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Program to address need for construction workers

By BRANDON STONE @Brandon_SVH Sep 13, 2017

In response to a shortage of skilled construction workers in the region, the Northwest Workforce Council will host a free retraining program for displaced workers.

The program will be taught by Apprenticeship and Non-Traditional Employment for Women (ANEW), a nonprofit that helps prepare women and minorities for work in fields where they are underrepresented, such as construction.

“There are so many opportunities in construction that we don’t think about,” said Karen Dove, executive director of the nonprofit.

The four-week program will be hosted at the WorkSource Skagit office in Mount Vernon. ANEW is adapting the program from one it has run for 36 years in the King County area.

The program, which will start Oct. 23, is open to those who are unemployed and are unlikely to return to their fields, according to the Northwest Workforce Council.

The 20 to 25 participants in the program will learn about hand tools, math skills, and the basics of several skilled construction trades.

Most importantly, Dove said, ANEW will use its connections with local apprenticeship programs to help connect participants to apprenticeship opportunities.

“They know the people who come out of our program are ready to learn,” she said.

The program is funded by the Northwest Workforce Council, a federally funded organization that works with private and public partners to facilitate workforce development in Skagit, Whatcom, Island and San Juan counties.

About one in three construction jobs in Skagit County — or about 1,400 positions — were lost during the recession, according to Anneliese Vance-Sherman, regional economist with the state Employment Security Department.

And while 900 jobs were added from July 2016 to July 2017, the construction industry took longer to bounce back than other industries.

“Construction dragged behind substantially,” Vance-Sherman said, adding that there was near zero growth from 2008 to 2012.

“There is definitely no skilled labor out there,” said Paul Woodmansee, president of BYK Construction.

“No one is out there ... applying who is ready to go.”

Woodmansee said his company has had to turn down work because it, and its subcontractors, don’t have enough laborers to do the work.

The company often doesn't bid on remodels or lower cost single-family home projects because the profit margin isn't there to justify taking the jobs given the limited pool of skilled workers, he said.

With five more carpenters on staff, Woodmansee said his company would be able to work at full capacity.

According to Vance-Sherman, the recession and its aftermath was particularly tough on the construction field's skilled laborers, such as carpenters.

Many of these workers tried to wait out the recession, but ended up taking early retirement or changed careers, she said.

Meanwhile, very few entered the field, meaning there was no one to train for these mid-level positions.

"The pipeline dried up," she said.

Vance-Sherman said a program to train workers so they're ready to learn the skills required for mid-level jobs would aid construction companies looking for workers to help keep up with the increasing demand for housing in the county.

Tammie O'Dell, a board member with the Workforce Development Council and a 42-year veteran of the construction industry, said it is a field in need of more women and minorities.

"For one thing, these are living-wage jobs with health care and pensions," she said, something she said should be attractive to women, specifically single mothers, when compared to other entry-level jobs.

While the industry is largely male, she said the field is more welcoming to women than it has been in the past.

"Attitudes have changed over the years," she said. "They see the benefits of a more diverse workforce."

WorkSource Skagit is hosting informational sessions for those interested in applying. More information is available by contacting Catherine Kennedy at 360-416-3516 or at ckennedy@workforcenorthwest.org.

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