

BUILDING CAREER OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN AND PEOPLE OF COLOR: Breakthroughs in Construction



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Apprenticeship programs run jointly by unions of working people and construction firms offer aspiring tradespeople the ability to earn family-sustaining wages and benefits and a hands-on, debt-free education. The unionized construction sector presents tremendous opportunities in raising the wealth within communities of color and women-led households.

Despite greater efforts by advocates to attach diversity workforce goals to construction projects to increase the number of women and people of color entering careers in the trades, achieving those goals has been an uphill battle. As of 2010, women hold only 2.2 percent of craft positions in construction nationally, and racial minorities are continually underrepresented in this sector.¹

A new report from Jobs With Justice Education Fund and the Tradeswomen Committee of North America's Building Trades Unions provides a roadmap for advocates and policymakers who seek to achieve more diversity and open more career opportunities in construction to women and people of color.

The research examines how the University of Massachusetts Boston campus and Minnesota Vikings stadium projects met and exceeded targeted workforce goals for hiring women and people of color. Nearly 60 tradespeople, community activists, government staff, union leaders, and contractors involved in these two major publicly-funded construction projects were interviewed. Key findings include that the range of groups involved must be unified around a vision where women and people of color are granted open access to careers in construction. Additionally, stakeholders must create and commit to a multi-stage plan and invest resources necessary to achieve goals and full compliance.

What follows is a brief summary of the range of strategies employed by stakeholders on both projects for expanding the pipeline of diverse tradespeople, and for creating a welcoming work environment to retain this workforce.

Strategies to ensure that goals for minority and female participation were met and in some cases, exceeded:

- **Commit key actors to the goals, in writing.** Secure commitment through project labor agreements, extensive meetings and explicit language on workforce goals and enforcement.
- **Hire watchdogs and grant them authority.** Employ equity directors and compliance staff who have resources, authority and deep knowledge of the hiring and recruitment procedures, which may lead to success in compliance.
- **Ensure general contractors enforce compliance of their subcontractors.** Integrate compliance staff into the management structure of the companies, and give them authority and resources to advance their goals. Plan for compliance during the bidding process, track workforce numbers of subcontractors on a weekly or even daily basis and bring subcontractors into meetings with unions when goals aren't met, to avoid one party blaming the other.

- **Maintain accountability through regular meetings of all stakeholders.** Meet regularly and engage in honest conversations to allow for productive troubleshooting when progress slips.
- **Push for consistent public pressure from community groups.** Community activists can successfully demand greater diversity by attending open-door meetings, engaging in public protests, and working behind the scenes with contractors and unions.

Build a pipeline to meet increased demand:

- **Utilize apprenticeship readiness programs to expand entry points into the trades.** The programs teach math and other skills that can pose a barrier to entering an apprenticeship program for many prospective tradespeople. They also place graduates in apprenticeship programs upon completion.
- **Adapt apprenticeship programs to increase diversity.** Utilize a practice of job placement assistance and reserving slots in their entering classes for women and people of color, as well as for graduates of apprenticeship readiness programs.



LeWanda Harper, Laborers Local 563 journey member, at work at the new Vikings stadium

Project labor agreements (PLAs). A PLA is a pre-hire collective bargaining agreement establishing the terms and conditions of employment for a particular construction project, and is typically signed by the general contractor for the project and the local council of building trades unions. According to our research with the Worker Institute at Cornell University, since 2004 there has been an increase in the number of PLAs that include “community workforce provisions,” or goals for hiring women, people of color, and veterans onto projects and into the trades.

- **Target recruitment where low-income residents reside.** Consider recruitment through public housing projects, homeless shelters, and public assistance offices.
- **Start early with outreach to schools.** Running job fairs and summer jobs programs with schools demonstrate the value of various trades, and starts the pipeline.
- **Advertise apprenticeships.** Ads, including on television, and with targeted appeals, like “actively seeking women and people of color” lead to successful recruitment.
- **Track “walk-ons.”** Maintain call lists and conduct regular outreach to hire women and people of color on-site.
- **Combat “checkerboarding.”** Actively work to stop contractors from bouncing women and people of color between jobs to fulfill equity goals, which prevents them from acquiring advanced training to move into a career as a journey person.
- **Ensure diverse “core crews.”** Appoint women and people of color to the crew of advanced journey-level workers traveling with contractors, so that projects start out with a diverse workforce.
- **Combat discrimination in job access.** Public or private audits can uncover whether there are disparities in annual wages and hours earned by gender, race, and ethnicity.
- **Encourage personal outreach by company leaders.** Construction firm leaders should directly welcome and encourage women and people of color in the industry.
- **Address a hostile work climate for women and people of color.** Suggestions include orienting all new hires about the equity goals of the projects and maintain bathrooms that are comfortable for women to use.
- **Amend hiring hall practices.** Unions can reform hiring practices based on seniority to make it easier for women and people of color to have access to available work.
- **Develop support structures within and across unions.** Union affinity groups and minority caucuses create safe, encouraging spaces for aspiring tradespeople.

Create careers, not jobs:

¹ “The Construction Chart Book,” 19. The Center for Construction Research and Training. April 2013. <http://www.cpwr.com/sites/default/files/publications/CB%20page%2020.pdf>

This report is a joint project of Jobs With Justice Education Fund and North America’s Building Trades Unions (NABTU) Tradeswomen Committee

About Jobs With Justice Education Fund

Jobs With Justice Education Fund is a national network expanding people’s ability to come together to improve their workplaces, their communities, and their lives. We create solutions to the problems working people face by leading campaigns, changing the conversation and moving labor, community, student and faith voices to action. We win real change at the national and local levels by challenging corporate greed and demanding an economy that works for all.

About the NABTU Tradeswomen Committee

The NABTU Tradeswomen Committee is committed to increasing the number of women in skilled-trades careers by promoting strategies for recruitment, retention and leadership advancement. The committee will give voice and visibility to these issues within NABTU, its affiliates and industry partners.