

Bridging Oregon's Work Force Gaps

When the Oregon legislature funded the \$1.3-billion OTIA III State Bridge Delivery Program four years ago, it directed the Oregon Dept. of Transportation to repair or replace hundreds of aging bridges and to outsource the

work, thereby improving the economy through job creation and expanded opportunities for all Oregonians.

But from the beginning, we at ODOT faced a good-news/bad-news scenario. The good news was that such an extensive infrastructure project would require a large, trained work force and create new family-wage jobs. The bad news was that Oregon, like many states nationwide, faced a shortage of skilled construction workers—right when it needed them most.

The numbers were troubling: Projections showed that an increase in private projects combined with attrition based on retirement would shrink the construction work force. By 2012, Oregon would face a shortage of nearly 15,000 new trade workers.

In July 2005, ODOT responded with its Workforce Development Plan, designed to increase employment diversity, expand apprenticeship participation and provide more training resources and opportunities for highway construction careers. Our first step was to listen. We went to the construction industry and asked what it needed. The industry told us that increasing demand for a diverse work force was not enough. It wanted help in securing a sustainable supply of qualified workers.

The agency then met with federal, state and local representatives, as well as community-based orga-

nizations, Native American tribes, unions, contractor associations and apprenticeship organizations.

We then acted upon what we heard. With the support of our stakeholders, ODOT successfully launched a process that is setting a new standard for work force recruitment and training. Beginning in the Portland metropolitan area and drawing on \$1.8 million in federal matching funds, we now are implementing the Workforce Development Plan statewide.

Career Building

Around the state, ODOT-led Regional Workforce Alliances bring together existing work force development systems and resources, such as the Oregon Employment Dept.'s One-Stop centers and community colleges, to implement the plan. At the Portland Community College-Cascade's Trades and Industry Division, pre-apprentices with no prior construction experience can receive training to prepare for careers as ironworkers, operating engineers, carpenters, electricians, laborers and cement masons.

We have initiated collaboration among organizations that provide orientation and outreach, training, drug-testing and support services. These efforts all are geared toward developing applicants into viable candidates for apprenticeship programs and ultimately for the statewide labor pool. Contractors seek-

ing workers can draw from this new source of qualified workers.

We also are innovators in apprenticeship. ODOT is the only state department of transportation that is moving toward a hard goal for contractors to hire 20% apprentices on OTIA III jobs. We already are at 10%. These goals are race and gender neutral.

As the bridge program enters the phase of heaviest construction in the next two years, we will continue to meet the challenge. We have successfully placed applicants in the qualified labor pool, established an outreach program in the communities and on a Web site and instituted a bilingual, toll-free phone line for callers seeking information on work force opportunities.

As a result, Oregon has shown a year-to-year increase in employment of women and minorities as individuals and as business owners in highway construction during years when other Western states have lost ground in this area.

Facing the numbers turned out to be a very good thing. Now, when we view this plan, it is through the lens of the individual worker's experience. We see a newly empowered group of people who are finding meaningful careers and new skills that will ensure a better future for them and Oregon.

The bridge program is not just building better highway infrastructure, it is building transportation careers, and it is building better tomorrows. And no public project could have a better goal. ■

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