



# WOMEN'S COMMITTEES: A KEY TO RECRUITING AND RETAINING WOMEN APPRENTICES

Being an apprentice in a nontraditional occupation such as in the construction trades can be an isolating experience for women.

While some regions are making progress and have more than one woman in an apprenticeship class, on the job site it is often still rare for women to meet other women – particularly in their own trade. Some women have used the structures provided by their union membership to support each other, provide mentoring, and help with the recruitment of new women into the trades.

This brief highlights the work of women's committees in three different trades -- the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT) DC 14 and the International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental and Reinforcing Iron Workers Local 63, both operating out of Chicago, and the Sisters in the Brotherhood committees of the Carpenters Union in North Puget Sound and in Massachusetts – and provides examples of how they support the recruitment and retention of women in the construction trades.<sup>1</sup>

## Women's Committees Support the Recruitment and Retention of Female Apprentices

Across the United States over 230,000 women work in construction occupations, including approximately 5000 women apprentices in the trades<sup>2</sup> (US DOL 2017a). This is a higher number than women working as dental hygienists, veterinarians, or librarians (US DOL 2017a); yet, because women are only 3 percent of all construction workers, and 3.5 percent of apprentices in construction, female apprentices may be



“I think everyone understands that being the only one of something everywhere you go is exhausting. Even if everything else is fine, there’s a spotlight on you because you’re the only one. You’re often held responsible for anything someone else like you ever did or didn’t do. You’re always treated like an anomaly. There’s an edge of wear and tear.”

**ELIZABETH SKIDMORE**  
*Chair, Boston Sisters in the Brotherhood*

the only woman in their class, and may rarely if ever work with another woman. Being the only woman, even in the best circumstances, can feel isolating, which is a major factor for the attrition of female apprentices and journeywomen from the trades (Gyarmati et al 2017).

To counter isolation of women already in the trades and improve the recruitment and retention of women to the industry, tradeswomen have formed women’s committees within their unions.<sup>3</sup> This briefing paper uses the examples of women’s committees in three different unions to highlight how women’s committees support the recruitment and retention of female apprentices.

**International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT) DC 14 Women’s Committee on Organizing (DC 14 WC):** IUPAT represents workers in the finishing trades – Industrial & Commercial Painting, Drywall Finishing, and Glazing & Glass Work, among others, and has 160,000 members in the United States and Canada. DC 14 WC was founded in Chicago in 2015, with support from the DC union leaders, by women members of IUPAT as an official support for women members of IUPAT locals in the Chicago area. The mission of the DC 14 WC is “educating, inspiring, providing mutual support, building a sense of belonging, and promoting active participation of our women members and lead them through charitable works, political involvement and various pursuits that promote and strengthen our locals and the labor movement.”

**The International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental and Reinforcing Iron Workers Union Local 63 Sisters Committee (SC):** the Iron Workers have approximately 130,000 members, including 12,000 apprentices. The Local 63 SC in the Chicago area was established in 2014 with the formal support of the Ironworker’s Local 63 leadership. The Sisters Committee has actively worked on both the recruitment and retention of women, specifically working to empower women with the information and knowledge they need to ensure they have a successful career as union iron workers in Chicago. Through networking, fundraising, awareness campaigns, and outreach, the SC’s mission “is to provide support, maintain and increase women in the skilled trades and promote solidarity and proactive organizing of our membership and union as a whole.”

**Sisters in the Brotherhood (SIB)** is the official women’s committee of the **United Brotherhood of Carpenters (UBC)**; the UBC is one of the largest building trades unions in North America, with over a half million members working in the construction and wood-products

industries. SIBs were formally established in the late 1990s to “create a network of active members that provides avenues for women to eliminate barriers to their success and to promote an increase in the number and diversity of women in the UBC” (SIB n.d.). The SIB of the New England Regional Council of Carpenters was established in 1998, operating mainly out of the Boston region; the N. Puget Sound SIB and the Western and Central Mass SIB were established in the last two years.

## Getting the Word Out

The women’s committees spend a substantial part of their efforts on the recruitment of women into apprenticeship. Women’s Committee members attend career fairs, participate in training events, and spend time out in the community showing other women that an apprenticeship in the trades is a route to a rewarding, well paid career for women.

