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Affiliated Construction Trades

Steve White is the Director of the Affiliated Construction Trades (ACT), a division of the West Virginia State Building and Construction Trades Council. The Council represents more than 22,000 union construction workers in West Virginia and its bordering counties. White has held the Director's position for 30 years. Prior to his role at ACT, from approximately 1984 to 1992, White worked for the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners of America in Washington, D.C., first in a research position, then in their apprenticeship and training department.

Apprenticeships: Access to Local, Skilled Labor

Jobs, Jobs, Jobs. That's what the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 means. Six billion dollars for much needed infrastructure projects in West Virginia, of course, means a lot of construction activity over the next five years.

Without going into detail, I predict the Infrastructure Act could create 1,500 new construction jobs in our state. (We currently have around 33,000 people employed in the construction industry.) What portion of these jobs will go to local workers and contractors remains to be seen. This article will address how apprenticeship can help to get local workers into these new jobs.

Features in the legislation ensure these will be good paying jobs, yet contractors must still compete for each project, and the low bid wins. To be competitive, a contractor must have access to skilled labor – simply having bodies is not a winning solution. Filling these new positions is a challenge we can all welcome; the key is encouraging workers who are new to the workforce, currently in low-wage or part-time employment, or unemployed to consider construction. One of the best ways to get the skills needed for a rewarding career is through apprenticeship programs.

The good news is local contractors and workers have been patiently building and improving apprenticeship programs for decades. They have invested in buildings, tools, equipment, materials, curriculum, instructors, application procedures, and more. The bad news is getting workers into these programs is increasingly difficult for a variety of reasons.

In a recent national survey, 83 percent of apprenticeship programs rank high schools and parents as the main obstacles to getting good candidates to apply for a career in the trades.

Why? Because college is seen as the best path to a prosperous future. While college has many advantages, it certainly is not for everyone. When it comes to the construction industry, private sector apprenticeship programs have the best track record of success.

There are 14 basic craft areas, from Boilermaker to Sheet Metal Worker, which offer apprenticeships. These programs vary in duration of two to five years, but they all share some common features. All apprentices earn while they learn, meaning when on the job they are paid. This is a core component of apprenticeship. There is no tuition, no student debt. Apprenticeship in West Virginia is funded by private sector contributions, not tax dollars. Contractors and workers in the industry pay for the programs.





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Basic entry requirements include a high school diploma or equivalent, a driver's license, and passing a drug test. Often programs use WorkForce West Virginia to administer an aptitude test to make sure candidates have the reading and math skills needed. Veterans, vocational students, women, and minorities all are welcome and encouraged to apply and are often eligible for preferences.

Programs typically advertise when they are taking applications. Some take them every day; others have a window when applications are accepted. When an applicant meets the basic requirements, they get an interview and are scored. Each year, and sometimes more often, these programs put together a new apprenticeship class.

Each craft has its own facilities for apprenticeship. For example, heavy equipment operators have one location in Jackson County that serves the entire state. If you live in Wheeling or Charleston, you go stay at the training center four weeks out of a year for your classroom training and stay at their dormitory. In contrast, the Electricians

have seven locations to serve West Virginia. They tend to have evening or Saturday classes.

Oftentimes, people express concern they don't see a facility in their county and think there are no apprenticeship opportunities. Regardless of where the facility is located, each craft serves the entire state, either in one location or several.

Having a great training facility is important, but the key to apprenticeship is structured on-the-job training. Apprenticeship requires a minimum of one fully skilled worker to one apprentice. Having two or three apprentices with one skilled worker does not provide a proper training situation. Often, we see a ratio of three or more skilled workers to one apprentice. Under these conditions, the apprentice is constantly taught. It's this constant back and forth between on-the-job training and classroom training that has proven to be a successful model.

Currently, around 500 new apprentices are selected each year. With an average program length of four years, that means

around 2,000 apprentices are in training at any given time.

A great source of information on West Virginia's apprenticeship programs is www.wvapprenticeships.com. We all can do more to promote apprenticeship. State and local governments can support pre-apprenticeship programs, which expose people who are unfamiliar with the construction industry to available careers. More effort could be made to let people know about apprenticeship. The programs do an excellent job of training but don't have the staff and resources to attend every job fair and career day. Cooperation between our school systems and apprenticeship programs should be encouraged.

Finally, if you know someone looking for a career, point them to the apprenticeship website. Luckily, we have a robust apprenticeship infrastructure in place. Now we face the exciting challenge of filling all these positions. ▼