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Making strides in building jobs

Big Step program helps workers land careers in construction

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As unemployment rates inch downward and construction hiring reaches unprecedented highs, a Milwaukee collaborative is preparing to celebrate its effort to simultaneously develop both the infrastructure and the work force of southeastern Wisconsin.

Advertisement The Building Industry Group Skilled Trades Employment Program, known as Big Step, aims to train Milwaukee residents for trades that can earn them decent livings while also addressing concerns about worker shortages by contractors caught up in a building boom.

The crunch for construction help became clearer Friday as the U.S. Department of Labor released November employment data showing nearly 7.5 million workers in the building sector last month, the highest ever for that month. Wisconsin and Milwaukee-area employment in construction also reached records in October.

Meantime, unemployment rates have crept to their lowest levels since the recession, suggesting smaller percentages of the labor force are actively seeking work.

Employers, union leaders, philanthropists, and state and local government officials plan to toast the emerging work skills of dozens of Milwaukee workers Tuesday evening in the Crystal Ballroom of the Hilton Milwaukee City Center.

The workers are among 300 graduates so far this year of Big Step, and of them, 212 already have jobs, according to Carrie Hersh, training manager for the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership.

Big Step is a service of the partnership, a non-profit collaboration among employers, unions and community agencies. In 10 years the partnership has helped more than 2,100 residents of Milwaukee's poorest neighborhoods acquire job skills that have landed them work with a starting wage averaging \$11 an hour with benefits.

The concerted push for construction trade workers follows a gathering at a Milwaukee labor hall one year ago, when Gov. Jim Doyle led a parade of speakers stressing the urgent need to train more people for the industry and to include more women and workers of color, who have been under-represented in the field.

"It allows more minorities to more successfully compete in the job market," Micabil Díaz-Martínez, deputy secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, said of the Big Step program.

"It is an essential part of the development of our work force," Díaz-Martínez said, adding that it contributes to the construction projects in Milwaukee, which he referred to as "the economic engine of the state."

You don't have to crane your neck to see evidence of the building boom, with work on Milwaukee City Hall, the Marquette Interchange, Bayshore Towne Center, the Park East corridor, Columbia St. Mary's and assorted commercial and industrial developments, including We Energies power plants in Port Washington and Oak Creek.

More jobs expected in future

According to projections by the Department of Workforce Development, the Wisconsin construction industry will have an average 5,340 job openings a year through 2012, positions it will need to fill to meet the growth of business as well as to replace workers who retire or leave the field.

In the Milwaukee area, the need is for about 1,300 new construction workers annually, suggesting a pace of growth greater than what's projected statewide.

In terms of pay, construction offered the third-highest average annual wages last year among private employment sectors in Wisconsin, at \$41,280. According to state payroll surveys, only two other sectors - financial activities and manufacturing - paid better.

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