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Building Trades Pre-Apprenticeship Program: Job Training Program for Disadvantaged Workers

Abstract

This pilot program in Buffalo trains entry level workers for successful placement in the building trades and skilled trades' apprenticeship programs. As a pre-apprenticeship program, BTPAP does not attempt to replicate the specialized training that is part of an apprenticeship program. Rather, BTPAP uses a "holistic approach" to basic skills development, including construction related mathematics, job search training, and exposure to various fields of skilled labor and their professional cultures. These fields include cement masons, roofers, plumbers, steamfitters, iron workers, electricians, plasterers and carpenters. Beyond skills enhancement, this program also seeks to instill the basic awareness that construction and skilled trades are viable employment option for minorities, women, and people living in poverty. BTPAP helps build confidence in each program graduate – allowing them to reach new opportunities in the skilled labor market.

Keywords

Buffalo, Economic Development, Workforce Development, Fact Sheet, PPG, PDF

Building Trades Pre-Apprenticeship Program: *Job Training Program for Disadvantaged Workers*

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What is the Building Trade Pre-Apprenticeship Program (BTPAP)?

This pilot program in Buffalo trains entry level workers for successful placement in the building trades and skilled trades' apprenticeship programs. As a pre-apprenticeship program, BTPAP does not attempt to replicate the specialized training that is part of an apprenticeship program. Rather, BTPAP uses a "holistic approach" to basic skills development, including construction related mathematics, job search training, and exposure to various fields of skilled labor and their professional cultures.ⁱ These fields include cement masons, roofers, plumbers, steamfitters, iron workers, electricians, plasterers and carpenters. Beyond skills enhancement, this program also seeks to instill the basic awareness that construction and skilled trades are viable employment option for minorities, women, and people living in poverty. BTPAP helps build confidence in each program graduate – allowing them to reach new opportunities in the skilled labor market.ⁱⁱ



BTPAP resembles similar initiatives around the country. Other examples include:

- New Skills Builder program in Chicago,
- Nontraditional Employment for Women in New York, and

- the Pre-Apprenticeship Program offered through the State Building & Construction Trades Council of California.ⁱⁱⁱ

Is there unmet demand for skilled labor and trades-workers?

This question can depend greatly on the industry and the season.

Currently in Western New York, the MEP Trades (Mechanical, Electrical, and Plumbing) have been experiencing acute shortages, and, as a result, have been importing skilled laborers from out-of-state.^{iv} Many smaller-scale roofing and home-improvement companies have also experienced a lack of reliable workers.^v This can cause companies to scale down operations, because expansion without reliable labor can cause overextension of resources. In the construction trades, time is money.^{vi} Once a job is signed, and financing arrangements are made for supplies and equipment, prolonging the job can narrow the profit margin and cause significant hardships for the developers.

Timothy Pettit is a skilled carpenter who has owned and operated TMP Home Improvement in Buffalo for over fifteen years. Mr. Pettit subcontracts from many larger home improvement and roofing operations, as well as runs his own job sites ranging from roofing to full scale home remodeling. He stated quite unequivocally, “during the work season^{vii} I can usually sell more jobs than I can staff at any given time.” Mr. Pettit believes this to be the case with most small to medium sized home improvement companies. He has experienced a consistent “lack of reliable workers, especially young ones.”^{viii}



With the Buffalo-Niagara Medical Corridor project breaking new ground each year, the demand for construction workers and skilled trades will likely continue to rise. But realizing that the job market is elastic, and that

glutting the local market with trades-workers is not sensible, Tyra Johnson at BTPAP has committed to “right-sizing”^{ix} her program to effectively “connect people with jobs in our current recessionary economy.”^x

Who does BTPAP program benefit, and why?

BTPAP benefits a wide range of interests and groups within the Western New York Community. Principally, this program benefits the participants and graduates. The BTPAP focuses on outreach to isolated, under-served and disadvantaged communities; the program seeks to provide new pathways to employment at a living wage. Wages in the skilled trades can vary widely, and are mostly based on skill requirements and occasionally licensure, but they are quite good when compared with low-skill jobs.^{xi} According to Mr. Pettit, for example, skilled roofers can be paid anywhere from \$14.00 to \$20.00 per hour.

Local employers can find a steady flow of trainable workers graduating from this program with an interest in the trades. During the pilot year, 143 people applied, 54 were invited to participate, 46 enrolled, and 25 graduated.^{xii} Mr. Pettit stated he would be more likely to hire graduates from these types of programs simply because finishing the program shows “a measure of reliability and consistency.” He is happy to invest in training a new worker if he can expect a reasonable term of service from the worker in return.^{xiii}

Unions also gain a potential recruiting ground for new skilled trades-workers in an era of declining union membership. According to 2011 U.S. Census data, only 928,000 construction and trades workers are unionized out of a total estimated workforce of 6,244,000, which equates to a rate of 14.9%.^{xiv}

How is BTPAP marketed and publicized?

BTPAP has a wide-ranging, multi-media approach, including continual updates on program developments to sponsors and supporters. BTPAP sought to create “a buzz” around the program by fully integrating social



media into their standard marketing strategy of newspaper, radio and television ads.^{xv}

Through its contacts in the Buffalo Building

Trades community, BTPAP encourages the trades to “speak the language” of the younger generations to “attract new talent.”^{xvi} The BTPAP webpage (www.btpap.com) and Facebook page (www.facebook.com/BTPAP) provide easily accessible information and a venue to post achievements and opportunities.

As well as marketing to potential program participants, BTPAP also provides “Stakeholder E-mails” to local policy-makers, building trades’ leaders, union representatives and social service organizations.^{xvii} By expanding the dialogue and engaging community partners, the program hopes to set firm roots to sustain future growth and community support.

