

New report details barriers to diversifying construction workforce, offers recommendations

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Kadence Jimenez, a mother of three, was working a minimum-wage job at an assisted living facility for five years when she enrolled in a free pre-apprenticeship program at Oregon Tradeswomen, a nonprofit that trains and prepares women to work in construction and other trades.

Jimenez enjoyed the work and decided to pursue carpentry after a man told their group during a tour of different trades that women couldn't do drywall.

"The fact that he would say that to a group of women that were trying to get into the trades — I wanted to prove him wrong," said Jimenez, who is now a journeyman interior/exterior specialist.

Women make up just 4 percent of the 23,000 people working in the Portland metro region's nonresidential construction workforce. Minorities account for 20 percent.

Though local organizations like Oregon Tradeswomen are working to close the gender gap, barriers to recruitment and retention still exist.

To help address these challenges, Metro's Construction Career Pathways Project is bringing together stakeholders at the regional level to learn more about the problem and identify strategies to provide reliable career pathways — from pre-apprentice and apprentice to journey level — for women and people of color.

In January 2017, Metro and the City of Portland commissioned a study to uncover the region's major barriers to achieving equity and increasing diversity in the construction workforce.

"There's no reason to think our region's unprecedented growth is about to slow down," Metro Council President Tom Hughes said in a statement with this month's release of the report. "As stewards of public funding, we have a responsibility to make sure that our work to build the pipes, roads, parks and schools we need in our region is done by a workforce that is reflective of the people who live here now."

Here are some major takeaways from the report:

Demand exists for workers in skilled trades

The report identified 81 large public capital projects that have or are expected to get underway between 2017 and 2021. Those 81 projects will require nearly 14,000 construction workers.

If workforce participation goals, or a percentage of hours worked by apprentices, minorities and women, were applied across all 81 projects, there would be a demand for 2,700 apprentices, 3,400 minorities and 1,900 female construction workers over the next five years. But an analysis shows that the 2016 worker supply falls short by 445 apprentices, 1,074 minorities and 1,416 women.

Diversifying workforce requires regional approach

Since workers in the industry typically work at different jobsites, work alongside different trades and can work for multiple contractors throughout their careers, the report suggests that having a regional approach can better address the issues as they occur and result in more substantial impact.

Success will require focus, investment and collaboration from everyone in the industry, including public agencies, contractors, training providers, apprenticeship programs and the workers on the job sites.

3 major goals

The report lays out recommendations that are centered on three goals: increasing recruitment of diverse workers, increasing retention of diverse workers and developing more robust equity policies and practices.

1. Increase recruitment of diverse workers

An already growing demand for construction workers is expected to increase as nearly 20 percent of the region's workforce nears retirement age. The report says that's why it is so important for the industry to tap previously excluded demographics.

Overall, many young people don't see construction jobs or related trades as viable career options since there's an emphasis in school on going to college.

Though pre-apprenticeship programs help expose historically underrepresented populations to the trades, the report found that the funding for those programs is insufficient, inconsistent and comes from a variety of sources. And recruitment often occurs through referrals from family and community connections, which minorities and women are less likely to experience.

The report's recommendations include ensuring there's a steady funding stream to increase the capacity of pre-apprenticeship programs; intentionally reaching out and exposing minorities

and women to career opportunities; and making it easier for pre-apprenticeship graduates to directly enter apprenticeship programs.

2. Increase retention of diverse workers

Retention of women and minorities remains an issue for a number of reasons, including a history of overt racist and sexist policies that still permeates the jobsite culture today, lower-quality on-the-job training that hinders their career advancement and a lack of steady work.

For women, early-morning or late-night shifts can also complicate child-care arrangements.

Recommendations include working regionally to develop training that helps create a jobsite culture where everyone feels welcome, comfortable and safe; increasing monitoring of on-the-job training of apprentices; and increasing mentoring and support services.

3. Develop more robust equity policies and practices

Some public agencies, contractor companies and labor associations have increased diversity and equity efforts within their organizations, but the report suggests that such policies need to be more widely adopted and subject to better monitoring and enforcement.

The report recommends that agencies invest in staff and systems, that shared policies and processes be adopted across agencies, and that data be regularly shared with a regional oversight body to ensure oversight and collective problem solving.

What's next?

The Construction Career Pathways Project has formed a Public Owner Workgroup charged with developing and adopting a regional approach to construction workforce equity.

The group's members represent 16 agencies including Metro, Prosper Portland, TriMet, City of Portland, Multnomah County, Port of Portland, the state's Bureau of Labor and Industries and Department of Transportation, Portland Public Schools, Oregon Health & Sciences University, Portland Community College, Portland State University, Home Forward, City of Beaverton, Beaverton School District and the North Clackamas School District.

The group's first meeting is set for Friday, July 13. Estolano LaSar Advisors, a Los Angeles-based firm that specializes in working with multi-stakeholder groups to address complex public policy and social equity issues, will help facilitate the group's work over the next year.