

THE DAILY REPORTER

Wisconsin's Construction, Law and Public Record Authority Since 1897

Strides made in diversifying the work force

John Topp

February 8, 2006

A recent report by the University of Wisconsin and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People made some important points regarding women and minority hiring in the construction industry. It has appropriately acknowledged that more progress is necessary to increase the hiring of minorities and women in construction. Because we support these goals, the Building Industry Group Skilled Training and Employment Program exists -- to help prepare minorities and women for entrance into the building trades apprenticeship program. The goal of the program is to make the construction industry as diverse as our population as a whole, and with new initiatives such as the work-force development and diversity fund, the Construction Labor Management Council and its partners are making strides toward reaching this goal.

What the construction industry is doing:

- BIG STEP is a nonprofit collaboration created in 1976 to offer assistance to minorities, women and others in meeting the requirements of entering the apprenticeship program. In practical terms, we offer advice, training, mentoring and tutoring. The program is especially instrumental in teaching the necessary skills to enter into skilled trade apprenticeships.
- BIG STEP works closely with CLMC, which has a vested interest in finding tomorrow's work force. BIG STEP's partners are employers, unions and community agencies, all deeply committed to encouraging and providing hands-on assistance to minorities and others wishing to enter the trades. These partners include: the Allied Construction Employers Association, Associated General Contractors of Greater Milwaukee, Milwaukee Building Trades Council, National Electrical Contractors Association and Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning National Association.

Program's goals

- BIG STEP's goal is to help the union's building industry labor and management organizations meet their demands for women and minorities entering the apprenticeship program each year. Some of the ways BIG STEP works toward reaching those program goals are partnering with community organizations such as the Milwaukee Urban League, providing a central clearing house for contractors to easily recruit and select pre-qualified minority candidates, working with employers and unions on program curriculums, speaking at schools and promoting at career fairs.
- In 2001, the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership began providing technical and financial assistance to BIG STEP. Since then, the collaboration has developed an array of pre-employment training programs, starting with utility line construction in 2003, road construction in 2004 and carpentry in 2005. This year, BIG STEP and WRTP will launch new training programs for sewer and water, bricklayer and other trades and industries.
- In 2005, BIG STEP and WRTP launched the Center of Excellence, a central clearinghouse for assessing, preparing and placing job-ready candidates for careers in skilled trades and industries for the first time. The center uses its increasing database of applicants to assist employers and unions recruit a diverse work force for a wide range of trades.
- In continuing to improve our efforts to train and place minority apprentices into construction jobs, union contractors and trades people of southeastern Wisconsin have taken the lead by establishing a collaborative effort to contribute \$.02 per hour to work-force development and diversity. This initiative has never been done in this industry before.

Proof positive

And those efforts are working. Consider this:

- According to the Department of Workforce Development Bureau of Labor Statistics, despite accounting for less than half of the industry's total work force, union construction contractors were responsible for 206 of the total 230 minority apprentices employed in 2005 -- approximately 90 percent.
- The Center of Excellence successfully placed 300 community residents into family-sustaining, skilled trade jobs in 2005. The average starting wage was nearly \$15 per hour.
- The BIG STEP-WRTP collaboration has been successful. Over the past seven years, the partnership has helped more than 2,500 low-income residents of Milwaukee acquire job skills that have landed them jobs in a variety of sectors with a starting wage averaging \$11 an hour with benefits.
- BIG STEP has made strides in educating and placing minorities into construction apprenticeships and beyond. From 2001 to 2004, a

total of 211 minorities have entered into the BIG STEP program – 84 percent successfully graduated and 78 percent were placed into construction jobs. An additional 80 minorities not in the BIG STEP program were also placed in entry-level construction jobs.

- Minorities account for 23 percent of the total population within the four-county metro Milwaukee area. While union apprenticeship programs have not reached 23 percent yet, the union construction industry has taken the lead in diversifying the work force. Currently, minorities account for 16 percent of union apprentices. This represents significant progress, especially when you consider that the apprenticeship programs over several trades serve much larger areas – with less diverse populations – than the four-county metro area. By contrast, minorities account for only 10 percent of nonunion apprentices. In other words, union apprenticeship programs are 60 percent more diverse than the non union program.
- Despite new construction projects in Milwaukee over the past five years, the construction job market has not grown. In fact, 27.4 percent of all contractors have at least one minority apprentice. This is all the more significant when you consider that 44.6 percent of contractors who employ apprentices have only one. According to BIG STEP, of the contractors hiring minority apprentices, all report having success with it.

Change doesn't occur overnight. We view the data cited in the NAACP study about women and minority involvement in apprenticeships as proof that our programs are working. As an industry, we are committed to building a safe, talented and diverse work force.

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