

Construction firms look to untapped resource for workers — women

About 9 percent of U.S. construction industry is female workers, according to National Association of Women in Construction

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Kelly Eustace is used to being the only woman on a construction site.

The chief operating officer of Heating & Plumbing Engineers Inc., a Colorado Springs-based mechanical contractor, tries to tour every one of the company's many job sites multiple times during the construction process, checking out the progress and checking in with her crews.

"It's my favorite part of the job," said Eustace, who bought the family business with her husband, Bill, from her father in 2005.

On a recent morning, that took her to a skilled-nursing facility under construction in Denver's Lowry neighborhood, where an all-male HPE crew was installing ductwork, plumbing and piping systems in the three-story building.

"I have never been disrespected, and no one has ever created any barrier for me. If anything, I've found it to be just the opposite," Eustace said. "They have been unbelievably supportive.

"For me, that's the one question I always get asked, and I don't ever think I give the answer anyone is looking for."

Eustace and other women in Colorado's construction industry would love to tip the scales a little more toward female, though, especially as many contractors struggle to find workers to meet construction demand.

A number of Denver-area companies are recruiting women for apprenticeship programs, in hopes of bolstering numbers both in the field and in technical and leadership positions.

"The sky's the limit within construction for women. There are so many positions and opportunities that are starving for more female candidates," said Karla Nugent, chief business development officer for Weifield Group Contracting in Denver. "Multitasking, organization, better communication — we really need that in construction. So many of the positions, they will train if you have basic skills they can build on."

According to the National Association of Women in Construction, 9.8 million people worked in the U.S. construction industry in 2014. Of that number, just 872,000, or 8.9 percent, were women.

On average, women in construction earned 93.4 percent of what men made in 2013 — a narrower gap than the national average of 82 percent, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

About 81 percent of Colorado construction firms polled by the Associated General Contractors of America said they intended to add jobs this year, with 26 percent planning to hire more than 25 employees.

Between December 2014 and last December, Colorado added 11,700 construction jobs, which represented a 7.9 percent increase, according to BLS data. Overall, though, construction employment is still below prerecession highs.

Weifield, a commercial and industrial electrical contractor, is working closely with partners such as Denver Public Schools, Emily Griffith Technical College and Goodwill to try to persuade more young women to consider careers in the industry, Nugent said. The company already has women in various technical positions, including one on the project-management team for Country Club Towers in Denver, a multimillion dollar, multiyear contract for the company.

"It's so hard to get women excited about being an electrician," Nugent said. "We're starting to make some strides with younger-teen girls, not just the guys." The apprenticeship model is one of the major selling points they bring up with prospective candidates, male or female, Nugent said.

Apprentices get four years of paid on-the-job training and free after-hours classroom instruction after which they can move up to a higher-paid, journeyman status, as well as other career paths in the field, such as estimator or project engineer.

"I'm not against higher education, but if you don't have the opportunity to do it, it's a fantastic choice you have to work with an employer that will invest that much time and money into an employee," she said.

Colorado State University is also trying to increase female enrollment in its Construction Management program, officials said.

Last fall, 43 of the 662 undergraduate students studying construction management were women, or 6.5 percent, according to the university.

That's "far too light for our liking," CSU internship and outreach coordinator Anna Fontana said in an e-mail.

Females, however, tend to be some of the most actively involved and highly recruited students in the program, Fontana said.

Lisa Reiswig, president of the Denver chapter of the National Association of Women in Construction, said the number of women attending construction-related programs through colleges has increased "quite a bit" over the years.

"Just because you're in the industry doesn't mean you're out there swinging a hammer," said Reiswig, who works in technical sales for United Rentals Power & HVAC. "There are administrative positions, there are technical positions, a lot of women are becoming engineers. Women can provide a different viewpoint."

Heating & Plumbing Engineers currently employs 19 women, including talent manager Reanna Werner, who oversees the plumbing apprenticeship program. Another longtime female employee in Colorado Springs is a master plumber and project engineer. HPE is actively recruiting women for apprenticeships, Eustace said.

Wages start around \$14 per hour for their apprentices, with entry-level journeymen earning \$25 per hour and more as they gain experience, Werner said.

"Women have just as much aptitude to get out into the field and install these systems as any man out there," Werner said.

Eustace said she would love to see the growing focus on science, math and technology roles for women translate to construction management and other construction-related jobs, as well.

"We want our young women to grow up to be doctors, lawyers engineers, service-oriented opportunities that we put a lot of value and respect in," Eustace said. "I would like to see young people want to grow up and be builders and really understand how to put things together."

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