

THE FUTURE OF BUSINESS IN NEW JERSEY

# Building Toward Equity

The **Associated Builders and Contractors of New Jersey** and the **African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey** are calling for greater diversity, equity, and inclusion in the Garden State's construction industry.



**E**ach year, New Jersey spends millions on infrastructure projects and taxpayer-funded projects, but regulations and restrictions preclude many tradespeople from working on them. The Associated Builders and Contractors of New Jersey (ABC-NJ) aims to alter those dynamics through apprenticeship programs that generate greater diversity and equity in the construction industry.

"New Jersey's construction industry should reflect the general diversity of the state and welcome anyone who is qualified and wants to have a career in construction," says Samantha DeAlmeida Roman, ABC-NJ president.

"This is taxpayer money," adds John E. Harmon Sr., president and CEO of the African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey (AACCNJ) and an ABC-NJ partner. "By making the state more competitive and the workforce more professional, we can lift all boats."

## TRAINING FOR ALL

New Jersey is one of the country's most diverse states—nearly 45% of its 9.2 million residents are people of color. However, the racial makeup of construction crews hardly reflects the state's diversity.

There are multiple reasons for this disparity. Project Labor Agreements (PLAs) imposed by government agencies require union labor contribute upward of 88% of a



project's workforce, but 98% of Black construction workers choose not to be signatory to a union, which automatically disqualifies them from many opportunities. New Jersey's threshold for PLA bids sits at just \$5 million, making it far below the federal threshold of \$35 million. By increasing the threshold, more minority businesses would have the opportunity to bid on public works projects.

What these rules amount to is a bias for white union labor baked into statewide regulations. Given that the Black population shoulders the state's highest poverty and unemployment rates, "These politics only add insult to injury," says Harmon.

"Black people have voted for the state's Democratic majority, so there should be some reciprocity," he continues. "Yet the construction workforce doesn't resemble the people who supported this administration."

Roman agrees. She adds, "Public construction projects should reflect the communities they're located within so people can work in



the areas where they pay taxes, raise families, and have roots."

ABC-NJ is addressing this gap through a registered United States Department of Labor apprenticeship program. With training in dozens of approved programs, it is open to recent graduates, veterans, second-career seekers, and anyone else interested in a skilled craft trades career. Once enrolled, students develop valuable skills in hands-on, real-life situations, and upon graduating, they are eligible to become federally recognized journey workers, qualified for careers built on skilled craft labor.

To foster greater diversity and inclusivity, ABC-NJ offers a summer camp for middle schoolers and free-of-cost outreach programs in diverse communities throughout the state. "Through education and training, we hope to remove barriers people might face as they pursue a long, prosperous career in the construction industry," says Roman. "The data is clear—you get a better return on investment when you participate in diversity, equity, and inclusion in an intentional way," Harmon adds. "Why wouldn't the state want men and women more properly trained to do professional work?"



**New Jersey**

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