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Minorities, women could help fill labor shortage

Experts push careers in building trades

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Expecting shortages of skilled laborers during a time of more construction projects in southeastern Wisconsin, a representative of the building trades is calling for a concerted effort to bring more minorities and women into the work force.

Advertisement "We're anticipating that as an industry, we're going to be experiencing an awful lot of growth in the next 10 years," said John Topp, executive director of the Construction Labor Management Council of Southeast Wisconsin Inc.

Even with apprenticeship programs at their current capacity, Topp said there will be a shortage of skilled workers because of the number of people retiring and taking different jobs.

A push to increase minority apprentices would give the industry a much-needed boost and offset potential labor shortages, Topp said.

Topp's comments came soon after a report commissioned by the Milwaukee branch of the NAACP that says minorities and women were largely being left out of apprenticeship programs in the building trades.

The report, released last month and conducted by the Employment and Training Institute at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, said that despite long-standing efforts to increase the numbers, programs recruiting minority workers have been disappointing.

An analysis of data from the state Department of Workforce Development and the Bureau of Apprenticeship Standards found that 475 contractors were preparing 11 white apprentices for every one African-American, and that the rate was 14 whites for every Hispanic entering the skilled trades.

Topp, who called the report "a wake-up call," said there will have to be an industrywide effort over the next several years to increase the skilled work force in the state.

The effort is necessary because state and federal statistics indicate a potential shortage of skilled workers over the next several years, he said.

"It's a dynamic that is happening, and it's a change in demographics which we are all experiencing across our country,"

Topp said.

In the union construction industry, there are now about 18,000 registered journey workers and apprentices in the six-county region of southeastern Wisconsin. Of that number, Topp said there have been shortages from 10% to 20% over the last five years.

That includes the increase in construction projects in the region, from the Marquette Interchange project to the expansion of the Lake Drive Campus of Columbia St. Mary's hospital and the power plant projects in Oak Creek and Port Washington, he said.

The report from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, he said, "is good timing" and contains a road map for change.

Over the past several years, programs such as Big Step have prepared minorities and women for apprenticeships. Earl Buford, who directs the group, said his program has been recruiting at high schools for apprenticeship programs. But the effort is not widespread, Buford said, because Milwaukee Public Schools doesn't have many trade programs.

"Plus, let's be honest, a lot of 18-year-olds, no matter what school district they're in, don't know if they want to go into a trade at 18 or 19," he said.

The Construction Labor Management Council has an ongoing outreach program and has hired a professional marketing firm to help encourage contractors in all disciplines to hire apprentices. Topp said the NAACP report indicates that the firms with minority apprentices prove to be successful contractors.

Jerry Ann Hamilton, president of the NAACP's Milwaukee branch, said the group's doors are open for dialogue with contractors. Among the NAACP's 11 recommendations in the report are an increase in outreach and more monitoring at construction sites.

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