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Trades build more than buildings

John Topp

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The stories about Hurricane Katrina (and more recently Wilma) make me proud to be an American. So many generous individuals have donated time, money and resources to help our neighbors in their time of need. While certainly terrible, tragedies can provide a unique opportunity for us to work together as a nation – the true measure of a community.

History has shown that grassroots efforts by “regular” people can be remarkably effective when there’s a problem to be solved. We are reminded of the strength in local, committed efforts vs. large-scale government answers to problems.

In much the same way, the building trades industry strives to be self sufficient and to proactively provide benefits for members. We know that injuries and illness happen. We feel it’s important to ensure our members have health insurance and retirement security benefits. Unfortunately, benefits aren’t free, and providing them means union labor will cost more than nonunion labor. But we’re proud to say our members earn their keep and don’t need to pass on the cost of these needs for others to pay if they or their families experience illness or injury. We feel it’s the right thing to do.

Providing for the interests of our members includes training, too. We are second to none in offering solid apprenticeships and continuing education opportunities that lead to good-paying jobs that can support a family.

Everyone gains

Even if your profession isn’t in the building trades, you benefit, too, from the care we take to train good workers, pay them a livable wage and ensure their health-care and retirement security. What would you do if you wanted to build your building but couldn’t find anyone who would show up to do the work? Or the workmanship was poor?

Or, consider if every person who worked in the building and construction industry in your community had no health insurance? Consider the negative health impact that would have on those hundreds of families and, ultimately, the economic impact for us all.

Our customers don’t have to consider those things because we already did, by acknowledging and accepting responsibility in today’s dollars, not expecting others to pay the bill tomorrow. The building and construction industry has a solid history of finding proactive ways to better the industry, rather than taking shortcuts that save money in the short term but hurt us all in the long run.

That’s why initiatives such as Building Advantage exist -- to ensure contractors and trades are building more than strong buildings, that we’re also building strong communities too.

John Topp is the executive director of the Construction Labor Management Council of Southeast Wisconsin Inc. and the Building Advantage initiative.