

## **Interview: Michael Sabitoni**

This month we talk with Michael Sabitoni, who has long been known throughout the state as a strong advocate for unionized labor. That same passion is now seen in his work for Building Futures, an initiative in which The Providence Plan is a key partner.

### **A union leader explains his enthusiasm for Building Futures**

*Sabitoni, who serves as president of the R.I. Building and Construction Trades Council and as business manager of Laborers Local 271, sits on the Building Futures Advisory Council. Building Futures, which got under way just over a year ago, helps low-income urban residents secure placements in union apprenticeship programs. It also seeks to make systemic change in the construction industry that would give people of color greater access into the field and help replenish an aging workforce.*

*In a recent interview, Sabitoni talked about Building Futures and the value of its mission.*

### **Q: Why is Building Futures so important to the unions and the construction industry?**

A: First of all, the training provided by the trade organizations is a real investment and it's what separates us from the others. It's why we have the stability and structure that we do. Building Futures helps candidates remove some of life's extenuating obstacles – such as child care, transportation, etc. – that can hinder an apprenticeship.

Second, the majority of our unions started in the urban areas. Building Futures is a way of getting back to our roots by recruiting from the urban centers.

Third, it's a way of helping the labor movement grow into the 21st century by increasing the number of minorities in the industry. This will help us meet the future employment demands of employers and developers. All the labor reports show a growing need for skilled laborers. Many in the current workforce are nearing retirement.

### **In its pilot year, Building Futures aims to place about 30 candidates in union apprenticeships. Two have been placed in your union. How is that working out?**

It's working out great, both for the young men involved and for us. One of them is working on the Dunkin Donuts' Center downtown, and the other is on the renovation project at Brown University's J. Walter Wilson building.

### **As a member of the Building Futures Advisory Council, what are some of your goals?**

We need to make developers and employers aware of what unions do in terms of training, etc. There's a big difference between "best cost" and "best value." Through Build RI and Building Futures, that's the message we're trying to get across.

We also want to encourage developers to employ a certain percentage of urban apprentices at every construction site and to see the value in developing a trained workforce for the future. We've gotten that commitment for three projects taking place now – Capital Cove, the new Blue Cross Blue Shield headquarters, and the J. Walter Wilson building at Brown.



Michael Sabitoni speaking at a press event for Building Futures last fall

Finally, I'd like to say that Mayor David Cicilline has given us great leadership and support. He has listed Building Futures as one of his job initiative programs and has adopted the language of Building Futures in contracts for school construction. [The City now has a requirement that 15 percent of the workforce on all school construction must be apprentices who live in Providence.] We really appreciate his help in moving this down the field.