

Labor/Management Viewpoints: Revisiting the COIN initiative

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The members of the Construction Labor Management Council of Southeast Wisconsin and their constituents continue to grapple with the provisions of the Milwaukee Community In Need Neighborhood Initiative.

COIN requires contractors on specific Milwaukee Public School projects to employ individuals who live in targeted areas in households with an income below the U.S. Census Bureau's poverty threshold for 2000. Contractors are required to hire 25 percent of their work force, including 5 percent women, from an area just west of downtown that encompasses 10 zip codes.

Although the intention of COIN, to increase work opportunities for impoverished Milwaukee minority residents, is altruistic and good, the implementation of COIN is highly impractical. Specifically, it is the restrictions placed on those seeking employment and those wishing to employ them that make the reality of this program challenging.

The fallacy of the initiative is that it focuses on short-term make-do jobs for individuals rather than providing them with an opportunity for a lifelong career as a carpenter, electrician, plumber, ironworker, bricklayer, etc. I strongly believe that providing minorities with construction apprenticeship opportunities that provide long-term career prospects will do far more good for the individuals, their families and the community than will make-do jobs.

Special skills needed

COIN appears to be based on the premise that anyone can do construction work regardless of their aptitude skills or education background. This is a grave misconception. Individuals must be able to work with various tools, follow job layouts and instructions, calculate measurements and angles, adhere to safety work rules and practices, and so forth. The need for these skills is such that, not unlike a college education, individuals are indentured in CLMC apprentice programs for three to five years to learn their craft before they can begin to call themselves a skilled tradesman. COIN, unfortunately, seeks to bypass this learning curve by having employers hire individuals off the street based solely on financial requirements and residency rather than on an individual's ability to satisfactorily perform construction work.

By nature of the labor agreements that most contractors are party to, employers cannot hire individuals off the street for make-do work. Rather, they are obligated to adhere to referral procedures and apprenticeship programs that provide them with skilled tradesmen. As such, they are not able to abide by COIN's hiring mandates.

Conservatively, this amounts to more than 800 firms and 20,000 workers being shut out of job opportunities in Milwaukee. The combination of significantly fewer bidders and a preponderance of unskilled workers tend to substantially drive up the cost of projects, which in this case is born by the citizens of Milwaukee. This must be kept in mind as MPS searches for funding in today's hold-the-line on taxes climate.

Indications are that some inner-city groups maintain the belief that CLMC members are averse to indenturing a significant number of minorities into their apprenticeship programs. Nothing is further from the truth. At present, about 200 minorities are indentured in various Milwaukee Building and Construction Trades apprenticeship programs. Although they may not reside in the targeted area, many of these individuals are from Milwaukee.

Education opportunities exist

Proponents of COIN will point out that upward of half of the targeted minorities do not meet the education requirements necessary to apply for an apprenticeship.

There are community organizations that help individuals meet these requirements. The CLMC has a close relationship with one such organization (as does the COIN Initiative) - BIG STEP. Since late 1999, BIG STEP has counseled and schooled 208 individuals who have entered apprenticeship programs, 72 of whom are minorities. Other organizations, such as the Urban League and the YWCA, are also available to help individuals meet apprenticeship application requirements.

From this perspective, it appears that the interests and needs of COIN's proponents and the CLMC can be accommodated by working together toward a common goal of putting more targeted minorities to work in the construction industry. There is a precedence that the parties can use as a model. A few years ago in Cleveland, various parties interested in furthering careers in construction for minorities established a program whereby the apprenticeship programs agreed to indenture a specific number of minorities from Cleveland each year. By all accounts, the program is successful. It has led to a greater inclusion of minorities in construction while maintaining the skill levels necessitated by the industry. Perhaps we should follow suit and adapt such a model to create greater minority apprenticeship opportunities here in Milwaukee.

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