
Opinion

As I See It: Construction industry must do more to ensure diversity

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We've just celebrated Independence Day in a year like no other.

All men are said to be created equal and we regularly pledge liberty and justice for all. However, the global pandemic has laid bare underlying health disparities and economic inequities, at the same time our country has begun a national racial awakening and reckoning about the magnitude of structural racism. This turmoil comes on the heels of the "Me Too" movement and a growing awareness of how pervasive the misuse of power has been against women.

These movements must be an impetus for organizations and companies to take stock of their own internal operations. It is time to take a hard look at the opportunities or lack of opportunities and business practices that have helped create an unjust society where people of color and women earn less, advance less, succeed less, based on the color of their skin or gender at birth. The construction industry, overwhelmingly white and male, is long overdue for this self-reflection.

Our industry has a long history of unequal access for women of all backgrounds and diverse ethnicities. A recent disparity study commissioned by the city of Worcester shows that women and African Americans each make up only 4% of the trades workforce (2% when looking at all of Worcester County).

It is time for the construction industry to ensure equal access to all its jobs and equal pay and promotion once hired. It is time for developers and institutions doing construction work to change the industry by requiring equal access to construction jobs by diverse people and providing equity in wages and job opportunities. Some institutions and developers have already begun and have created blueprints and best practices for others to follow.

In Worcester, several projects are modeling commitments to access and equity in construction through applying the action steps listed below. These projects include the YWCA of Central Massachusetts and the construction manager, Consigli, with their renovation and expansion; The city of Worcester and the construction manager, Gilbane, with the Polar Park project; and Trinity Development, the city of Worcester and Tocci Construction with the courthouse development.

Construction access and equity action steps:

1. **Accountable access to work:** Commit to a workforce that reflects our community by requiring that women and people of color are hired as members of the construction work crews in addition to requiring the use of MBEs and WBEs. Creating opportunities for minority- and women-owned businesses are important, but it is equally or more important to ensure a diverse workforce of trades workers who can support their families through hard-skilled labor at decent wages.
2. **Apply the diversity in construction best practices:** Ensure the diversity workforce requirements are a floor not a ceiling — a reality, not empty words on paper — by including the diversity requirements in bid documents, contracts and monthly monitoring compliance with these goals. Evaluate contractors' diversity track records prior to hiring them for a job.
3. **Create a career pathway for diverse talent:** Create opportunity for new people entering the trades, including Worcester residents and students coming from our region's career tech programs and high schools by hiring them as on-the-job apprentices. Skilled journey-level trades workers teach new apprentices, passing on knowledge to the next generation of local, skilled workers. New apprentices are hired and perform work at reduced rates, gradually increasing their pay, as their experience and skills grow.
4. **Ensure equitable work:** Eliminate race and gender pay gaps among the trade's workforce, and ensure living wages and benefits are paid by using union contractors who pay every worker equally according to their apprentice or journey-level. Fair, living wages bring additional consumer spending power and broader economic benefit to our communities at a time when it is even more needed.

The construction and development industry has a responsibility to respond and change. There is no silver bullet that will immediately solve the construction industry's diversity problem. But by implementing these four simple, meaningful steps, we can finally build a construction workforce that fulfills the mandate of fair and equal access to good jobs for all.

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