

## Labor/Management Viewpoints: Labor and management creating workforce excellence

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When the Construction Labor Management Council of Southeastern Wisconsin was formed last year, one of its established goals was to encourage and publicize the good work being done jointly by labor and management in the areas of worker recruitment, training and safety.

The BIG STEP (Building Industry Group Skilled Trades Employment Program) program is one example of the positive outcomes that arise when these groups work together on issues such as apprenticeship recruitment and workforce diversity. BIG STEP works closely with the CLMC to support the industry's efforts to build a qualified and diverse workforce in the unionized construction industry.

Our efforts started in 1967 with Project Leap, which evolved into BIG STEP in 1976 to acquaint underrepresented individuals with employment and career opportunities in the skilled trades. BIG STEP has the support of the Milwaukee Building and Construction Trades Council, contractor associations and their joint apprenticeship-training committees.

The program is dedicated to improving communities and enhancing the careers of individuals because we believe communities become stronger when their workforce is better. As the current executive director, I am continuing the Herculean efforts initiated by Vince Toran and Lerman Ellis.

The program has recommitted its relationship with the JATC's by serving as the centralized link in their recruitment efforts. Funding is also a top priority for the board, which consists of both labor and management. Current funding sources include the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District, the Private Industry Council of Milwaukee County, the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership, JATC trusts and the CLMC.

### Record of Success

BIG STEP is recognized nationally and around the state for our efforts connecting underrepresented individuals to career opportunities in the construction industry. Achievements include:

- Since 2000, we have helped 80 percent of our program graduates pass an apprenticeship test and be deemed eligible for an apprenticeship. Seventy percent of those eligible clients have become contracted apprentices, with 40 percent minority and female.
- In August 2002, the federal Office of Apprenticeship Training, Employer and Labor Services named BIG STEP as one of 17 national organizations selected to comprise the agency's Diversity Outreach Technical Assistance Providers Bank.
- In 2002, BIG STEP was selected by the Wisconsin Apprenticeship Advisory Council and BAS to receive the Affirmative Action Award.
- We have also developed relationship with Milwaukee Public Schools and its construction-related high schools of Bradley Tech, Bay View and Custer. Bradley Tech has been our primary focus, primarily in electrical and plumbing. Since 2001, 46 students have been involved via assessments and guest speakers, eight have become apprentices, 17 have passed apprenticeship tests and deemed eligible, four have found entry-level construction employment and five have found construction-related employment in the residential pre-apprentice program with IBEW 494.
- BIG STEP, working with two programs of the Dane County YWCA and Job Options and Transportation Alliance for New Solutions, recently won startup funding to develop an apprenticeship prep program based on the BIG STEP model. The collaboration is called Training Partnership for the Skilled Trades.
- A collaboration between BIG STEP and Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership was awarded the Marquette Interchange Labor Development Program-M Trans by the state Department of Transportation.

Although the program emphasizes recruiting minorities and women, we will help anyone who wants to pursue a career in the trades upgrade their skills in math, science, basic road-building and other areas necessary for a successful construction career.

These successes are just a small sample of what we can achieve when labor and management come together for the good of the community. There is much work to be done, but I believe we are headed in the right direction.

*Earl Buford is the Executive Director for BIG STEP Inc.*