

Report explores Milwaukee construction workforce

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Milwaukee's construction sector is facing a challenging labor market, the Wisconsin Policy Forum reports.

In its latest report, the group says it uncovered a mixed picture for construction in the region. While some of the information they collected from industry leaders and other sources "suggest the workforce is stable and supported by a relatively robust pipeline," other findings "may reflect longer-term challenges" for certain trades and types of workers, they wrote.

The report shows the sector's labor market is strained, as unemployment is near historic lows while job openings are the highest they've been in more than two decades.

And though construction employment rose slightly during the pandemic, union members are "being stretched to work considerably more hours" than they were just 10 years ago.

Between 2012 and 2021, the number of active union workers in the region's construction sector rose 3.2 percent. Over the same period, the number of hours worked by these laborers increased 19.9 percent, based on a WPF check of Building Trades United Pension Trust Fund data. And half of the unions that responded to a WPF survey said they have fewer available workers now than before the pandemic.

Late last year, the number of construction apprentices in the region was the highest it had been in more than 20 years, according to preliminary Department of Workforce Development figures included in the report. That total reached around 3,040 in October, up from around 1,200 a decade earlier. Plus, WPF says most unions expect that total to grow in the coming years after it plateaued during the pandemic.

But at the same time, report authors found five unions in the area — glazers, tile setters, roofers, bricklayers and iron workers — saw their apprenticeship totals fall

by at least 17 percent in the past five years.

And unions representing roofers, painters and insulation professionals said they don't have enough people lined up for apprenticeships to replace the number of workers expected to retire in the next few years, according to the report.

WPF is calling for further efforts to improve gender and racial diversity among construction workers in Milwaukee, noting "limited progress" has been made on this front. And the group suggests changing the city's Residents Preference Program to require workers to periodically recertify.

The RPP program is meant to ensure a portion of jobs linked to projects supported by the city are filled by locals, and has been altered several times since it launched more than 30 years ago to "boost inclusion" in the workforce.

WPF says more than 8,700 workers have been certified through the program since 2012. But because their eligibility never expires, that makes it "impossible to estimate" how many are pursuing work in the local construction industry, according to WPF.

"City leaders may wish to require workers to recertify periodically to give employers and industry leaders a clearer understanding of the size of the available workforce and how it aligns with demand," report authors wrote. "If they do so, however, they should consider how to ensure that the recertification process does not lead to the loss of available workers."

See the report:

https://wispolicyforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/BuiltToLast_FullReport.pdf

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