How is BTPAP funded?

Funding for the pilot year was provided through a project-labor agreement in the Buffalo Schools Reconstruction Project. The PLA created a Pre-Apprenticeship Training and Education Fund with ten cents (\$0.10) from each labor hour. The initial funding has been nearly depleted, and BTPAP is currently



reviewing funding options to ensure that two full training programs can be run next year.^{xviii}



What programs does BTPAP include?

The program is an eight week course a^{xix} During this short period, the following activities and exercises cover a wide range of important skills and instructional goals:

- ❖ *Job Readiness Training* offers an overview of many of the construction trades and their requirements for employment and apprenticeship. Sessions over twelve separate days cover basic yet crucial skills including recognizing one's personal strengths and goals, networking, finding opportunities, completing employment applications, managing tough interview questions, and successfully "onboarding" after being hired.
- ❖ *Math Training* is begun by a proficiency test on the first day. Lectures, homework and testing sharpen the participants' understanding and command of construction related mathematics.
- ❖ *Guest Speakers* from local unions, construction firms and trades organizations present to the group throughout the program. These speakers provide encouragement and reinforce the curriculum's relevance to securing employment.
- ❖ *Hand-On Training* sessions provide direct exposure to select trades in a training environment. Representatives from sixteen local trades ran sessions with varying degrees of interactivity. Whether

hanging drywall, laying brick, building and joining walls, or working through mathematical issues prior to a plumbing installation, these experiences help students identify potential fields of interest, and pinpoint skills needing further development.

- ❖ *A Networking Workshop* held at the offices of LPCiminelli allowed students to interact with local business owners.
- ❖ *Job Placement Assistance* after graduation utilizes the market savvy and industry knowledge of the BTPAP team to transition graduates into Apprenticeship programs or long-term employment.

What are the pre-requisites for successful placement and steady employment in the building trades?



Different trade fields have different requirements such as clean driver's licenses, reliable transportation, high

school degrees, and certain technical proficiencies.^{xx} For example, plumbing requires knowledge of chemistry to understand what liquids or gasses can be run through particular pipes; as a result, the training and apprenticeship period can be as long as five years.^{xxi} In contrast, roofing has very few educational pre-requisites, outside of being able to read a tape measure, but will likely require a clean driver's license and possibly one's own transportation.^{xxii}

But the key to success in any trade, or any job for that matter, is reliability.^{xxiii} Punctuality and reliability are some of the habits that the BTPAP seeks to instill in its participants. For example, classroom doors are locked as soon as lessons begin; if late-comers seek entry, they are informed that failure to report to a job site on time might cause a foreman to send you home for the day without pay or end your apprenticeship.^{xxiv}

How does the BTPAP help fight poverty in Western New York?

“BTPAP’s primary objective is to seek out and provide training to the traditionally underserved communities, in particular minorities and women, to work in the Buffalo Building Trades.”^{xv} In the pilot year, 87.2% of the 143 program applicants lived in the City of Buffalo, which has by far the region’s highest poverty and unemployment rates.

This program provides an additional avenue to career employment while



also teaching valuable employment and life skills. Even if students do not choose to enter a construction trade, the resume writing workshops and computer job search training sessions will prove valuable in all future job searches. BTPAP is another tool in our community’s toolbox – carving out roads to gainful employment in the skilled trades.

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- ⁱ Telephonic interview with Tyra Johnson, Program Director at BTPAP, on Monday 26th March 2012. (“Johnson Interview”)
- ⁱⁱ Johnson Interview.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Each program maintains a fairly informational website. BTPAP-Buffalo: www.btpap.com; NSB-Chicago: www.newskillbuilders.org; NEW-New York: www.new-nyc.org; PAP-California: <http://www.buildingc3.com/doc.asp?id=2885>.
- ^{iv} Johnson Interview.
- ^v Telephonic interview with Timothy Pettit, owner TMP Home Improvement in Buffalo, on Saturday 24th March 2012. (“Pettit Interview”)
- ^{vi} Pettit Interview & Johnson Interview.
- ^{vii} By work season, he means the warm weather months during which most roofing and general home remodeling is contracted and performed.
- ^{viii} Pettit Interview.
- ^{ix} Johnson Interview.
- ^x BTPAP-Final Report 2011 at p. 2.
- ^{xi} Johnson Interview & Pettit Interview.
- ^{xii} BTPAP-Final Report 2011 at p. 27.
- ^{xiii} Due to the financial realities of many building trades, including insurance rates, many smaller firms rely almost exclusively on independent contractor labor. Firms, like TMP Home Improvement, pay their independent contractors hourly for the jobs they work. As there is no regular salary or benefits, the staff turn-over rate can be high.
- ^{xiv} U.S. Dept. of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics News Release, Union Members - 2011, USDL-12-0094, Released January 27, 2012, available at www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf. (“BLS News Release”)
- ^{xv} BTPAP-Final Report 2011 at p. 14-15.
- ^{xvi} BTPAP-Final Report 2011 at p. 14.
- ^{xvii} BTPAP-Final Report 2011 at p. 14.
- ^{xviii} Johnson Interview.
- ^{xix} BTPAP-Final Report 2011 at p. 20.
- ^{xx} BTPAP-Final Report 2011 at p. 7.
- ^{xxi} Johnson Report.
- ^{xxii} Pettit Interview.
- ^{xxiii} Johnson Interview & Pettit Interview.
- ^{xxiv} Johnson Interview.
- ^{xxv} BTPAP-Final Report 2011 at p. 1.

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