



Building Equal Opportunity
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CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

\$2 Million Grant Beckons Women to Trades

Francine Knowles, Business Reporter
October 5, 2004

Chicago Women in Trades, which has long worked to get more women to pursue careers in the high-paying construction industry, will have greater resources at its disposal thanks to a \$2.1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Labor.

The money, nearly three times the nonprofit's annual budget, will fund a three-year campaign that's projected to reach 9,200 women.

The campaign will include outreach and marketing to introduce women to the skilled trades, orientation sessions, job fairs and education and support services, including career planning, placement and mentoring programs.

The campaign was unveiled here Monday by U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor for Employment and Training Emily Stover DeRocco. Less than 3 percent of skilled trades are filled by women, meaning they aren't entering a field where "the benefits are enormous," said Chicago Women in Trades President Lauren Sugerman.

"You get on-the-job training that leads to a career that pays \$35 to \$40 an hour, comes with benefits, health insurance, pensions and the real satisfaction of doing a job that makes such a critical contribution to our economy," she said. Barriers to entry include stereotypes that result in girls and women being steered away from nontraditional skilled trades careers or not given information about opportunities, she said.

"People sometimes assume women won't be interested," she said.

The grant will aid in drawing more women into an industry where in northeast Illinois a shortage of skilled labor is expected. The construction industry is expected to add 5,400 new positions here annually and require a total of 38,000 workers in the next decade. The U.S. Bureau of Labor estimates 1 million more workers will be needed nationally by 2012, DeRocco said.

"Chicago Women in Trades is clearly well situated to help us," DeRocco said.

The nonprofit will partner in the campaign with industry trade and advocacy groups, the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, City Colleges of Chicago, the Illinois Department of Labor, Workforce Boards of Metropolitan Chicago and others.