

Groups toil to draw more females into trades, construction

By Paula J. Owen

WORCESTER – As the construction industry rebounds from the last recession, creating a shortage of skilled tradespeople, efforts are underway to draw more women into the historically male-dominated field.

Unions, government, companies and training organizations are seeking and encouraging women to choose the trades.



Kaela Goddard, left, and Creunice "Cleo" Dacosta at a work site beneath Interstate 190 in Worcester. [T&G Staff/Christine Peterson]

“There is a long history of women not welcome on construction sites that stems from a perception of women not being physically able to do the work, but that perception has eroded in many physically demanding industries,” said Lisa J. Clauson, head of strategic partnerships for the New England Carpenters labor management program. “The military is a prime example, and over time, it is eroding in the construction field, but it is a slow process.”

The percentage of women construction-site workers in the United States has hovered below 3 percent for decades, with women only making up 2.6 percent of workers in construction and extraction occupations, according to state Attorney General Maura Healey’s office.

That means that of the 7.6 million construction workers, only about 206,000 are women. White, non-Hispanic women make up 2 percent of workers. African-American women make up only 0.2 percent, and Native American women just 0.1 percent.

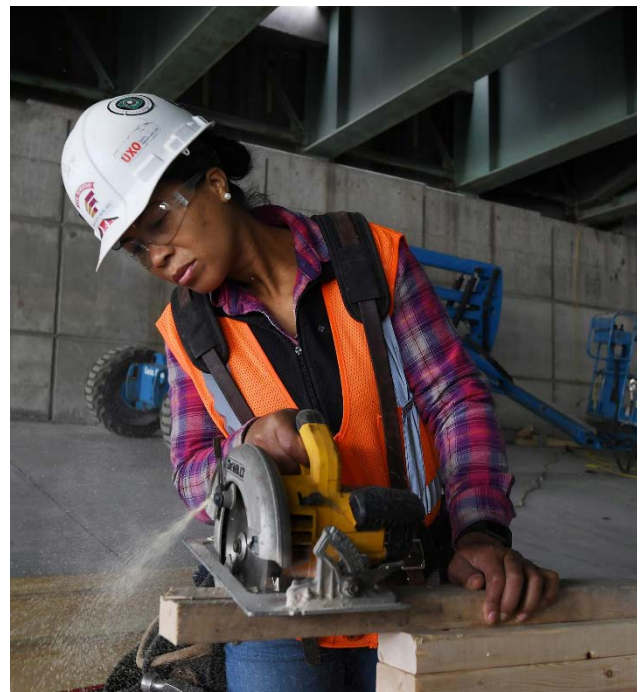
Ms. Clauson is in charge of recruiting women to work on construction sites throughout New England. In Massachusetts, the effort began under the administration of former Gov. Deval Patrick, Ms. Clauson said, with goals set requiring all contractors to hire at least 6.9 percent women and at least 15.3 percent people of color, including at the Wynn casino in Everett and the MGM Springfield casino. Both are under construction. MGM, Ms. Clauson said, is exceeding those goals, with enforcement key to the effort.

To find women who may find construction appealing, Ms. Clauson meets with people in the community and at organizations; students, particularly those in vocational, nontraditional, hands-on programs; people in the building and automotive trades; military veterans; and women who are considering leaving the farming community.

She also partners with the Worcester- and Springfield-based carpenters unions' 1,600 members and more than 100 staff members to create an alliance with organizations to figure out ways of recruiting more women and people of color.

In addition, there is a campaign to encourage more private colleges to hire more diverse construction crews, she said.

“Through word-of-mouth and talking to (union) members, we identify who is interested,” she said. “Through outreach with veterans’ organizations, we’ve found and recruited women veterans leaving the military and looking for new careers, and recruited women in farming work who like to work outdoors and work with their hands and see something for the work they have done.”



Creunice "Cleo" DaCosta went into construction through an apprenticeship program.

[T&G Staff/Christine Peterson]

In the case of farming and other fields, the hours and benefits are better in construction, she said. Also, some women who work in light manufacturing and are used to physically demanding work are attracted to the wages and benefits, she said. Wages for members of Local 107, which represents workers in Worcester County, are \$38.52 per hour for journey-level skilled construction workers and \$19.26 per hour for an apprentice with no experience. Benefits include health insurance, pensions, annuities and training.

Apprentices train on the job for four years and attend free, one-week training sessions at a center in Millbury every three months while receiving regular wage increases.

“We are looking for people who are physically able to do the work and looking for people who are able to build a career,” Ms. Clauson said. “We invest in training and provide free accommodations (during training). We want to make sure people are serious about becoming a long-term, skilled carpenter, not just for a year or two.”

Creunice “Cleo” L. DaCosta, 42, who moved to the United States from Brazil 20 years ago, completed the apprenticeship program and has worked in the construction field for 12 years. She previously worked in multiple fields, including housekeeping, landscaping and manufacturing.

Self-described as an independent, single woman, she said construction is a way to pay the bills and live a better life the “same way any guy does who goes to the jobsite to earn a paycheck.”

