center will be conducted by the Louisiana Technical College.

“To carry out the President’s vision of helping more Americans gain the skills to find good jobs, the Employment and Training Administration launched the President’s High Growth Job Training Initiative in 2002,” said Assistant Secretary of Labor for Employment and Training Emily Stover DeRocco. “Through partnerships among businesses, educators and the Labor Department, workers are being trained for jobs in new and expanding sectors of the economy. This includes health care, advanced manufacturing, biotechnology and retail, to name a few. Since 2002, we have invested \$92.5 million in 47 high growth pilot projects demonstrating solutions to the workforce challenges these industries face.”

The Skills Center will respond directly to the employment and training needs of area employers, with assistance from the NRF Foundation and the Louisiana Retailers Association.

“The Louisiana Retailers Association and MERA (Marketing Education Retail Alliance) hope to work closely with the New Orleans Customer Service Skills Center in order to cultivate a highly trained workforce composed of employees skilled in the areas of customer service and marketing.” Dawn B. Johnson, Executive Director, Louisiana Retailers Association.

Skills Centers are highly visible recruitment, training and placement facilities that operate in large shopping centers or as part of public employment services. The Centers offer classes on computers, English as a Second Language, career counseling, and workshops on customer service.

Retail Skills Centers are created through a unique partnership of employers, government, shopping center developers, schools and colleges and community associations. More than 680 companies in the retail and service industries have participated in these programs.

Speakers at today's Grand Opening ceremony included Mayor Nagin; Larry St. Amant, Assistant Secretary of Louisiana Dept. of Labor; State Senator Ann Duplessis; Alden McDonald, President of the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce; Mary Moorhouse, Workforce Development Manager of NRF Foundation and Jim Rutledge, Louisiana Retailers Association. The Mayor distributed pins and certificates to initial program graduates who have passed the assessment and become certified in National Professional Certification in Customer Service.

The Center is supported by JOB1, a federally-funded program that assists job seekers in finding education institutions, job training, and employment databases. Other partners include: Dress for Success New Orleans, Louisiana Technical College, New Orleans Workforce Investment Board, Louisiana Technical College - Sidney Collier Campus, Liberty Foundation, Office of State Senator Ann Duplessis, New Orleans Chamber of Commerce, Louisiana Restaurant Association, Louisiana Retailers' Association, New Orleans East Economic Development Foundation, Louisiana Department of Labor, with technical assistance from NRF Foundation made possible by U.S. Department of Labor funding. The Skills Center is located at the New Orleans Centre Shopping Mall, thanks to support from Hertzgroup.

The **NRF Foundation** (NRFF) is the research and education arm of the National Retail Federation. A non-profit foundation created in 1981, the Foundation conducts industry research, develops education and workforce development programs, and promotes retailing as a career destination. The NRF Foundation benefits retailers, their associates and business partners and allies, and consumers in many ways. Research provides the basis for education about the industry and its importance to the economy, and provides industry and government leaders with an analysis of public policy decisions on consumers, retailers, and the economy. The Foundation's education and career development efforts, including NRF University *wired*, encourage professional development and excellence in performance of retailing for associates and executives at all levels.

The **National Retail Federation** is the world's largest retail trade association, with membership that comprises all retail formats and channels of distribution including department, specialty, discount, catalog, Internet and independent stores as well as the industry's key trading partners of retail goods and services. NRF represents an industry with more than 1.4 million U.S. retail establishments, more than 23 million employees - about one in five American workers - and 2003 sales of \$3.8 trillion. As the industry umbrella group, NRF also represents more than 100 state, national and international retail associations. www.nrf.com.

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