

## Building Futures

After year-long pilot program, Building Futures charts its own future

Building Futures, in partnership with The Providence Plan and BuildRI, was launched just over a year ago to help the construction industry meet its current and future labor needs, while also creating career opportunities for low-income adults from the state's urban communities. With lessons learned from that pilot program, and with the recommendations of a skills gap analysis that Building Futures commissioned (see story below), the initiative is now poised to play an even stronger and more visible role within the industry.

By any measure, the first year was a success. With little in the way of formal recruitment, Building Futures received 154 completed applications for the program, twice the initial goal. Despite a downturn in the construction industry, 20 of those candidates have been placed in union apprenticeships and are fully employed. Another seven have successfully completed their training and are awaiting placement.

In the short time since its inception, Building Futures has assembled an impressive advisory council representing all facets of the construction industry, educational community and financial sector. It has also found three key partners among construction industry employers – Blue Cross Blue Shield, Brown University and the City of Providence. All three have made a commitment to hiring Building Futures placements as apprentices in their construction projects. According to Blue Cross Blue Shield, nine of the workers on its new building downtown have come through Building Futures.

During the course of the year it became apparent, however, that some candidates need more training and preparation than Building Futures had initially anticipated to bridge the skill gap. Pre-employment activities are now being expanded to include both hard- and soft-skills training. "Soft skills" are the very necessary life skills that a worker must have to retain employment – punctuality, reliability, motivation, financial management, finding dependable child care, etc. As a result of its expanded focus on training, Building Futures has been certified as a pre-apprenticeship program by the Rhode Island State Apprenticeship Council.

Building Futures also offers GED preparation for those lacking a high school credential, a necessary requirement to enter apprenticeship programs. Another barrier to employment, a valid driver's license and reliable transportation, is a huge issue, according to Building Futures Director Andrew Cortes. In Rhode Island, where a license can be suspended for an unmet financial obligation, many of the candidates have no way of getting to construction sites not accessible by public transportation. Building Futures is exploring solutions, including potentially proposing legislation for a "limited-use license" that would be valid only for driving to and from work. "If they can't work, they can't repay that money," Andrew notes.

*Other future goals include:*

- Marketing apprenticeships and the construction industry as an appealing career option to young adults.
- Measuring the success of its training program through verified data provided by apprenticeship sponsors.
- Improving the completion rate of registered apprenticeships. (The estimated dropout rate within construction apprenticeships is about 20 to 30 percent.)
- Increasing the number of employers contributing to training the future workforce by hiring apprentices.