

Labor Day: Groups hope to boost diversity in local trades

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URBANA — After walking in today's Labor Day parade, local unions and organizations will collaborate again — this time, on a new project to boost diversity in local trades.

The Champaign-Urbana Initiative for Labor Diversity is starting up and aiming to launch a three-year action plan early next year. It will focus on gender and racial diversity, especially in construction trades, in response to a University of Illinois study published last October.

The study found that just 14.5 percent of people in 10 unionized building trades that are affiliated with the East Central Illinois Building Trade Council are female or people of color.

About 60 people turned out for the initiative's first meeting. So far, 15 unions in the council are taking part in the effort, said co-chairman Matt Kelly, president of the Champaign County AFL-CIO labor council and a member of the Plumbers & Pipefitters Local 149.

Also involved: State Rep. Carol Ammons, Parkland College, the cities of Champaign and Urbana, the Cunningham and Champaign townships, the Champaign County Board, Unit 4 schools, Habitat for Humanity and the UI's School of Labor and Employment Relations.

Stephanie Fortado, an initiative member and UI labor education lecturer, said misconceptions about the trades need to be addressed.

"People think trades are things you do if you can't get into college or do other jobs, but it's important work and should be respected as hard work," Fortado said, noting the rigorous apprenticeship programs that many trades require.

In a push for inclusivity, Kelly said any person or group can join the effort — even the non-unionized trades. In fact, he said, non-unionized trades — which didn't participate in the UI study — should heed the initiative's message.

"To be very frank," Kelly said, "if you're not a white guy or family member of a non-union contractor, you're not going to get" into a non-union trade.

For the initiative to be successful, Kelly said, it can't lose momentum.

"It has to be comprehensive, not a fragmented effort trying to do one thing," Kelly said. "We're going to follow up with another thing and another thing. Hopefully, this group will be persistent with following up."

Fortado said the first meeting's attendance exceeded her expectations. She's eager to see where it goes from here.

"I think construction trades are a viable career path where you can make a living and raise a family," she said. "I think people in the community should know about and look for them."