

# WCTF and Building Pathways: Supporting Women and Minorities in the Trades



Building Pathways participant Eulanda Sequeira operates a pipe threading machine during a field trip to the UA Pipefitters Local 537 apprenticeship training center.

**T**he current employment climate in Massachusetts is strong. With an unemployment rate of 4.4%, the Commonwealth's rate ranks lower than the national US average (MA Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, March 2016). However, we still have unemployed and underemployed workers across the state who struggle to find work. Hiring managers are still seeking to mitigate risk in making hiring decisions; they rely on relationships with trusted individuals and organizations to vouch for candidates. Job seekers that lack these relationships have difficulty finding work, despite their potential.

That's why Commonwealth Corporation, which administers the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund (WCTF) on behalf of the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development, invests WCTF funds in training and placement programs that build partnerships between businesses, training providers and community-based organizations.

These partnership programs provide a reliable source of trained employees for businesses who need them. In the building trades, registered apprenticeship programs are a trusted source of workers, but race/ethnic minorities and women have been under-represented in the construction trades. So in 2011, with WCTF funds, Building Pathways was formed and designed as a pre-apprenticeship program to "tap new talent to bring into the construction industry," says Executive Director Mary Vogel. "There is a booming [construction] market in Boston and an aging workforce. We need to support 45,000 construction jobs in Massachusetts in the next ten years."

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While there are jobs available, apprenticeship programs are especially competitive to enter. Jim O'Connell of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 103 shared that 1,300 individuals applied for entry in their current cycle. The 1,300 take an aptitude test and, O'Connell explains, "with that test, we cut the applicants down to approximately 300 to 400 applicants. We interview those 300 to 400 applicants, and this year, we hope to take north of 100 applicants." That's roughly 8% of the original pool. And often, says O'Connell, Building Pathways graduates make up approximately 8-10% of that group. Building Pathways does a "great job at helping identify good candidates."

There's no doubt that it is a competitive market. That's why Building Pathways, in addition to their mission of bringing more workers into the construction industry, focuses on creating a more inclusive and diverse industry. They work with their community-based partners such as the Boston Housing Authority and Action for Boston Community Development to encourage women and minorities to apply. Over the past 3 years, 86% of Building Pathways' participants were race/ethnic minorities; 45% were female; 83% were low-income



Building Pathways participants learn welding techniques at Pipefitters Local 537.

### Over the past 3 years, Building Pathways Participants were:



and 38% were receiving public assistance at the time of enrollment.

Building Pathways modeled its six-week training program to replicate industry norms. The pre-apprenticeship program combines occupational skills training and soft skills training with coordinated case management so that participants are able to surmount any barriers that might impede their ability to graduate and to successfully enter and complete an apprenticeship program. They lay the groundwork so participants experience what it's really like to work in the trades.

Vogel says trainees work similar hours, Monday-Friday from early in the morning until the afternoon. Building Pathways instructors and coaches have high expectations for participants and nurture a strong work ethic, punctuality, and positive attitudes. Yannick Murray, one of the original graduates from the program back in 2011, is now an apprentice with the IBEW at Sullivan & McLaughlin, New England's largest, single-source electrical and technologies contracting company. He says, "things I learned at Building Pathways still apply today in terms of showing up on time, doing good work, and having a good attitude. I had a good work ethic and

Building Pathways made it even better."

Building Pathways taps into key partners to ensure their pre-apprenticeship program teaches skills that employers are looking for. "Having many partners is critical," says Vogel, "we cannot do it alone."

And who are these partners? Vogel explains that Boston Building Trades and local building trades councils were integral in designing and getting Building Pathways off the ground. Building Pathways works with contractors and unions who agree to hire Building Pathways' graduates. Employers are interested in helping with outreach and recruitment because they want to make sure there is an influx of workers to their fields. Additionally, Vogel explains that a fundamental part of the training is to visit "various apprenticeship programs for hands-on learning and training and the employers are involved in the actual training." IBEW Local 103 actively participates in this process and is committed to supporting the program. Participants benefit from the on-the-job style training and employers have the opportunity to interact with the future workforce.

The relationship between Building Pathways and their partners is a win-win. Building Pathways knows that they will be able to place their hard-working participants in an apprenticeship program upon completion of the program. Employers like Sullivan & McLaughlin benefit because they know they are getting a cohort of well-trained employees from a trusted source. Brian Barton, Superintendent of Labor at Sullivan & McLaughlin, says, "Building Pathways has put a lot of hard work into finding great candidates and that's what



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Building Pathways’ program is designed to prepare participants for an apprenticeship program; but they don’t stop there. Vogel explains, “We have a very high graduation rate – 97% and improving over time. But that’s not enough. We want to make sure that these graduates (1) decide a construction career is what they want to do and (2) successfully enter an apprenticeship that is their first or second choice, and complete it. The apprenticeship is anywhere from 3-5 years, and that’s a long haul. We haven’t done our job if they haven’t completed the apprenticeship.”

Yannick Murray remembers Building Pathways being there long after he completed the six-week training program. He says, “They kept in touch after to see how I was doing in the field and at school. They continued to offer support even after I finished the program.” Yannick is one of the many examples of Building Pathways’ commitment to support their participants above and beyond employment skills. In partnership with their community-based partners, they help candidates work through any barriers they might face, and they ensure

candidates make the best career choice for their particular skill set, goals and interests.

Vogel explains, “we’re putting them on a path to a 30-40 year career so we want to make sure the trade they choose and the trade we think they’re fit for is right – we make a very informed decision about that.” A lead instructor and project coordinator team up with participants throughout the six weeks. Most participants target a trade even before they enter, but the “beauty of the program,” Vogel says, is that it exposes participants to all of the trades. Participants work with their lead instructor and project coordinator to find the best fit for them.

“The Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund supports partnerships that are comprehensive over the long term,” says Commonwealth Corporation President Nancy Snyder. “Partnerships include businesses that are hiring, educators who understand the skill requirements of the job, career coaches who can help individuals to build their personal network, and staff who can support individuals in all ways critical to finding and retaining a job and building a career.”

## In FY14 CommCorp awarded \$4.5 million in grants to 15 industry sector partnerships across the state. To date:



Note: placement activities will continue through the spring of 2016.