



Building Equal Opportunity
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\$2 million labor grant announced in village

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Two decades after the feminist movement took root, Geri Harston set out to be an electrician, but her Chicago high school counselors steered her toward nursing or cosmetology instead.

Disappointed, she conceded but she never gave up her dream.

In 1989, seven years after high school, the current co-chairwoman of Chicago Women in Trades, which advocates for women's jobs in the construction industry, became a certified electrician.

This week, the U.S. Department of Labor announced in Elk Grove Village that her organization will receive almost \$2.1 million in federal grants to help young women realize their goal of becoming carpenters, electricians, masons and plumbers.

The dollar figure is nearly three times the group's annual budget.

Chicago Women in Trades intends to expand its Women in Skilled Trades project to recruit, assist and support women for jobs in the construction industry, which needs workers and offers pay well above a living wage.

On average, entry level construction jobs pay \$13 an hour and include benefits. As workers progress, jobs in the field can pay \$35 to \$40 an hour.

The group's goal is to attract 750 women into union construction apprenticeship programs over the next three years. The project will rely upon building networks among the Metro Chicago Workforce Boards, the Building and Construction Trades Councils of Chicago, 21 community colleges in the city and suburbs and 19 career centers.

Less than three percent of the current construction labor force is comprised of women.

Harston said the bottom line is the grant will empower women who are interested in this field.

"It will help streamline the process of getting into careers like these. It will also help generate awareness, support the people who get involved along the way and sustain them throughout their careers," Harston said.

Lauren Sugarman, founder and president of Chicago Women in Trades, said the grant will address the goals of her group as well as the construction industry and the department of labor.

"Their both seeking a diverse and healthy workforce. We've identified an underrepresented population to tap into. Doing so is vital to relieving the wage gap between men and women and helping the industry by expanding its pool of workers," Sugarman said.

The announcement came Monday by U.S. Department of Labor Assistant Secretary Emily Stover DeRocco at the Chicago Regional Council of Carpenter's Elk Grove Village training facility.

DeRocco, who was promoted to her position in the Department of Labor by President George W. Bush in 2001, said building is occurring at a record pace and finding employees within the nontraditional labor pools to do the work is now a priority.

"There are 6.9 million people in the construction industry. That figure is expected to increase by 1 million by 2012. There's a nationwide shortage in construction and skilled trades talent," she said. "There's a need to identify ways to entice women into long-term careers in construction."

Chicago Women in Trades aims to do just that.

The group had humble beginnings -- it started as a support group for women in the trade industry and members held meetings in their kitchens.

Now its excited officials will work to put their plan into action.

Harston, who is also the executive director of the Architecture, Construction and Engineering Technologies Charter High School in Chicago, said the goal is to identify, support and challenge girls, not shun them.

"I went into high school very interested in taking shop and electronics classes. When it got to be time to select classes, I was told no," Harston said.

"We had a critical strategy to get women into the industry, but we lacked the resources for our big dreams and vision. This changes all that."

For information on Chicago Women in Trades, go to www.womenintrades.org or call (312) 942-1444.

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