

what's working

recruiting women
into apprenticeships



Leah Rambo
Training Fund Administrator
and Director of Training,
Sheet Metal Air, Rail and
Transportation (SMART)
Workers' Local Union 28,
Jamaica, New York

by | **Kathy Bergstrom, CEBS**

Working in construction was the last thing on Kandice Rogers' mind when she graduated from college in 2008.

"That never was something that I thought I could do or even thought was possible for women," she recalled.

Rogers had earned a bachelor's degree in architecture, but the Great Recession was just starting and job opportunities were scarce. Her best friend's father was a sheet metal worker and told her that his employer was looking for someone who could coordinate design work between building trades. She got the job, and a year and a half later the company owner suggested she apply to become an apprentice in the Apprenticeship School of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation (SMART) Workers' Local Union 28 in New York.

The apprenticeship program was seeking to boost the number of female apprentices. Rogers completed the five-year program three years ago and now works as a sketcher and detailer for a sheet metal company in Bethpage, Long Island, New York.

More women should follow the apprenticeship path, she said. "The apprenticeship program is a great option for anybody—male or female—because it's teaching you a craft," she said. "I encourage people to give it a try. You never know what you can do until you actually do it."

Rogers is just one of the women Local 28 has successfully recruited and retained over the last several years. Through targeted recruiting, use of preapprenticeship programs, and a focus on consistent apprentice monitoring and evaluation, the Local 28 apprenticeship program has increased the percentage of female apprentices from 3% in 2011 to 14% in 2019.

Strategies for Success

"When I came into the trades, there were very few women, and no one really saw an issue with

that," said Leah Rambo, Local 28 training fund administrator and director of training. When Rambo started in 1988, women were often gawked at and sometimes harassed on jobsites, she added. "I always felt that there would be less of that if there were more women."

The Local 28 Joint Apprenticeship Committee (JAC) has had problems in the past with race and national origin discrimination, but within the apprenticeship program it now has 70% participation from minorities. However, the percentage of women remained low.

Rambo got her chance to bring about change when she became apprenticeship director in 2011. She was deliberate about her approach in discussing the issue with JAC trustees—She focused on



The Apprenticeship School of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation (SMART) Workers' Local Union 28 in New York has successfully recruited and retained an increasing number of female apprentices over the last nine years.

improving the quality of apprentices overall and making sure that every apprentice was trained equitably with the same monitoring and training.

To improve the quality of apprentices, Rambo advocated for working with direct-entry programs, including Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW), Helmets to Hardhats, Opportunities Long Island and the Edward J. Malloy Initiative for Construction Skills. These programs introduce people to the trades and have extensive approval processes.

Graduates of these programs can take the apprenticeship exam, which otherwise is offered by lottery and is very competitive. Typically 2,000 people apply for only 75-125 available positions annually. Because the direct-entry programs are traditionally very diverse, it leads to a diverse group taking the test, increasing the chance that selected apprentices will be women or minorities.

Rambo also works with other groups and has developed close relationships with New York City career and technical education (CTE) high schools.

But the effort didn't stop with recruitment. "After we started getting more women, my job was to ensure that they had fair training," Rambo said.

The Department of Labor requires apprenticeship programs to regularly evaluate all apprentices, and Rambo makes sure that those rules are followed and applied equally for men and women. By regularly evaluating apprentices, programs not only keep track



Welding is one of the skills SMART apprentices learn.

of their progress but also whether they are receiving training in all of the tasks so they are gaining the skill sets that they need, she said.

These evaluations ensure that every apprentice—regardless of gender—has received the same training and can be successful on the job. The union refers apprentices for jobs based on their position on a list that is strictly monitored, removing the likelihood that a woman will be passed over for a referral.

Relationships Are Key to Retention

The school also has an informal mentoring network for women. When a new class of apprentices starts, Rambo gathers all of the new female apprentices, introduces them to the existing

female students and encourages them to speak freely with one another. The higher term apprentices tell the women what to expect from the program, what it's like working on a jobsite, and how to handle discrimination or harassment.

New female apprentices are grouped together in classes whenever possible so that they have an automatic support system and don't feel alone. "You have the support, which is helpful, and it changes the tone of the class when you have more than one woman," Rambo explained.

Every instructor in the program must complete sexual harassment and diversity training, and complaints of sexual harassment are investigated immediately, Rambo said. "We are very open about issues that we've had in the past, and we set a very clear tone of



The percentage of women in the Local 28 apprenticeship program increased to 14% in 2019.

what we expect. There is zero tolerance here at the apprenticeship school, and everyone knows that.”

Contractors have been told that they are responsible for policing their jobsites and their employees.

The retention strategies have made a difference, Rambo said. In 2011, only 1% of journeymen were women, and that percentage has increased to 5%.

After the initial success, however, “we took our eye off the prize,” Rambo admitted. The percentage of female apprentices climbed to 10% in 2012 but then dropped to 7% in 2013.

Rambo said she had stopped the targeted recruiting, so she picked it back up again. In addition to continuing her relationships with the direct-entry programs and the technical high schools, she expanded the recruiting net to women’s organizations, gyms and sports teams. She also encourages women who are apprentices to refer their friends.

She made sure that applications include a statement that women, minorities and veterans are encouraged to apply. Re-

cruitment “has to be intentional. That was my lesson—that we’re not at the point yet where word of mouth will do it,” she noted.

Changing Mind-Sets

One of the challenges in recruiting women is that they may not think that they are capable of succeeding in a job in the trades. “You’re never asked as a little girl, ‘Why don’t you become a construction worker?’” Rambo said, adding that fewer schools have shop classes and that girls aren’t pushed by their guidance counselors or parents toward technical careers.

She makes sure to have women who work in the trades with her when she makes recruiting visits to schools and organizations so women and girls can see “different types of women being successful.”

Many contractors also needed a new perspective. Initially some employers balked when they were assigned a female ap-

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prentice, but Rambo noticed that those objections eventually stopped as they started to see women being successful.

Previously they may have telegraphed their preference for a man by saying they needed someone “strong.” If the next woman on the list is strong, she gets sent to the job. “The contractors are losing their biases and not having those same preconceived notions,” Rambo said.

Want Them, Get Them, Keep Them

Apprenticeship programs that want to increase the number of female apprentices have to “want them, get them, keep them,” Rambo advised. “You have to want to make things different and want to make change. You can’t say that it can’t be done.”

That requires tracking first. Programs should find out how many women they have and put measures in place to track recruitment and retention. They should talk to women in the program and find out whether there are problems with recruitment, retention or both.

Programs can look to resources like Chicago Women in the Trades for help with recruiting strategies. One easy step is to include pictures of women working in the trades in slide presentations, and Rambo stressed that a woman should always be part of a recruiting visit.

Programs that are not able to retain the women they recruit likely need to work on culture. “You have to systematically make sure you are training them the same way, evaluating the same way, and providing the same learning and working opportunities,” Rambo said.

It comes down to creating a professional atmosphere that makes the workplace better for everyone, not just women, she noted.

“It doesn’t take rocket science to do it, but it does take a very intentional effort to make a change. It won’t happen on its own. Not yet.”



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