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For Cities With Diversity Goals, Pre-Apprenticeships Prove Critical

Written by Amanda Maher

There's been much discussion about how the jobs being created today are either well-paying, highly-skilled positions or low-wage jobs for low-skill workers. The path to middle class employment has seemingly been eroded. But that's not true across all industries.

Take the construction industry, for example. The industry is booming in cities across the U.S., leaving both skilled- and unskilled laborers in high demand. Inner city workers are increasingly being hired within the trades, thanks in part to recently-introduced municipal regulations in some cities that require contractors to meet diversity goals.

Adopted in 2010, the City of San Francisco's [local hiring ordinance](#) aims to have 25 percent of all construction jobs filled by local residents, and 25 percent by disadvantaged workers. A provision of the ordinance also requires apprenticeship programs to diversify and offer 50 percent of slots to local residents, 25 percent to disadvantaged workers. By 2012, the number of local residents working on San Francisco-based construction jobs had [increased from 24 percent to 32 percent](#), and 56 percent of all apprenticeship openings have been filled by local residents. A similar [ordinance in Cleveland](#) has resulted in an uptick in low-income workers hired for construction projects, from only 4 percent prior to the ordinance to 11 percent afterwards.

These local hiring and diversity ordinances, along with Project Labor Agreements that are tied to individual projects, have created an increase in opportunities for low-income and minority construction workers. But as some cities are learning, these diversity targets can be difficult to achieve, and there's no guarantee of the types of jobs disadvantaged workers will receive.

[Rochester, NY](#) set an ambitious diversity goal that required minorities perform at least 20 percent of work associated with their \$40 million downtown redevelopment project. These goals were meant to offset the lack of diversity in Rochester's construction industry to date, where 93 percent of the existing workforce was white. Yet [five months into the project](#),

Hispanics had logged less than one percent of all hours worked on the project, and most minorities on the project had been placed in unskilled labor positions.

A recent [news report](#) finds that construction firms in Boston are also falling short of the goals laid out in the city's ordinance around local and diverse hiring: Local residents 50 percent, minorities (25 percent) and women (10 percent). Despite the city's hot commercial real estate market, only 30 percent of construction hours went to local residents in 2014, just over 30 percent to minorities, and a measly 4.4 percent to women.

"The needle is moving, although not as quickly as we'd like it to," [said Boston City Councilor Ayanna Pressley](#), the first woman of color elected to the council.

One of the challenges to meeting these diversity goals is the lack of a diverse talent pipeline. There are a number of apprentice programs across the trades, but accessing one of the limited apprenticeship slots can be a challenge. In some cities, getting in to the union hall requires deep connections to those already in the hall, and the halls in places like Boston have been dominated by white men.

That's where pre-apprenticeship programs like Boston's [Building Pathways](#) and Baltimore's [Project JumpStart](#) have proven vital. Each of these programs places an emphasis on attracting low-income residents, minorities and women into a free training program that guarantees placement with one of the local trades. As highlighted in a recent [What Works for Cities case study](#), more than 130 inner city residents have completed the six-week Building Pathways program, over 85 percent of whom have been placed in a certified union apprenticeship program or job

upon graduation. [Tyiesha Thompson](#) is one such graduate. The South Boston resident and single mother was looking for work when she came across a Building Pathways flyer in her housing development. By the time Thompson was in her third year of an apprenticeship with the Heating and Frost Insulators, a position that pays middle-class wages, her family was able to stop collecting the public assistance it once received.

Project JumpStart is a similar pre-apprenticeship that provides inner city Baltimore residents with an introduction to the construction trades. The [14-week program](#) combines rigorous classroom training with on-the-job training; financial education, career coaching and case management are provided throughout the program. More than 70 percent of the program's graduates are placed into well-paying jobs and apprenticeship programs upon completion.

"Class is wonderful. You were taught by instructors who have been in the construction field for years," [explained Tyrone Ferrens](#), a JumpStart Graduate. "Instead of just teaching you classroom things, they taught you what you actually needed to know on the job site—everything from handling tools to coexisting with your coworkers."

As the national construction industry continues its surge, it's important that opportunities continue to expand for inner city communities. [ICIC research](#) has found that the Construction, Housing and Real Estate (CHRE) cluster may have the largest impact of any cluster on inner city economic development given its multiple impacts, from job and entrepreneurship opportunities to neighborhood revitalization. Moreover, jobs in the CHRE cluster pay competitive wages across a wide range of skill-levels.

With cities grappling for ways to meet diversity targets and provide lower-income residents a pathway into the middle class, continued efforts are needed to secure opportunities for underserved residents in the CHRE cluster.

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3. Engage anchor institutions to create shared value.
4. Strengthen existing and emerging inner city clusters and better link inner city business to regional clusters.
5. Support management and leadership education for inner city entrepreneurs.
6. Connect inner city companies to appropriate growth capital.
7. Increase inner city company recognition and strengthen business networks.
8. Expand revenue and contracting opportunities for inner city companies.

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