



Business

Building Futures recruits the poor into construction jobs

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Providence Mayor David N. Cicilline, with representatives from several builders' unions, speaks on the 32nd floor of the new Westin tower. They were celebrating a new training program for the construction industries.

The Providence Journal / Andrew Dickerman

This story of statewide interest originally appeared in a local news section.

PROVIDENCE — Varsana Sihavong had bounced from dead-end job to dead-end job in his 26 years until he heard about Building Futures from a friend who was working on the new Westin Providence tower.

In August, he joined the pilot program, a pre-apprenticeship sponsored largely by the state's construction unions. At the end of the month, the Smith Hill native is poised to become one of its first graduates, assuming he passes his placement exam for the electrician's union apprenticeship program.

"Before Building Futures came into existence, I had no future," Sihavong said. "Opportunities didn't present themselves to kids like me."

The nonprofit Building Futures takes impoverished men and women, most in their late teens and early 20s, and works to direct them toward a job in the construction industry. After conducting an assessment of where their needs lie, Building Futures helps them secure driver's licenses, high school equivalency diplomas and childcare, if needed. Once those basic needs are met, the participants are enrolled in classes in safety, job rights and labor history, and tutored for the union apprenticeship exams. If they pass, they can enter the trade programs.

"There aren't enough programs out there like this that focus on troubled youth. Thanks to Building Futures, I now have hope for a successful career," Sihavong said.

The program, which began in June, is a partnership among the unions, the city, the state, YouthBuild Providence, the Providence Plan and nonprofits such as the United Way. On Wednesday, those partners assembled on the 32nd floor of the new Westin tower to celebrate the successful first five months of the program.

"We've been seeing that too many working families are doing everything right and still getting left behind," Mayor David N. Cicilline said. "Building Futures is one of many initiatives designed to create real employment opportunities for individuals to help them pursue the American dream."

The program also pulls directly from the city's First Source list, which gives preferential status to Providence residents to work on projects in the city.

Andrew Cortes, director of YouthBuild and a member of the City Plan Commission, said the program has enrolled 22 students and has placed 6 in construction jobs, with 4 about to be placed. A total of 18 were pulled off the First Source list.

Michael Sabatoni, president of the Rhode Island Building Trades, said that as the union work force ages, such programs are needed to replenish the ranks during the city's continued building boom. Even better, he said, is that the program pulls from city residents.

"What is particularly gratifying is that under this initiative, we will be recruiting our future members from urban areas such as the city of Providence," Sabatoni said.

The program is in flux as it emerges from its pilot status, but Cortes said the goal is to eventually enroll 30 students at a time. Depending on how much assistance a student needs, completing the program can take a month to six months or more.

Eric Anderson, executive director of the Associated General Contractors of Rhode Island, had his own way of describing the program's rigor: "It's like a pre-apprenticeship boot camp," he said.

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