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Bill Would Give State Control of Union Apprentices Plans

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Construction trade unions in Illinois, which have drawn criticism for not having more minority and women represented, would see their apprenticeship training programs placed under state control, under a proposal introduced by Senate President Emil Jones.

The proposal, which has divided labor unions, would set up a council that would be responsible for approving and overseeing the programs, including establishing standards for training, compiling data on population and employment trends and establishing an Illinois plan for equal employment opportunity in the programs.

The council would be made up of employer and employee representatives, who would be appointed by the governor.

Labor groups in the past have resisted state interference in the operation of their apprenticeship programs. But this particular proposal was spearheaded by the Laborers' International Union of North America.

The group says it is concerned about the quality of some programs, which are overseen in Illinois and some other states by the federal government.

"The country is going to be facing a shortage of skilled construction workers over the next decade," said Sean Stott, director of governmental affairs with the union's Midwest regional office. "We feel the state of Illinois can do a better job of ensuring we have the skilled work force that we're going to need here, as opposed to the federal government."

Greater local control could also lead to greater diversity in the programs, he contended. But Sen. Dale Righter (R-Mattoon) labeled the proposal "a really bad idea," and a reaction to the Bush administration. Construction trade unions here have benefited from state requirements that all state projects be built with workers trained in apprenticeship programs. But the Bush administration has been approving non-union training programs, jeopardizing union access to some state projects.

Righter said the Bush administration's stance is appropriate.

"They ought to be looking for the best apprenticeship programs, not just those affiliated with unions," he said. Stott said state oversight would still mean both union and non-union programs could operate, but would rid the system of substandard programs.

"There are programs that are in name only that don't do anything close to what they purport to do," he said, contending the federal government doesn't properly police them.

"We feel having local control over the approval process would benefit the state of Illinois and workers because they would be assured of getting a quality product," he said.

The International Union of Operating Engineers Local 150 doesn't share that view. It blasted the proposal.

"The state can barely run its own house," said James Sweeney, vice president at the local.

"We don't need politicians running programs to train ... electricians that wire hospitals, pipefitters that put pipes in nuclear plants, operating engineers that run the cranes," he said.

"To have rules set by politicians I think would be disastrous."

Jones could not be reached for comment, but his spokeswoman Cindy Davidsmeyer said he believes the state oversight proposal is a good one.

Chicago Women in Trades, which has worked to increase the representation of women and minorities in the construction trades, said state oversight alone is no guarantee of greater diversity in the trades and would need to be part of a broader effort.

"No matter what kind of oversight you have, unless you have really good programs ... that help people get the foundation they need to be competitive, to be successful, none of the oversight matters," said Susan Donovan, director of policy with the nonprofit.