
OREGON PLUMBING-HEATING-COOLING CONTRACTORS TESTIMONY ON APPRENTICESHIPS

Before the Joint Interim Task Force on Apprenticeship in State Contracting
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By: Ron Loewen, President, Oregon PHCC / Owner, Best Heating, Scio



Mr. and Madam Co-Chairs:

The Oregon State Association of Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors represents both open and closed shops, both small and large shops, and new, remodel and 24-hour service shops.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our concerns about Oregon's unique and dysfunctional process for indenturing new apprentices.

The historic, traditional and national model for a business to indenture a new apprentice starts when an employer hires a new employee for an introductory job outside of the skilled trade. The new employee cleans the shop, inventories tools, washes trucks and runs errands. If she/he works hard, shows up on time, seems to enjoy working in the contracting environment and demonstrates an interest in the trade, they will be asked to become an apprentice in the businesses. Employers like to promote from within. The business owner then introduces their employee into the apprenticeship program. Sometimes these new apprentices are family members of the owner, working their way through the business from the ground up.

This doesn't happen in Oregon. The rules prohibit it.

In Oregon, new apprentices can apply for a program with no connection to a business or employer. They take classes and, in this economic environment, hope for on-the-job experience. The apprentices are ranked by the Apprenticeship Committee. When an employer decides to indenture an apprentice, they must hire the person at the top of the list.

This provides significant obstacles to many Oregon businesses, especially rural contractors and those in the emergency service industry. As a result, they choose not to make the investment to become a training agent or to indenture apprentices. Let me explain:

RURAL BUSINESSES

Imagine, if you will, a small employer in a rural portion of Oregon. The business owner wants to bring an apprentice on board. The highest ranked person on the work list lives 90 minutes from the business. A brutal commute, especially in bad weather. The second person on the list lives two blocks from the business. The second person on the list, as a local, knows the community, the employees and many of the customers. Guess who the small employer must hire if he/she would like to bring on an apprentice?

This lack of flexibility and common sense built into Oregon's apprenticeship rules discourages employers from joining the ranks of apprentice training agents for two reasons: First, the value of the employee is impacted by their distance from the shop. They would not be available to take after-hour service calls. The response time would simply be too long. Second, the likelihood of this apprentice, upon receiving his/her journeyman card, going to work full time for the training agent is very low due to the distance between home and work. The newly turned out journeyman will most likely seek employment closer to home. Everything changes in this scenario if the employer can indenture the second person on the list.

SERVICE EMPLOYEES

The existing indenturing process also creates significant problems for contractors who provide 24-hour emergency services. If you are a new construction or remodel contractor, the appearance of your employees (and apprentices) may be important to you and your image, or it may not. But if you are an emergency service plumbing shop, your employees' physical appearance determines the success of your business. When someone shows up to at a front door in the middle of the night to repair a broken water pipe, facial tattoos of skulls and half inch gages in ears and multiple nose piercings do have an impact on the customer's perception of the business. But the employer does not get to choose an apprentice from the list. They have to choose the person at the top of the list.

NON LICENSED TRADES

While one must become an apprentice in order to get a journeyman card to work as a plumber, in Oregon not all trades require licensing or a journeyman card to work. The heating and air conditioning industry is unlicensed. As a result, one can work in the industry without going through an apprenticeship program. Nevertheless, apprenticeship programs are available and help ensure high quality work. But without the incentive of being required, this industry faces an uphill battle to get more training agents and apprentices because the process is so cumbersome. If government will remove barriers to training apprentices, rather than BEING the barrier to indenturing through promulgating rules that discourage participation, more businesses will open their doors and provide opportunities. More apprentices can be indentured and everyone will benefit through better training, a higher quality work product and wages families can live on for skilled employees.

I know of at least one business owner who will not bring on an apprenticeship because there is no one at the office but his wife during the day. He will not hire an apprentice, who may need to go to the office when only his wife is there, unless he has the right to decide who he hires, as an employer.

Our association can provide this Task Force with examples of family businesses which were unable to bring a family member into the family business as an apprentice. Instead, a competitor is training their family member.

The average age of a journeyman plumber in Oregon is increasing. We need to create more opportunities for more people to enter the skilled trades through apprenticeship programs. This simply cannot happen until the Legislature or BOLI modifies the indenturing process to encourage and incentivize more businesses to become training agents. If Oregon benefits from a robust building growth spurt in near future, some skilled trades may not be able to provide a sufficient number of trades-men and -women to keep up with demand.

The Oregon State Association of Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors strongly urges this Task Force to make recommendations to open the skilled trades to more people. The apprenticeship indenturing process should not be an obstacle to employment growth in the skilled trades sector, it should be a springboard. Let's work together to open the doors to family-wage jobs in the skilled trades rather than allowing bureaucratic barriers to stifle job growth in Oregon. I am happy to answer any questions.

Oregon Association of Plumbing-Heating-Cooling Contractors

3340 Commercial St SE Ste 210 Salem OR 97302 (503) 557-1203 info@orphcc.com www.orphcc.com