

Metro-led group looking at issues affecting workforce retention

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Months after convening the Construction Career Pathways Project work group, Metro is beginning to forge a path forward to encourage more women and minorities to enter and remain in the building trades.

The effort brings together 16 entities from around the Portland-metro region, including city and county governments, transportation agencies, Oregon Health & Science University and Home Forward.

“In many cases, there are strong programs in place,” said Noelle Dobson, equity strategy program analyst for Metro, “and it’s a matter of how we might replicate some of those and take them to scale.”

Some local governments, including the city of Portland, have instituted equity requirements for major public projects. However, there are not enough minority and women employees for firms to comply, Dobson said.

“It’s both a supply and a demand issue,” she said. “Even if all agencies had (equity) goals ... right now, the supply is not there to meet that demand.”

Retention of minorities and women in the construction industry continues to fall short. The work group is looking at the root causes of low retention, including child care and transportation issues and how workers are treated at job sites.

“The retention rates are not great,” Dobson said. “There are issues around jobsite mentoring, jobsite training, jobsite culture. There are issues of harassment, where people say it’s not worth it to come to work.”

Members of the work group are examining pilot efforts such as Multnomah County’s “Green Dot” program at its Central Courthouse project to encourage reporting of harassment.

“How do we address some of these barriers that aren’t related to: Are you a good bricklayer? Are you a good electrician?” Dobson said.

There are also efforts at the Hyatt Regency Portland at the Oregon Convention Center project site to help workers. Construction workers face commutes to work sites that change with each

project, and challenging hours that create child care obstacles for working parents, Dobson said. Mortenson is serving as general contractor of the 600-room hotel.

A flood of large public projects is expected to create a steady demand for construction workers for the next several years. These include the Southwest Corridor Light Rail project, the Broadway Corridor and the Bull Run filtration plant.

The work group identified 81 large public capital projects that will require nearly 14,000 construction workers. Some of the projects have stated apprentice and workforce diversity goals. The goals average 20 percent apprentices, 25 percent minorities and 14 percent women.

The Metro-led work group aims to produce formal recommendations at some point this summer.