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Grant builds on effort to get women into building trades

Geoff Dougherty, Tribune staff reporter
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The U.S. Department of Labor on Monday announced a \$2.1 million grant to help Chicago-area women enter the building trades, a field traditionally dominated by men.

The money, along with \$1.2 million from trade unions, construction businesses, local community colleges and the State of Illinois, will fund outreach efforts in high schools and colleges.

Chicago Women in Trades, a 400-member non-profit organization, will administer the programs.

"I'm still floating about 25 feet off the ground," said Lauren Sugerman, the group's president. "We have known for a long time what to do to address this issue. We have just lacked the resources."

Sugerman's group will develop orientation and mentoring programs to reach more than 9,000 high school girls, and publications for use in guidance offices and at career fairs.

The group also will provide money for Chicago-area community colleges to hire teachers and develop courses in such areas as architecture, design and construction management.

Labor Department records show women comprised 2 percent of those entering Chicago-area trade apprenticeship programs last year. National figures on women working in construction are similar.

"We are going to use this to get that number to 10 percent," said Sugerman.

The grant was announced at a carpenter's union training facility in Elk Grove Village by Assistant Labor Secretary Emily Stover DeRocco, who noted that the nation will require 1 million new construction workers by 2012.

"It's important for women to understand that these are good careers with good pay," she said.

According to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, carpenters in Chicago last year earned an average of \$22.48 an hour, 18 percent more than the typical Chicago worker.

Across the board, pay for women continues to lag behind that of men. Researchers have found part of the reason for the disparity is that lucrative fields--construction among them--employ few women.

"These traditionally were trades that were passed on from father to son," said Paul Clark, a labor studies professor at Penn State University. "That in itself tends to keep the number of women and people of color down."

Clark said cultural factors also play into the low numbers of female carpenters, bricklayers and ironworkers. Trades like nursing, he said, traditionally have drawn interest from women, while men were more interested in construction work.

The grant money is aimed at making women aware that the building trades are a viable, and attractive, career for them.

"These are life-changing opportunities for women," said Sugerman. "They offer benefits that are uncommon with traditional female jobs, like dental care and optical care."

Some benefits are less concrete, said Sugerman, who worked repairing elevators at the Sears Tower.

"The sense of power that you have in the world when that's your job is really different," she said.

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