

## Working with Labor Unions to Create a Workforce Pipeline

They say a company is only as good as the people it employs, which is why the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and State departments of transportation (DOTs) are looking toward labor unions to develop a successful workforce pipeline.

The most effective effort in the development of a workforce pipeline is a pre-apprenticeship program. An example of such a pipeline and relationship exists between the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) and the Laborers' International Union of North America (LiUNA).

Comprised of a half-million workers across the United States and Canada, LiUNA represents a skilled, experienced workforce in the construction and energy industries. This makes LiUNA a strong and effective partner for FHWA and MassDOT.

The brainchild of Tina Hooper, FHWA Civil Rights Specialist, the partnership took shape after Hooper observed shortcomings within the on-the-job-training (OJT) program as there was a lack of measurable outcomes. Hooper is intentional about creating sustainable good jobs and implementing long-term careers in highway construction. She knew this could only be accomplished through developing a partnership with labor unions. Hooper wanted to ensure OJT participants acquire benefits the unions are well-suited to provide: training, safety, camaraderie, and long-term careers in transportation.

"We want the trainees to be safe," Hooper says. "That's the number one thing: safety on the job. The unions can provide the training that ensures this safety."

LiUNA's program involves six weeks of training that covers areas such as safety, specialties, and career development. Before the participants even arrive at the facility, they are mandated to complete 40 hours of online work to prepare them for on-site training.

"They get the [Occupational Safety and Health Administration] OSHA certification online. They get a basic introductory math class. They get a history of LiUNA class. They come with all this knowledge on the first day," explains Jay Sabitoni, training director at LiUNA.

In addition to this training, Hooper sought to ensure career longevity.

"We invest a significant amount of time, money, and energy into our OJT participants, but we can't account for their whereabouts after the training hours are completed," Hooper says. "We don't know for sure whether the participants are continuing with a career in construction. It's proven that our OJT participants can have a good-paying career in construction with a labor union."

"There's no guarantee that they will make it, but we think it's a good upfront investment," Sabitoni explains. "We know that down the line, we'll get those quality workers who last for years. We know it's money well spent upfront."

With this longevity comes a sense of belonging, a feeling unique to unions and one that offers safety benefits, too. After speaking with union members during construction site visits, Hooper learned how grateful they are to be part of a sisterhood/brotherhood organization.

“The graduates of the program are part of a family, and that’s what you need on the job, especially in something as dangerous as highway construction,” Hooper says. “Someone is looking out for you. I felt our OJT participants didn’t have that level of camaraderie.”

Unlike typical apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships do not require prior experience, and for this reason, they help serve as career-interest exploration. Individuals without any construction work experience can apply for pre-apprenticeships. This helps separate those candidates who are not suited to the level of effort involved with working in the highway construction industry.

“When our candidates come through a program this extensive, they’re ready for the work,” Hooper comments. “They’re committed to the work, and that creates sustainable employment.”

MassDOT’s pre-apprenticeship program will focus on increasing equity and economic vitality for trainees particularly women and minorities. Hooper emphasizes the importance of equal opportunity. A successful career in highway construction triggers a positive economic effect on the individual but also provides financial security for their families.

“It’s easy for us because we are a diverse union,” says Scott Gustafson, Director of Organizing New England Region at LiUNA. “If a government agency has policies that they need to meet, we’re able to do that through our recruitment and training programs.”

The first cohort will have 20 participants. While Hooper does not expect a 100 percent graduation rate, she says she’ll be “really happy” with 16 graduates. “The real test will be when they are actually on the job.”

From there, as the workforce development program progresses, Hooper hopes to expand relationships with like-minded organizations like other unions, Helmets to Hardhats, youth outreach programs, and others.

“I’m just really excited that we have this opportunity and that LiUNA is ready, willing, and able to come to the table,” Hooper says.

For more information on the MassDOT OJT program, visit <https://www.mass.gov/on-the-job-training-ojt>.

For more information on LiUNA, visit <https://www.liuna.org/>.

To learn about FHWA’s Strategic Workforce Development initiative and how you can identify, train, place and retain qualified individuals into highway construction jobs, contact Chrisy Carrier at [Christina.Carrier@dot.gov](mailto:Christina.Carrier@dot.gov).