

Guest column: How one company is helping unskilled workers find meaningful employment

Sep 1, 2017, 1:37pm CDT

<https://www.bizjournals.com/memphis/news/2017/09/01/guest-column-how-one-company-is-helping-unskilled.html>

Minority unemployment is not a new problem in the city of Memphis.

Since the 1990s, we have been a majority-minority city, with a population that's about 63 percent black. Roughly 43 percent of Memphis-area small businesses are black-owned. Yet, those and other minority-owned businesses only account for 0.9 percent of total sales, according to U.S. Census data.

According to the [Economic Policy Institute](#) (EPI), Tennessee's unemployment rate was 5.1 percent overall in the final quarter of 2016. But, broken down by race, the rate of unemployment of black people (9.5 percent) was more than twice that of white people (4.1 percent).

In 2015, [Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare](#) began collaborating with Turner Construction Co., FL Crane & Sons, Innovative Engineering Services Barron Heights Transitional Center and others on the Minority Workforce Equity Program (MWEP) to help minorities secure a viable, long-term career in construction.

The issue is not a lack of jobs. In June 2017, the national construction unemployment rate fell to 4.5 percent, the lowest rate on record, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

There are currently more than 16,000 job openings in Memphis, and positions in the construction industry pay well — \$16 to \$18/hour on average.

Right now, Turner is in the midst of a major project — the \$275 million expansion of Methodist University Hospital, set for completion in 2019 — for which we have an ongoing need for a skilled, inclusive workforce.

The biggest challenge we face is one of communication. We know great potential employees are out there. But, they may not know about the openings — or the skills or training that may be required.

With the MWEF, we're addressing this challenge head-on by scheduling job fairs at the ZIP codes with the highest level of poverty. Going into these neighborhoods puts in front of job candidates a human face who can answer questions and assist them in taking their next steps.

This approach also makes it easier for job candidates to reach us, since many of them lack transportation. According to a 2016 GMAC Workforce labor study of 450 unemployed and underemployed Memphis residents, 64.1 percent of respondents seeking work require public transportation or ridesharing to get to a job.

At these fairs, we're joined by subcontractors, who do roughly 85 percent of Turner's work and provide the best opportunity for unskilled workers to become skilled construction workers. New employees can learn in the field, progressing into new levels of responsibility as they become more proficient.

In 2015, Turner Construction participated in two career fairs featuring 15-20 firms. Out of the attendees, 12-14 people were offered jobs or hired. In 2016, seven to 10 people were offered or accepted a position with a participating company.

Our next career fair will be held 1-4 p.m. Monday, Sept. 11, at Mason Temple, off E.E.H. Crump Boulevard. As a corporate citizen, we feel it's our responsibility to use our influence to help unskilled and low-skilled workers gain meaningful employment that can improve their quality of life.

We know more work needs to be done to help the program grow and thrive, and we're excited to do it. As anybody in construction will tell you, you can't build anything unless you start with a strong foundation.