The DC 14 WC works closely with Chicago Women in the Trades (CWIT), addressing trainees and providing hands-on workshops to introduce them to the painting and finishing trades. Likewise, the Washington SIB works with Apprenticeship & Nontraditional Employment for Women (ANEW) on their recruitment events. The Ironworkers Local 63 SC in Chicago organized a major community fundraising event for CWIT in October 2017 -- engaging the whole community and union members and their families, while spreading information about the benefit of apprenticeships for women.

The New England SIB recently participated in the first Tradeswomen’s Open House, which attracted more than 60 women from the community and featured presentation from women members of the SIB. The recruitment efforts by the SIB in Western MA have led to a stark increase in women in the locals. One SIB apprentice has noticed the huge difference the SIB’s efforts have made: “When our SIB started there were just 10 women, now, 15 months later, there are 28 – an incredible jump. It was amazing – I saw all these women and thought: if they can do it, so can I. It was such a big difference from being on a site – there are good guys, but there are also a lot of them who think that women have no business working in construction and should be at home in the kitchen.”

## Helping Women Access Apprenticeships

Women’s committees have been very effective in helping prospective applicants navigate the application process. DC 14 WC and the

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### **FEMALE CARPENTER APPRENTICE**

*4th year, committee member of  
Western Mass Sisters  
in the Brotherhood*

“It was a struggle to find a job...the support that I received from the [DC 14] women’s committee members really kept me from getting discouraged...they would call to make sure I was doing ok, and that I was still trying, and would tell me to hang in there.”

**FEMALE APPRENTICE**  
*Member of IUPAT DC 14  
Women’s Committee.*

Local 63 SC are only open to those already in the trade, whether as apprentices or journey-workers. Yet committee members spend a significant amount of time building relationships with and supporting prospective applicants throughout the application process. Members of both committees actively work with CWIT and their participants to help them understand what skills are needed to enter an apprenticeship in their trade and provide information on the ins and outs of the application process.

Most SIB committee meetings are explicitly open to any women seeking a carpentry apprenticeship. Some women are referred to SIB meetings by pre-apprenticeship programs such as BPI or ANEW, others come through word of mouth. Part of the meetings provide information navigating the apprenticeship application process. For example, Ana, a first year apprentice in the N. Puget Sound SIB, attributes her ease at navigating the application process and success at finding her first job to the advice she received and connections she made at the SIB meetings. Not only did she receive mentorship from the sisters, one of the UBC brothers who regularly attends the N. Puget Sound SIB meetings also helped Ana through the application process, especially with how and what to prepare for the interview.

## **Helping Women Find a Sponsor and Stay Employed as an Apprentice**

For DC 14 WC, the application process is complicated by the requirement to obtain an intent to hire letter from a contractor to qualify for entry into apprenticeship. This hurdle has significantly limited women’s participation in the district, and one of the primary goals of the committee is to eliminate this barrier by facilitating connections between applicants and contractors, either directly or through advocacy with business agents. In addition to connections, the support and encouragement provided can make difference between persisting or giving up, as one DC 14 apprentice shared: “I tried so hard to find a sponsor – I got a list of contractors and went to visit every single one. One day I saw a hiring sign on a site; I went in, found the foreman and gave him my resume. I went back the next day, and they said they did not have it anywhere. I left another one. Finally a guy I knew told me privately that as soon as I left the foreman had just laughed and ripped up my resume. The women from the women’s committee helped me find a contractor – I just got nowhere before they helped me.” Since this effort began, the committee has succeeded in supporting five women to enter apprenticeship.

The need for assistance in finding employment does not end at acceptance into apprenticeship. Women's committees help both apprentices and journeymen network and find out about job openings in their area. Since many of these committees span numerous locals and regions, these meetings become a great way to find out about jobs outside your local area.

