



**Building Equal Opportunity**  
Chicago Women in Trades  
1455 S. Michigan  
Chicago, IL 60605  
(P) 312-942-1444  
(F) 312-942-0802  
[www.chicagowomenintrades.org](http://www.chicagowomenintrades.org)  
[cwitinfo@cwit2.org](mailto:cwitinfo@cwit2.org)



## **Jill of All Trades: Chicago Women in Trades Prepares Workers for Lucrative Construction Jobs in Fields Traditionally Dominated by Men**

Katie Dodd  
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Renee Hill knew she could do better. After a 17-year career at People's Energy and two pay cuts, she still struggled to support her three children.

"If you have a job for 17 years and you only make \$16.65 an hour, it's time to go," she said.

So Hill enrolled in Chicago Women in Trades' technical opportunities program, which trains women to enter apprenticeship programs in the construction industry. Within a year she was an apprentice electrician with Amtrak, making \$12.05 an hour. By the next year, her hourly wage went up to \$20.

When Chicago Women in Trades holds its semiannual Career Fair on Thursday, Aug. 26, it hopes to encourage more women to follow Hill's lead. Now celebrating 23 years of service, the nonprofit organization provides women with education and on-site training to land high-wage jobs as plumbers, electricians, carpenters, ceramic tile layers, and others in the construction trade.

In Illinois, experienced laborers in construction jobs earn an average hourly wage of \$28, more than twice as much as employees in the traditionally female retail trade.

"These are truly higher-paying paths with a career ladder built right in," said Sharon Mastracci, assistant professor of public administration at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

In 2002, women made up only 1.1 percent of employees in the construction industry in Chicago, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. But the push to get more women into construction jobs is not just a matter of integrating a male-dominated profession, Mastracci said. It's a major force in the battle for women's economic equity.

“It’s not just about diversifying an occupation for the sake of doing it,” she said.

Part of the reason construction jobs offer higher wages is that most are union-affiliated. That’s another reason the jobs are appealing for women—union rules dictate that women can’t be paid less for equal work.

Hill is just one of the women making inroads in a “man’s world”. But the numbers are still startlingly low. And Illinois is “Certainly not one of the standouts,” in terms of making nontraditional jobs more available for women a priority, Mastracci said.

In Illinois, state-funded One-Stop Career Centers are governed by 26 local boards. The centers provide career guidance, education, training, and placement.

A 2003 study found that only one of those boards planned to give all women information on nontraditional jobs. In the next five years, only half of the boards planned to direct more than 5 percent of the women they serve into nontraditional training. That means that most women served by the centers are steered toward traditional low-wage women’s jobs, unless they express a specific interest in trades.

“We can do better,” said Susan Donovan, public policy director of Chicago Women in Trades, “and we really need to do better.”

The problem is, most women don’t ask for specific information because they don’t realize the range of options open to them. They’ve learned from a young age that there are “boys’ jobs” and “girls’ jobs,” said Deanna Hodges, Chicago Women in Trades outreach coordinator.

When her daughter attended third grade, Hodges says, she announced she wanted to be a beautician. She far prefers taking apart VCRs to fixing her dolls’ hair, Hodges said, but her teacher told her she thought she’d “be a good beautician”.

Hodges bristled at the suggestion. “It’s OK to be different,” she said. “It’s OK to like to do different things.”

Mastracci said other states would do well to follow the example of Wisconsin, a state that makes a “concerted effort” to provide women with detailed information about nontraditional jobs.

While initiatives like the Chicago Minority Business Enterprises/ Women Business Enterprises (MBE/WBE) construction ordinance and the Department of Transportation’s Business Enterprise Program encourages government-funded projects to employ minority and women contractors, such plans actually do little to increase the number of women working as laborers on the job sites, Donovan said.

“That’s about contracts and entrepreneurships, not jobs,” Donovan said. “And there’s no evidence that women and minorities hire women and minorities.”

Hill said she's seen numerous examples of women getting contracts, then not hiring a single woman for her crew. "[Women] work against each other sometimes," she said. "They don't bond in all places."

And economic downturns make construction jobs more scarce. During the '90s, "it was not unlike what you saw in World War II," Mastracci said. "There was a demand for trained people and people put their discrimination aside." Now, she said, there's some evidence that as there is more competition for jobs, women face more resistance.

The training Chicago Women in Trades offers is crucial, Hodges tells the hopeful faces at her information session. The standardized exams help prevent women from being passed over simply because of their gender.

She recalls talking to an employer who recently hired several women from the CWIT program as plumbers.

"I asked him what he thought about that," Hodges said. "He just shrugged and said, 'What can you do?' They had the skills."

She smiles triumphantly. "What can you do?"

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