

Social media campaign attracts women, minorities to construction industry

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A local electrician and telecommunication company launched a social media campaign targeted toward women and people of color in an effort to increase diversity in the workforce.

The campaign, launched jointly by IBEW Local 103 and Millennium Partners Boston, utilized platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat, Pandora and Google to reach prospective workers, according to the campaign report. The results were record-breaking, with 452 out of 687 applicants being people of color — the largest number of minority applicants for a Boston construction apprentice program in history.

According to the report, 85 of the applicants were women, 57 of whom were women of color.

Boston City Councilor-at-Large Annessa Essaibi George said though the campaign was successful, more can be done to increase diversity.

“You have to keep at it,” Essaibi George said. “You have this success and you wipe your hands and you walk away from it, but you have to build on that to create a more diverse workforce.”

Essaibi George said jumping into the construction industry can lead to greater accomplishments down the line.

“Hopefully, they continue to create an awareness, but then, also, demonstrate the future success of those individuals,” Essaibi George said. “Perhaps they’re entering the workforce at the ground level but you’re showing professional growth, you’re showing greater achievement, greater income, greater opportunity and that creates added excitement to those jobs and that workforce.”

Though talent is equally distributed, opportunity has not always been, especially in the construction industry, Eric White, chief of staff for Boston City Councilor-at-Large Ayanna Pressley, wrote in an email to The Daily Free Press. IBEW Local 103 is one of the few unions intentionally building pipelines for minorities into these industries, he wrote.

IBEW Local 103 and Millennium Partners Boston’s application process is for the development of a building at the site of the former Winthrop Square garage, according to a joint press release from both companies. The businesses will hire hundreds of construction workers for this initiative, the release said.

Rob Grossman, 22, of Allston, said the issue may be that women and minorities do not feel as comfortable applying for labor jobs.

“If it turns out that women and minorities just don’t want to do construction jobs as often, then they don’t have to, but if it is a question of interest and they’re hesitant to apply for fear of lack of hire because of gender or race, then that’s the issue we need to address,” Grossman said.

Phil Doherty, construction superintendent at James W. Flett Co., Inc. a Massachusetts-based construction corporation, said city officials cannot mandate that workers be minorities or people of color.

“We’re in Local 22’s territory, so you have to use 51 percent of that union’s workforce, so sometimes that gets sticky,” Doherty said. “You can’t call Local 22 and say you want two females and two minorities — it’s illegal. You just say ‘I need two laborers’ or ‘I need four laborers.’”

Doherty, speaking in reference to the construction crew working on Myles Standish Hall, said the workforce has branched out in recent years.

“I think it has diversified and I think it’s for the best,” Doherty said. “Even within the makeup of this crew here, we have a city resident, we have a female laborer who is great and it has come a long way.”

White wrote in an email that part of choosing a career is being able to see yourself in that industry.

“In order to be it, you must see it,” White wrote. “... the successes of increased diversity in constthe building trade builds on its own success. More women and people of color see it as an opportunity to build a career and raise their families.”

White wrote that despite the achievement of the campaign, diversification of industries must continue.

“We must be intentional and not rest on our successes,” White wrote. “We have to reinforce the pipelines that exist into the industry and make sure our Boston Public Schools have the programming and relationships to ensure everyone knows that they can build a career and care for themselves and their families.”

Jayde Umemba, an Allston resident, said to improve the issue, unions must be held accountable.

“It is all white men,” Umemba, 22, said. “... there’s a history of white men being in unions and people of color being excluded, so I think that’s where you need to start to break the mold and incorporate more people.”

Emily Jaques, 22, of Jamaica Plain, said individuals are often not educated for construction jobs.

“In general, more skills-based training should be added,” Jaques said. “One of the biggest problems with our education system is that it prepares people for a lot of jobs that don’t actually exist anymore and doesn’t prepare people for the ones that do.”