Though entrance into apprenticeship is not contingent on sponsorship for the carpenters, apprentices are often responsible for their own job search. Carpenters in these regions, for example, are responsible for their own job search and must go out and find their own work to stay employed. SIB helps its female members connect to jobs by dedicating time at the monthly meetings for announcing new job opportunities and discussing ways women can get plugged into upcoming construction projects. The New England SIB meetings often highlight new job opportunities learned about through the various Access and Opportunity committee meetings (run by the Policy Group on Tradeswomen's Issues) held at different construction projects throughout Massachusetts.<sup>4</sup>

To become an iron worker apprentice, individuals must apply and pass a test. In Chicago, applications are only taken every other year, making it vital for prospective apprentices to find out about application deadlines.<sup>5</sup> Then, in some JATCs apprentices are placed into work, while in others apprentices have to find employment themselves. Apart from exchanging information about job prospects, women's committee members in Chicago have noticed an increase in the number of contractors and employers who ask for a formal resume from job applicants, something that seems to be rarely asked when men apply. Local 63 SC is helping its members meet these requirements, for example by helping them use LinkedIn to build their resumes, network, and find job opportunities. The LinkedIn platform makes it easy to add new job experiences and allows them to track and document their work experience. Having a profile on LinkedIn can also be a way to search for employment opportunities and advertise themselves to contractors and employers using the site.

## Helping With Skill Acquisition

The most significant contribution of women's committee for many apprentices is the opportunity for working with and learning from more senior women in their trade. Apprentices can bring their

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### FEMALE APPRENTICE

*Member of IUPAT DC 14*

*Women's Committee*



“The main reason I would tell someone to join a women’s committee is you’ll be that much better of a carpenter. You’re going to be informed and you’re going to have a support system.”

**HIEU NGUYEN**  
*New England Sisters  
in the Brotherhood  
3rd year apprentice*

questions to general meetings and can get advice and guidance from the journeywomen. Magali, a second-year DC 14 WC apprentice, says the committee members have helped her improve her job skills and be a better employee: “[The other women] have helped me a lot to be a better person in the field...they [have taught] me a little of everything.”

The women’s committees also provide opportunities for apprentices to work side by side with more experienced journeywomen by hosting events and volunteer activities. The SIB chapters routinely hold volunteer events where their members work together on a project, such as working on building low-income housing or helping another SIB member in their time of need. This not only brings the women together to use their skills for a good cause, it also allows the apprentices to learn practical from more experienced UBC members.

Local 63 SC is currently working to partner with manufacturers on hands-on seminars to learn how to properly install and/or use specific materials/items. Much like the classes that are run out of many home improvement chain retailers, these seminars would keep apprentices and journeywomen current on the latest products being used in construction, making them more desirable employees for contractors and sub-contractors.

## **Mentoring & Leadership Building**

The women’s committee is the central place where women get advice on everything from what career paths to take to how to deal with being the only woman on the jobsite and/or in the local. It is also the place where apprentices can get access to formal mentoring and get help developing the tools they need to become union spokespeople and leaders.

In an effort to help increase women’s visibility and respect within the union, the women of the DC 14 WC encourages its members to be as active in their local unions as possible, even preparing and encouraging the women to run for officer positions. As a result of these efforts, five DC 14 WC members have recently been elected to officer positions in their locals – including one Vice President and the apprenticeship school has hired its first female instructor.

The New England SIB also spends time training women to be spokespeople for the UBC, including giving the women opportunities to develop their public speaking abilities, through opportunities such as speaking at the recent Tradeswomen’s Open House. While a

formal mentorship program is run by the N. Puget Sound UBC – where apprentices are paired directly with journey level workers for advice and guidance – the SIB augments this with informal mentoring, much like the New England SIB. Both are committed to meeting monthly as a main way to keep women connected, but also regularly have other events and volunteer days where their members can come together and be involved in activities.

## Making attendance easier

In order to connect their members to a wider range of opportunities, the Central and Western Massachusetts SIBs have begun to hold their meetings at the same time, connecting to each other through videoconferencing. The Western Mass SIB moreover is opening its meeting to women from across the region, including from neighboring Connecticut; they are hoping that participating in a women’s committee will encourage women carpenters in Connecticut to eventually form their own women’s committee.

The Ironworkers in Chicago have recently begun to offer attendance via a free conference line. Such a facility is highly appreciated by women who live a little further away and, for work or family reasons, would not be able to attend in person.

“What happens when groups of women get together is they empower each other, they find answers and resolve conflicts together.”