“I love to work outside,” Ms. DaCosta said. “I’m an outdoor person and work with my hands. I have family in Brazil who work on the farm or in construction. My grandfather was a cabinetmaker.”

After losing her job in a factory and seeing multiple advertisements for companies looking for carpenters, she said, she decided to complete the four-year apprenticeship. She is the only woman in her family working in construction, she said, and her mother brags about it to the rest of the family in Brazil.

“It is awesome,” she said. “I actually love what I do. I’m not bored, because I go to different jobsites, and I feel good when I look back and drive around the work sites and say, ‘Hey, I worked there,’ when I show my nieces and nephews.”

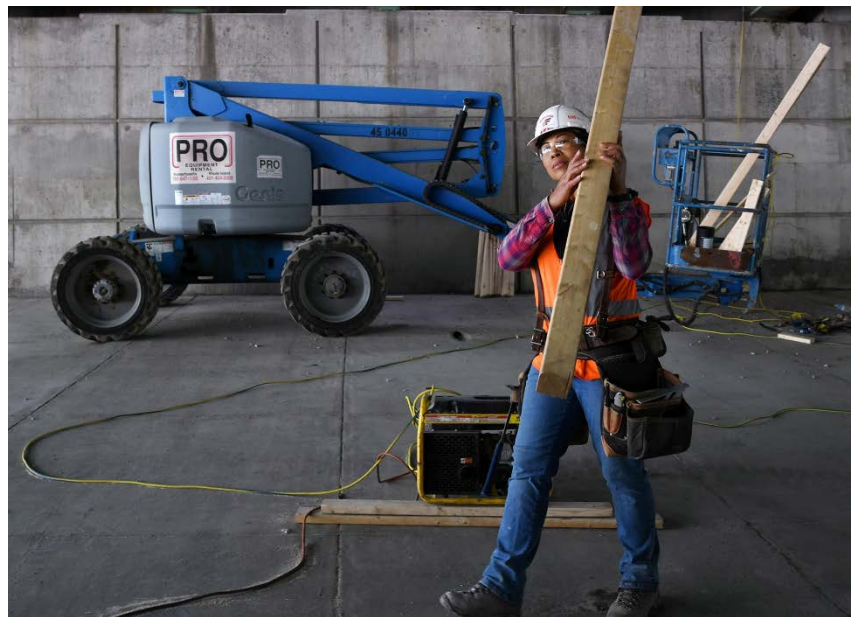
More women are entering the field than when she started 12 years ago, she said. It wasn’t easy proving she could work just as hard as the guys, she said, at times dealing with men trying to intimidate or sexually harass her.

“We do face a lot of sexual harassment in this trade, but it is the same as any other job or trade,” she said. “We got to report it to the foreman and business agent, because the union is here for us and treat us equal ... We just have to speak up and make it so other women do not have to deal with it. We can do the job same as the guys can do, and just have to put our mind into it and stay strong and tough.”

As part of Ms. Healey’s efforts to advance economic opportunities for Massachusetts residents, her office established a grant program aimed at women, minority workers and small-business owners in the public construction industry.

The one-year grant program that begins June 1 will award \$90,000 in funding to eligible applicants through apprenticeship programs, job training, diversity and inclusion training, and support and outreach programs.

“Women and people of color continue to face barriers in the workforce and to lack full access to jobs that pay a living wage,” Ms. Healey said. “Increasing underrepresented sectors of the workforce in nontraditional fields like construction will improve living standards for more working people in Massachusetts. This is vital to the economic security of families and to the overall health of our communities.”



Creunice "Cleo" Dacosta works beneath Interstate 190 in Worcester. [T&G Staff/Christine Peterson]

Construction companies are also investing more in women.

Consigli Construction Co. of Milford committed \$20,000 to establishing a new “Women at Wentworth” scholarship fund at Wentworth Institute of Technology.

The scholarship will begin in the 2017-2018 academic year and be awarded to female students with high academic achievements during their first two years at the institute and demonstrated leadership skills.

“Women historically have been underrepresented in STEM careers such as engineering and construction,” Consigli President Matthew Consigli said. “Those of us who are leaders in these fields have both an interest and an obligation to inspire women to choose STEM careers and support them along the way.”

Not all women will take to trades jobs.

Kelsey A. Lamoureux, program director of the Worcester Jobs Fund, coordinates short-term job training programs and job-related services for local residents. One is the Worcester Building Pathways pre-apprenticeship program, an eight-week, full-time program funded with state and federal money that offers hands-on training and teaches how to read blueprints and do “construction” math.

Classes are capped at 10 students, with a target of at least half being women. Though they reach that target for enrollment, not all the women graduate, Ms. Lamoureux said.

“A lot of women don’t understand the building trades, and when they learn more about it, some are not able to work the hours, because it is difficult to get child care at 5 or 6 a.m. to get out to the work site. That’s the biggest hurdle,” she said.

Another hurdle, she said, is many have always been told “girls don’t do that.”

“We find many women laugh because they don’t think it is a viable opportunity, yet so many women we work with have experience in the health care industry and are involved with heavy lifting and are physically capable of lifting large amounts of weight,” she said. “They just never thought about lifting large amounts of weight on a construction site.”