

Mississippi Business Journal

Non-traditional employment opportunities open doors

March 13, 2006

By Becky Gilette

Working at a fast food restaurant is fast-paced, stressful and, most importantly from the bottom line perspective for women, it doesn't pay enough to sustain a family. The same is true of many other traditional women's jobs such as retail sales. More often than not, it isn't possible to make enough to pay the bills when you have children to support.

What can be done about it? One effort launched on the Mississippi Gulf Coast recently with partners from around the country is encouraging women to get employment in non-traditional fields.

"The idea and timing for this particular project was sparked by the fact that there are so many construction-related jobs out there women could get trained for to take part in helping rebuild the Gulf Coast," said Carol Burnett, executive director of Moore Community House, an organization in Biloxi dedicated to providing child care and other services for low-income families. "I think everyone agrees this is an ideal time to make better job opportunities available for women along the Gulf Coast. The families we work with at Moore Community House are single-parent families that really need the opportunity to increase earnings to better support their families. This is a great chance for us to put something together to benefit families by increasing job opportunities for women."

In late February, a number of national advisory groups including **Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW)** and Tradeswomen Now and Tomorrow traveled to Gulfport to meet with local groups who want to encourage training and placement of women in non-traditional jobs.

Burnett, who is also chair of the Mississippi Women's Commission, said the workshop grew out of the interest from groups outside of the state in helping the people of the Gulf Coast recover from Katrina.

"The organizations outside of Mississippi who are willing to help, and organizations from here inside the state, agree this is something that would be a valuable

contribution," Burnett said. "Some of the people from organizations outside of Mississippi have experience encouraging women to pursue a number of different kinds of non-traditional jobs, not just construction. Thirty-five states have similar programs to encourage women in non-traditional fields. Because of the environment after Katrina and the opportunities in construction, that is where the focus is right now. It could expand later to having women consider all types of job opportunities that might offer them higher wages."

Burnett said it will take time, money and planning to put the effort together. To get it started, they wanted to hear from leaders of groups elsewhere in the country that have had success in the arena.

"It was wonderful to have experts from across the country come to the Mississippi Gulf Coast and share some of their success stories with us so we are able to take the best practices in each case and see how that can be turned into programs that will work best in Mississippi," said Jolie Spiers Machado, program officer with Enterprise Corporation of the Delta/HOPE Community Credit Union. "Construction is going to be one of the major employers on Mississippi Gulf Coast for next several years. That is what the experts are saying.

All you have to do is look around and see how much building is going on to feel confident that is a viable industry that women should be a part of."

Training is going to be one of the most important components of any effort to place women in construction jobs. But the first hurdle is selling them on the idea of working in construction.

"I don't think many little girls dream of becoming a backhoe operator when they grow up," Machado said. "But why not? These are well paying jobs with a great deal of opportunity. It is not all about being up on a roof. Women can find success in a variety of different positions from being heavy equipment operators,

painters or electricians and even supervisors. Women are very agile. They have a great deal of manual dexterity and good critical thinking skills. So it makes sense they would be adept at mastering construction jobs. They already have the skills that are needed in many trade industry professions, and they don't even know it."

Machado predicts that women who participate in this program and gain some construction skills - and their employers - are going to be surprised at the level of competency that emerges.

There has been a shortage of construction labor in Mississippi and elsewhere for years now. It isn't something that just developed after Katrina. Many skilled construction workers are retiring, and this type of labor hasn't been a big seller with the Pac Man generation.

Machado believes construction will continue to be a good field for women even after the Katrina rebuilding.

"I hope in the future there are going to be more doors open for women to do construction work even after Katrina rebuilding is over," Machado said. "It is not just a quick fix. The intent is to train women to help with immediate need the Mississippi Gulf Coast has for skilled labor. But it is also going to continue to be a viable career path for women in the future."

The participants from the groups such as WOW, West Virginia Women Work and the Idaho State University (ISU) Boise Center got to see some of the Katrina devastation first hand during their visit to the area.

"Everyone who has lived through this disaster has said you can't understand or believe it until you see it in person," Machado said. "With our guests from out of town, this hit home for them. They were aware from what we said and what they had seen in the media that there was a lot of damage here. But until they saw it themselves, they couldn't quite comprehend the level of disaster we are dealing with. Once they saw it, it made them even more committed to helping. Everyone who left had a great desire to continue to help with our program."

Burnett said the next step is seeking a planning grant to hire a staff member to put together a program. Local representatives from the Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College are involved in the effort, and the junior colleges currently provide training in a number of different construction trades. Right now there is a free, four-week construction work training course that is offered on the Coast to help train people to help with

the rebuilding efforts.

One of the first things that needs to be done is sell the idea to women.

"Many of the representatives from groups who came in from out of state commented about the fact that since women here haven't been encouraged and supported to pursue these opportunities, they may need some targeted outreach and encouragement," Burnett said. "It is also important for women to be provided child care support services, both to allow them to take advantage of training opportunities and to support them entering the work force."

While the effort is still in the preliminary planning phase, Burnett said they are already encouraging women to take advantage of the training programs offered by the community college.

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