



Building Equal Opportunity
Chicago Women in Trades
1455 S. Michigan, Ste. 210
Chicago, IL 60605
(P) 312-942-1444
(F) 312-942-0802
www.chicagowomenintrades.org
cwitinfo@cwit2.org

swnewsherald.com

More Outreach and Training Programs Ahead for Chicago Women in Trades

Sheila Elliot
October 07, 2004

The organization representing a coalition groups working to improve women's status in construction and skilled trades is scheduled to receive a multi-million dollar infusion of new funds courtesy of the U.S. Department of Labor.

Officials with Chicago Women in Trades (CWIT) announced this week that they've been named a recipient by the Labor Dept. of a \$2.1 million grant, providing the financial wherewithal to build an infrastructure of its own so women are better informed about the employment and training opportunities in the trades. Funds will be disbursed over a three years period, they said.

For years, construction work and skilled trades like plumbing and carpentry were regarded as male-only jobs, but no longer, they said. Today, a woman working in those occupations can expect to much larger salaries than a woman who has chosen a career in what is regarded as a typical female profession, they said. Annual salaries in the trades can be three and a half times greater than those in a profession like childcare for example.

The Labor Dept. grant will help assure women's access to the training that's necessary to enter those occupations as well the support system necessary for success, they said.

One of the many Chicago area organizations represented by CWIT is Southwest Women Working Together (SWWT), now headquartered in a refurbished building along a busy retail street, at 6845 S. Western Ave., in Chicago.

SWWT began working with women's employment training specifically for the trades and construction work when their Women Employment and Training program started in 2000. Since then, SWWT has had about 300 women enroll in the eight-week pre-apprenticeship program, Betty Powell, the program's director, said Tuesday. About 200 of the women have completed the program, though the reasons why some remained with it and others left are as varied as the individuals participating, she said.

Some learn that the work they were interested in is not what they expected, she said. Still others start with an interest in one trade, change in mid-course, and start training for another trade, she said. What SWWT has learned, though, is that there is no lack of interest among women in working in construction and the skilled trades. “Once they see and understand, they see how they can become self-sufficient,” by working in well-paid occupations, she said.

On its Web site the National Institute for Women in Trades, Technology and Science says that the percentage of women employed in occupations not usually thought of as female, is small. They describe “non-traditional” fields for women as those where 25 percent or less of the workforce is female. Automotive mechanics as an example, they said; it’s an occupation where only about one percent of the people who do that job today are female. Women who work in nontraditional jobs earn much higher wages than women working in traditionally female occupations, however, they said.

National statistics indicate an increased need in the future in the skilled trades and construction. In a U.S. Department of Labor report Tomorrow’s Jobs, officials estimated that between 2002 and 2012, employment needs in construction will increase by 15.1 percent, rising from 6.7 million workers to 7.7 million. New housing and more road, bridge, and tunnel construction will be the greatest source of jobs in this sector, they said. Overall employment in manufacturing is predicted to decline slightly, though some specialized sub sectors in that category will grow, they said.

In a press statement announcing the new grant this week, CWIT cited figures for the future of the construction industry in northeast Illinois that predicted a shortage of skilled labor over the next decade. About 5,400 jobs will be added, they said, but other factors must be computed if one is looking at the overall employment needs.

Career changes and retirements especially in the late 1990s are expected to have an impact. Between 1988 and 1997, the percentage of skilled construction workers between the ages of 35 and 44 jumped to 31.5 percent, they said, citing statistic provided by the Associated General Contractors of America.

Keeping an eye on long range industry and employment conditions is part of what SWWT tries to instill in the women enrolled in their Women’s Employment and Training program, said Powell. It’s one of many topics covered in pre-apprenticeship training. In the first four-week session the program emphasizes improving math and vocabulary skills that are needed to pass preliminary exams, she said. Training in mechanical drawing is provided, and the pre-apprentice must work on developing their job hunting skills like writing a resume.

In the second four-week session, students have the opportunity for hands-on training, often in the trade they're interested in learning, she said. This might mean working in carpentry, with plumbing, or doing electrical work under the direction of a professional at a new housing site, doing rehab work, or another workplace situation, she said. The on-the-job experience gives the woman a chance to see if she really wants to pursue that occupation, she said. It can also be a way of obtaining the letter of sponsorship they may need to be accepted by an official apprenticeship program, or give them the chance to prepare an application for the job she wants, she said.

That on-site experience can also be the point when she learns that becoming an apprentice in a trade can mean waiting for an opening to begin official training, a wait that in some cases may last a few years, she said. If that does happen, SWWT can be a source of other job leads, while they wait, providing opportunities where the applicant can use some of the skills they've acquired and still earn a good salary. Often those jobs are in industry, manufacturing, or a related field, she said.

CWIT's new three-year grant will allow them to expand their reach throughout the Chicago metropolitan area, linking trade and business groups with community colleges and career centers where outreach work and training for women can be provided. In their statement this week, U.S. Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao said there was a shortage of skilled workers in the U.S.

Martin Umlauf, representing the Chicago Regional Council of Carpenters, said working with CWIT was a way of seeing that the number of women working in trades increased. Commercial and residential builders in Illinois would benefit, he said.