

TRAINING

Building Trades Seek Formal Changes to Apprenticeships

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Long-running conflicts over the merits and standards of apprenticeship programs between unions and open shop groups may be coming to a head.

The AFL-CIO's Building and Construction Trades Dept. has taken formal action, requesting that the Dept. of Labor establish specific graduation requirements by craft for construction apprenticeship programs. BCTD alleges that nonunion programs sponsored by the Associated Builders and Contractors have "startling failures in the standards and completion rates." The department issued a study of ABC programs in October 2003, highlighting the alleged flaws.

BCTD President Edward C. Sullivan further charges that the Labor Dept. is ignoring the growing problem, including what he calls "sham" programs that seek to take advantage of the apprenticeship wage break. "Any misuse of the apprenticeship system undermines the industry's future and potentially defrauds construction workers," Sullivan asserts.

Anita Drummond, ABC's director of legal and regulatory affairs, says the group plans to file its opposition to the unions' Petition for Rulemaking, which was delivered to Labor Secretary Elaine L. Chao late last month. Although Drummond agrees that some rule changes are necessary, she maintains that any proposed changes should first be submitted to the 30-member federal Advisory Committee on Apprenticeships, an ongoing panel representing labor, employers and the public that is crafting proposed changes for all industry apprenticeship programs.

Drummond claims that comparing the number of apprentice graduates with those that drop out in the first year is not an accurate measure. A better indicator would be to look at the percentage of each class that graduates. Drummond also believes that apprenticeship programs may not be "the most appropriate way to deliver training to workers."

Drummond notes the high dropout rate in both union and nonunion programs and says this stems from a variety of reasons. Many states offer a craft professional license after one year of on-the-job training, compared to apprenticeship programs that can last up to five years, she explains. Some workers "don't want to be locked into a lower wage rate and they want to leave a program and apply for their license," she says. Shorter programs with different levels to reach journey status may be more attractive to workers, she claims.



BATTLEGROUND Unions and ABC duke it out over graduation rates. (Photo by William G. Krizan for ENR)

Electrician Jobs on the Rise

The BLS predicts that the number of construction industry jobs could rise by 13% from 6.8 million in March of this year to 7.7 million by 2012. Electricians accounted for roughly 584,000 of those jobs in 2003, or 8.5%, and if you apply that percentage to the predictions for the number of construction jobs in 2012, That works out to about 654,500 electricians, or an increase of 70,500 positions.

Cont. from page 3 IEC: Building the Future

Because of the time required to move from establishment to approval by the Washington State Apprenticeship and Training Council, it may be as long as two years before these new programs are approved for apprenticeship, however, it is the goal of the IEC of Washington to begin teaching the curriculum as quickly as possible.

The Residential program will be a two year program and will provide the appropriate training both in the classroom and on the job to prepare an apprentice for superior quality residential field work. The VDV program will focus on the high-tech end of electrical work. This program will include specialties such as hospital care systems, security and alarms, networking, audio/video systems, and more. It is IEC's goal to provide BICSI certifications to all apprentices completing the program as part of the curriculum. The VDV program will be a three year program with both classroom and on-the-job training components.

In order to provide greater flexibility to apprentices in the Residential and VDV programs, the Construction Electrician (CE) program will be altered slightly to allow individuals who have completed either the Residential or VDV programs to not only transfer into the CE program, but carry their credited hours over as well. The details of this transition process have not been finalized yet, but will be an integral part of the overall development of apprenticeship through IEC of Washington.

IEC is now the only state-wide approved electrical apprenticeship program. Because it is approved in every county in Washington, contractors have more flexibility on the jobs they choose to bid on. Currently, IEC has more than 210 apprentices and more than 150 applicants from all areas of the state waiting to become apprentices. Through the professionalism and assistance of our contractors, the IEC of Washington apprentices are of the highest caliber and will be assets to contractors, future apprentices and the industry.