**JANET DUKIC**

*Chair, Local 63*

*Women’s Committee*



“I have spent four years in my apprenticeship without ever once meeting another woman in my trade.

Finding out that women’s committees even exist has made a huge difference to me. I want to connect with other women like me, who know what it is like to be the only woman apprentice or only woman on a job, and am hoping to start a woman’s committee in my area.”

**ERICA BAILEY**  
*Glazier Journeywoman,  
West Coast*

## Supports that Helped Women’s Committees Get Started

Formal recognition from the union can be essential to building an effective women’s committee. Official union support signals to the women that their issues and concerns will be taken seriously by union leaders and provides committees access to supports – such as video conferencing, meeting space, and communication supports – they would not otherwise have access to.

Female carpenters from the Boston area had been meeting informally for 13 years prior to the formation of the official New England regional SIB in 1998, and having this informal group was a vital support for many of the women who rarely saw other women during their work. Yet it was only when the committee became an official, union supported committee that members felt they were authorized to take steps to tackle issues around in the recruitment and retention of women in the UBC in New England.

Official union support has also helped the Local 63 SC gain access to data and put forth recommendations as well as extend their reach by providing a toll-free call-in number that is used for the SC monthly meetings. Though it might seem small, providing this call-in option allows women who cannot make meetings – due to family or other obligations – and who are not local to the Chicago area connect to the SC and other female ironworkers. As a result, the Local 63 SC has not



only been able to reach a greater number of women in the Chicago area, they have had members from all across the US and even Canada take part in their monthly meetings.

## Looking Forward

Union supported women's committees can be an important tool in the recruitment, retention and skill development of tradeswomen. Women's committees help female union members stay active and involved with their local unions. They allow women the time and space to work on recruiting more women into union apprenticeships, to build relationships with other women – which helps to combat the feelings of isolation that can lead to women leaving the construction industry – and gives women a forum to not only raise issues but also find solutions to these issues, making changes that will only increase the long-term retention of women.

Many areas still lack women's committees and the lack of a women's committee is often sorely felt by the women working in the construction industry. For years, Erica Bailey, a glazier in California, worked on job sites and never met another woman glazier. Though she loves her work, the experience of being the only woman was isolating. "I spent four years in my apprenticeship without ever once meeting another woman in my trade. Finding out that women's committees even exist has made a huge difference to me. I want to connect with other women like me, who know what it is like to be the only woman apprentice or only woman on a job, and am hoping to start a woman's committee in my area."

"Having worked in non-union construction and in union construction...it's a huge difference. There's still stigma about women on the job site but the union is trying to take away that stigma...and change the culture of construction a little bit; nobody's trying to do that in non-union construction."

### FIRST YEAR APPRENTICE

*North Puget Sound  
Sisters in the Brotherhood*

## FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

HELEN CHUNG, CHAIR DC 14 WOMEN'S COMMITTEE (EMAIL/CONTACT INFO?)

OR GO TO: <https://www.facebook.com/DC14WomensCommittee/>

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OR GO TO: <https://www.carpenters.org/sisters-in-the-brotherhood/>

JANET DUKIC, CHAIR LOCAL 63 SISTERS COMMITTEE ([jdukic2020@yahoo.com](mailto:jdukic2020@yahoo.com))

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## ENDNOTES

1. Unless noted otherwise, this brief is based on interviews with women apprentices and journeymen who are part of the IUPAT DC 14 Women's Committee, New England Regional Sisters in the Brotherhood, North Puget Sound Sisters in the Brotherhood, Central Massachusetts SIB, and Ironworkers Local 63 Sisters Committee.
2. According to the U.S. Office of Apprenticeship (2017b) in 2016 there were 144,583 active apprentices; 3.5%, or approximately 5000 of them are women; Federal Data: Active Apprentices by Industry for Fiscal Year 2016.
3. Union membership is typically an important route to becoming a skilled tradeswomen; the large majority of apprenticeship programs in the construction trades are run jointly by unions and contractors through Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committees.
4. The process for accepting applications from apprentices differs between union locals; some locals test and accept apprentices on a continuous basis, others are more restrictive in the timing of the application process.

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