



## Construction Trades see diversity as key to future workforce

Like many industries, professional construction is facing a long-term labor shortage. It is estimated that as many as 500,000 new tradespeople will be needed in the U.S. over the next decade. Casting a wide net and actively recruiting from all corners is crucial for every industry that wants to survive into the coming decades.

Attracting “non-traditionals” – people who have not historically considered construction as a career – starts with focused outreach. In 2014, seven local trade unions, including the carpenters, banded together to create Building Union Diversity (BUD). This unique program allows participants to try their hand at different trades to see which is the best fit. Surveys have found that a main reason apprentices drop out of trade school is because the job is not what they imagined it would be.

Spending time with a profession before committing to joining allows beginners to try it on for size and take it for a spin. Using this approach, they get matched with a skill (carpentry, plumbing, electrical, etc.) that best fits their talents and aptitude.

Similar to the BUD program, Pre-Apprentice Tactical Training School (PATTS) was developed by the Mid-America Carpenters Regional Council to educate pre-apprentices – those who have not yet enrolled in the union – on the rigors of a career in the construction industry. PATTS teaches the basics of what is required of a first-term apprentice on day one of their new job.



Developed by the Mid-America Carpenters Regional Council, Pre-Apprentice Tactical Training School recruits “non-traditionals” who have never considered a career in the construction trades. (Submitted photo)

“I want to start my own carpentry business someday so I can hire my own union carpenters,” said Khadijah Bounds, a recent PATTS graduate. It’s an ambitious goal but one she is already on her way to achieving after completing the program that some have called “boot camp” for carpenters.

“PATTS covers how to measure, cut, pack lumber, stay flexible, hydrate... all the things they need to know,” said Ron Tierney, the Mid-America Carpenters Union’s St. Louis training director. “We practice these things repeatedly in a physically strenuous program so that when they hit their first real job they have the basics to be effective workers.”

The program simulates real construction sites, and while students are learning the ropes, the union is eliminating those not cut out for a career as a professional carpenter. “That way our contractors aren’t bringing people on board who won’t stick around. Also, the apprentices have less anxiety and more confidence their first day on the job,” said Tierney.

PATTS operates as a three-week program and was developed in collaboration between the Carpenters Union and its signatory contractors. The demand for quality apprentices in construction is high and the union believes that graduates of the program demonstrate

the grit and determination construction companies are looking for.

Recruits come from community and faith-based organizations, referrals from other union members and job placement centers. They are required to have reliable transportation, pass a drug test, arrive to class 15 minutes early each day, and maintain a positive attitude.

“I loved being in PATTS,” said Bishop Coleman, who graduated last year in one of the program’s first classes. “You learn skills you can use for a lifetime. You can use what you learn at work, of course, but also for yourself. If I want to build something I know how. You learn how to create something out of nothing.”

The transformation from inexperienced newbies to skilled apprentices took PATTS instructor Chris Adair by surprise.

“We spent four hours the first day just learning how to read a tape measure. I’m a third-generation carpenter, so this stuff is in my blood. It was shocking to see how little they know at first,” he said. “But now, to see how far they can come in only three weeks is incredible to watch.”

Bounds, who is now working as a union carpenter, calls PATTS the best decision of her life.

“It was challenging but you learn so much and it sets you up for a great career. It supports my family and gives my younger siblings something to look up to, proof that you can make it out of adversity.”

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