

Diversity in hiring falls short of goals for public construction projects

Contractors and government officials say more recruiting and training is needed.

By Emma Nelson Star Tribune MARCH 29, 2017 — 10:14AM

Star Tribune

When Tonya Jordan goes to work as an electrician, she's the only woman of color on the job.

Despite efforts to draw more women and people of color into construction and trade work, white men still comprise most of the industry's workforce in Minnesota — a stubborn trend that puts government officials in a tricky spot.

Five years after the Minnesota Department of Human Rights nearly tripled its minority workforce requirement for contractors bidding on state-funded jobs in Hennepin and Ramsey counties, hiring is falling short. In the fourth quarter of 2016, only half of Minneapolis projects met state workforce inclusion goals.

That's not good enough, City Council Member Cam Gordon said at a meeting where the numbers were presented.

"I totally agree we need to train people, we need to get them interested in these careers, we need to be building it all the way up," he said. "And then we also have to be having really clear expectations and raise them."

Contractors and the government officials who hire them say more recruiting and training are needed to bring women and people of color into the industry. Diversity advocates say there are plenty of qualified workers, but they're not getting hired or they're leaving after facing discrimination on the job.

Either way, the industry will have to find a solution soon. According to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED), recruiting and retaining workers of color will be essential to keeping Minnesota's construction industry afloat. The industry hasn't recovered from Recession workforce losses, and baby boomer retirements are adding to the shortage. Meanwhile, most of the state's workforce growth is among populations of color, according to DEED.

"We need to make sure that we have processes and systems in place that ensure the participation of everyone in the future workforce," said Elizabeth Campbell, director of emerging business inclusion at Ryan Companies.

Jordan said she was nervous to start her electrical job, knowing she'd be in the minority as both a woman and a person of color. But so far, she said, it's been OK.

“If you don’t let what people say get to you,” she said, “you can pretty much work anywhere and not let it bother you.”

‘A numbers game’

In 2015, more than 95 percent of workers in the construction industry were white and more than 86 percent were men, according to DEED.

Until recently, the state required contractors to employ people of color for 11 of every 100 hours worked on state-funded projects.

But with an eye on workforce disparities, Human Rights Commissioner Kevin Lindsey in 2012 boosted the minority workforce goal for projects in Hennepin and Ramsey counties, expecting minority workers to complete 32 of every 100 hours. He also pledged to raise the female workforce goal, which stands at just 6 out of every 100 hours, in the future.

Between 2013 and 2016, hours of minority participation on state-funded construction projects across Hennepin and Ramsey counties averaged about 26 percent. For individual cities, the numbers are lower. Since 2013, participation has averaged about 20 percent for Minneapolis and St. Paul projects, data from the two cities show.

Contractors don’t have to meet the goals to win bids — there’s wiggle room for those that come up short but demonstrate “good-faith efforts” toward hiring women and people of color.

“It’s more art than science,” said Velma Korbel, director of the Minneapolis Department of Civil Rights. “We’re always playing a numbers game.”

Effective recruiting and training programs are essential to diversifying the industry and creating a supply of workers to meet diversity goals, Korbel said at the city meeting earlier this month.

“It really is selling to young people, while they’re in middle school and while they’re in high school, that construction is an attractive occupation,” she said.

Discrimination continues

When it comes to enforcing workforce diversity, oversight comes from different places: the human rights department, government entities, contractors themselves.

Longtime construction and trades workers say discrimination is still happening.

Joanne Hager graduated in 2008 from Summit Academy — where Jordan, the electrician, also trained — and started working in the industry in her late 40s. Julie Odendahl, a master electrician, has worked in the industry for nearly 30 years.

Both described persistent discrimination they’ve experienced and witnessed on job sites. Women and people of color are often relegated to menial duties instead of the skilled tasks they

were trained for, they said, and laid off before their white male counterparts when work starts to slow. Many don't complain because they fear retaliation.

"We're treated more as a marginalized workforce, and we're treated as expendable," Hager said.

Human Rights Commissioner Lindsey said his department is aware of the practices the two women described, and said enforcement officers crack down when they become aware of them. While there have been strides in recruiting women and people of color, he said, retaining them — in construction or any other industry — is another matter.

Odendahl said she's thought about leaving, but she keeps coming back. She loves the work, she said, and wants to be there to stand up for those who may not stand up for themselves.

"I can't make a difference here if I'm not there," she said.