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## Building industry nonprofit striving to make do with less

By: Chuck Slothower in Construction, Focus on workforce development October 15, 2019 1:20 pm



Last month, Pat Daniels speaks during a fundraiser for the Constructing Hope pre-apprenticeship program. (Courtesy of Constructing Hope)

The economic boom has been good for nearly everyone connected to the construction industry. But for **Constructing Hope**, the steady supply of high-paying jobs has led to an unforeseen complication: Its trainees have gone back to work.

The cash-strapped nonprofit relies on a mix of paid trainers and volunteers to teach flooring, roofing and other trades to low-income individuals. Many of the trainees come straight from prison or jail – about 70 percent were reincarcerated.

Constructing Hope also runs a five-week summer program for high school and middle school students.

As the economy hummed along, Constructing Hope lost one instructor – a retired electrician who decided to work. Then two carpentry instructors did the same, trading the classroom for higher pay at the jobsite.

Now the organization is making do with two instructors. One is a union-certified carpenter who makes the wage; the other is a retired carpenter working on contract.

“It was a challenge to get instructors from the beginning,” Executive Director Pat Daniels said.

Instructors can use lesson plans and curriculum developed by Constructing Hope. The nonprofit was founded in 1995 as the Irvington Covenant Community Development Corporation by Pastor Henry Greenidge of Irvington Covenant Church. In 2007, it became a certified pre-apprenticeship program with partners **Hoffman Construction**, the **Northwest College of Construction** and the **Pacific Northwest Carpenters Institute**.

Enrollment has grown from an initial group of 12 students to 28 this year. In 2018, Constructing Hope graduated 65 students; they secured 65 placements, including 45 paid apprenticeships. The group is on track to exceed totals this year, Daniels said.

More instructors would help.

"Not having instructors – it makes for large groups," coordinator Tami Watkins said. "Smaller groups, they're more hands-on."

Constructing Hope is seeking qualified instructors who have worked in the trades. In the past, some local professionals have volunteered as instructors, but they were unable to bring students up to the level the carpenters' union requires, Daniels said.

On Monday, Mark Downing, a self-employed carpenter, taught applied construction math to a small class of 10 students. Such tutoring helps students learn skills – such as subtracting fractions – they will need on the job, Daniels said.

"When Mark comes in and teaches them, it makes a world of difference," she said.

A toddler strolled around the office while her mother took part in the math class in a small, separate classroom. Constructing Hope's staff members provide child care when needed.

On days when large classes meet, students clock in at 6:30 a.m. and clock out at 4 p.m. Wednesdays are for classroom work, while Thursdays are for hands-on instruction.

"On Thursdays, I want them to have their tool belt," Daniels said. "I don't want to hear nothing but hammering."

Daniels is hoping to remodel Constructing Hope's office at 405 N.E. Church St. The nonprofit rents the building but has decided against a seismic upgrade for financial reasons. Daniels is looking to modernize the classroom with computers for building information modeling (BIM) and other tasks.

Constructing Hope crews work on various jobs for nonprofits. Currently, they're framing the **Allen Temple Church** – a Northeast Portland structure that was heavily damaged in a 2015 fire.

Last year, students collectively worked 1,684 hours to build an accessible walkway from **Pleasant Valley Elementary School** in Gresham to an adjacent nature site. The job taught students precision cutting techniques, Daniels said.

"We need you to be able to measure twice and cut once," she said.

Attracting and retaining students is another challenge. The 10-week construction skills course is free. Outreach Coordinator Tarrell Dawson frequently visits jails and prisons, including the **Washington County** jail, the **Correctional Institution** in Sheridan, the **Columbia River Correctional Institution** in Northeast Portland and the **Snake River Correctional Institution** in Eastern Oregon.

"A lot of times it's word of mouth," Dawson said of recruitment of students.

Formerly incarcerated students often need coaching on how to communicate appropriately on jobsites, said Hamilton, case manager and career coach for Constructing Hope.

"The disconnect with them being incarcerated for so long is dealing with people," he said.

Constructing Hope asks for a three-year commitment that includes career placement, mentorship and support services. Oftentimes, successful graduates return to volunteer.

"If you don't have a father, brother or in-law showing you the ropes, we're that mentor," Daniels said.

People interested in learning more can visit [constructinghope.org](http://constructinghope.org) or email Operations Manager Simon Coll [simonc@constructinghope.org](mailto:simonc@constructinghope.org).