

Alaskans for hire

Private-public project aims to put people in well-paying, skilled jobs

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It's not that Andrew Myers, 47, couldn't find work at all.

The problem was that he wasn't plugged in -- at least not like more highly-trained carpenters in the Anchorage area.

At times, Myers, originally from Pilot Station, a Western Alaska village, wasn't bringing home a regular paycheck. There were long spaces between carpentry jobs.

Wayne Anasogak, 39, had a similar problem. He'd call up guys he knew for construction work. Sometimes he'd get jobs. Other times, he wouldn't. Recently, he was down to his last \$25 in cash.

"It's hard for anybody to get work, independently," he said.

But this fall, the two Alaska Native men were speedily plucked from the sidelines of Anchorage's construction industry. They are among roughly 20 other Alaska Natives now in apprenticeships or jobs due to a new public-private partnership created to match Alaska and Lower 48 Natives with well-paying jobs in skilled labor.

The partnership for jobs is an outgrowth of the growing Native presence in Alaska's economy. The trend is particularly visible in Anchorage, where some of the biggest private construction projects in recent years have been led by Native corporations or nonprofits. The projects range from Tikhatnu Commons, the giant mall under construction in Muldoon, to the high-rise headquarters some far-flung Native corporations have built for themselves in the center of town.

Anasogak and Myers found work with contractors who are working all winter to build the University of Alaska Anchorage's integrated science building complex.

CAREERS, NOT HANDOUTS



"It's hard for anybody to get work, independently," said Wayne Anasogak. The Cook Inlet Tribal Council and Cook Inlet Region Inc. helped him and about 20 others find skilled labor positions. (BOB HALLINEN / Anchorage Daily News)



Andrew Myers, a carpenter working on the integrated science building at University of Alaska Anchorage, had had trouble finding jobs in Anchorage. Originally from Pilot Station, he found an apprenticeship with the help of a public-private partnership that is matching skilled Native workers with well-paying jobs. (BOB HALLINEN / Anchorage Daily News)

Native unemployment in the Anchorage-Mat-Su area is about 19 percent, greatly outstripping the statewide, general unemployment rate of about 7 percent, according to state statistics.

Many businesses in Alaska report trouble recruiting residents for jobs in skilled trades, according to Guy Bell, assistant commissioner for the Department of Labor and Workforce Development.

"We know from (our) data that a lot of their recruiting efforts are resulting in non-Alaskan hire," Bell added.

That's troubling, because those jobs could be providing decent income to Alaskans, Native officials say.

The Cook Inlet Tribal Council and Cook Inlet Region Inc., both of Anchorage, and the Labor Department came up with several ambitious goals. And they signed a memorandum of understanding, committing to fund the Native-hire project through next year.

One goal is turning around the local Native unemployment rate.

The best way to empower Native people isn't through handouts, it's through lifelong careers, said Gloria O'Neill, president of the Cook Inlet Tribal Council, a nonprofit social-services organization involved in education, child services, job training and other programs for Alaska and Lower 48 Natives in the Anchorage area.

Another goal is providing trained workers for Alaska businesses, which face a rising tide of retirements among baby-boom aged workers in the skilled trades.

Not enough people are coming up in the ranks behind the aging workers, despite the fact that these are well-paying jobs that don't require a college education, said Margie Brown, chief executive of CIRI, the big regional Native corporation for much of Southcentral Alaska.

"Getting people trained up is good for us as a state," she said.

EARLY SIGNS OF SUCCESS

O'Neill said the idea for a Native-hire project had origins in the construction of CITC's office building two years ago.

A provision in the construction contract stipulated Native hire, she said, and as a result an average of 33 percent of the labor was Native workers, she said.

Possibly the only other major construction project in the last 20 years that mandated Native hire -- in writing -- was the Alaska Native Medical Center, Rock said.

So far, the new, bigger Native-hire project has linked about 25 Alaska Natives with jobs or apprenticeships in the skilled trades.

Some are working in Anchorage. At least one is doing plumbing work in Valdez. Another is in Juneau. Five or so are on the North Slope.

The Cook Inlet council hired former local carpenter's union leader Royce Rock as a matchmaker, of sorts.

A strength Rock brings to the job is his connections. He networks with contractors and the unions to line up Alaska Native job seekers with training or jobs. For some of the job seekers to qualify for local work, they may need to take a few classes or get a driver's license. Rock said it just takes a small push, sometimes, to get them in the door.

The prospective workers undergo background checks before they are linked up with the jobs and training. That gives the contractors a higher-quality set of prospective employees, and they appreciate that, Rock said.

Next year, the project is expected to kick up considerably.

That's because of CIRI. The Anchorage-based regional Native corporation is building what will be the state's largest shopping mall on land it owns next to the Glenn Highway in Muldoon.

CIRI officials say building the Tikahtnu Commons Mall will require 800 to 1,000 construction workers over the next few years.

CIRI says it is working with the mall's consultants and contractors to reach a 25 percent Native hire for the construction project.

EXPANDING TO RETAIL

CIRI and tribal officials also are discussing a similar initiative that would match Natives with training for upper-level retail jobs.

The CIRI mall could employ 1,200 to 1,500 people when it is fully built, and though only a couple of tenants have been announced yet -- Target and Regal Cinemas -- dozens of stores are planned.

"There's a lot to running these stores beyond the entry-level position," Brown said.

She and O'Neill have begun talking to Target and other retailers about Native hire at their stores, and to state and academic officials about a possible curriculum in retail management that could prepare local people for those jobs.

So far, the tribal council, the state and CIRI have each kicked in \$50,000 for the Native-hire project.

"This was a good way to get started," Brown said.

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