

Multnomah County creates fund to encourage trade apprenticeships, diversity

by Stuart Tomlinson, KATU News | Thursday, April 5th 2018

PORTLAND, Ore. — Getting more diversity into the construction trades is the driving force behind a new Multnomah County fund.

[The Construction Diversity and Equity Fund](#) resolution was passed by the board of commissioners last month and goes into effect this summer.

A four-year college degree remains valuable in the workplace, but college isn't for everyone.

With construction booming around the Pacific Northwest, trade jobs -- carpenters, electricians, plumbing, drywall and more -- are in high demand.

And many of those jobs are passed down through families.

“So many people who are in the trades right now are in that field now because their family member was a plumber, so they became a plumber. Or their dad was a carpenter, so they became a carpenter,” said Multnomah County chairwoman, Deborah Kafoury. “There are a lot of people who don't have those family connections. And they've never thought about a career in the trades as a way up or a way out. And it really is. These are family wage jobs.”

Multnomah County itself is in the middle of a building boom, as work continues on the new central courthouse and a new health headquarters across the street from Union Station.

The county wanted to help women and minorities get into pre-apprentice programs, apprenticeships and then reach journeyman status.

"Once they advance through the ranks as apprentice and then to journey, once they get to journey level they are able to go out on their own and start their own businesses," said Lee Fleming, supplier diversity officer for Multnomah County. "They are able to pass this on to future generations and hopefully get sons and daughters involved in this process in the business."

Apprentice Ericha Watson has been working on the new county health headquarters building for the past three months, the first steps on a four-year apprentice program through the [Constructing Hope program](#) -- one of several apprentice organizations the new fund will benefit.

“I like putting things together and taking things apart and being able to stand back at the end of the day and see what I've accomplished,” she said during a break working on the new county health headquarters building.

Watson will focus on learning skills related to exterior and interior systems such as steel stud construction, drywall and acoustic ceilings.

The encouragement she's received pairs well with a living wage.

“You can tell that they want to help you, they want you to succeed,” she said. “It's good money as well -- you get raises every six months as long as you put your hours in. So you're able to learn new things but also support yourself and support your family at the same time.”

The diversity fund will draw one percent of construction costs for county remodeling projects with budgets of \$200,000 and new county construction projects over \$1 million.

The fund's goals are still being worked out, but county diversity officer Lee Fleming says changing the dynamic of low income families and getting them off assistance is at the top of the list.