

Resident-hiring reforms 'on the right path,' industry reps say

By Alex Zank
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When Alderman Russell Stamper sees a building going up in the city and calls for some of the resulting work to go to unemployed Milwaukee residents, he's not just thinking about the local economy. He's also looking for a way to deter crime.

That's why, he said Thursday, he and other officials on a specially established committee are recommending changes that they believe will improve the city's Residents Preference Program. That program requires that at least 40 percent of the work hours stemming either from public-works contracts or private developments receiving at least \$1 million in city money go to unemployed or underemployed local residents.

Committee members, after months of discussion with the construction industry and workforce officials, sent their recommendations to the Milwaukee Common Council on Thursday. Speaking before the vote, Stamper argued that providing jobs to underemployed and unemployed residents would have the additional benefit of helping to deter crime.

"The No. 1 antidote to crime, killing and shooting is providing this community with jobs so they can get off the streets," said Stamper, who also serves as chairman of the Workforce Organizational Reform Committee.

He noted that a man was shot and killed near his home on Wednesday. Stamper said he was notified of the death while he was at the funeral visitation for Za'layia Jenkins, a 9-year-old girl who had died from gunshot wounds just days ago.

The recommended changes to the Residents Preference Program and related policies call for, among other things:

- Getting rid of the five-year limit for being certified in the program;
- Reducing, from 30 days to 15 days, the amount of time a resident would need to be unemployed before qualifying for the program;
- Requiring that a quarter of the city residents certified in the program and working on a construction project reside in an impoverished area of the city;
- Requiring that contractors hire a certain percentage of apprentices or on-the-job trainees;
- Establishing a commission that would review compliance with the Residents Preference Program and measure its performance; and
- Changing the rules so that contractors who are unable to meet the hiring requirements exclusively in Milwaukee can instead employ certified residents on projects in Dane, Kenosha, Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Racine, Walworth, Washington and Waukesha counties. To qualify for the transfers, Milwaukee residents would still have to have begun their employment on local projects.

Dan Bukiewicz, president of the Milwaukee Building and Construction Trades Council, said contractors will benefit from the changes.

"I think we're on the right path," he said.

Although the committee has been working on possible changes since last year, the formal recommendations come on the heels of a Public Policy Forum report that concluded the Residents Preference Program does not go far enough to ensure participants can get lasting careers in the construction industry.

Among the recommended changes, Bukiewicz said he expects particularly good results from one calling for a system to be set up to keep track of the number of Residents Preference Program participants who are also in apprenticeships. At the same time, he cautioned that city officials should make sure that the apprentices on a project don't vastly outnumber their supervisors.

Rob Henken, president of the Milwaukee-based Public Policy Forum, said he is pleased to see that some of the recommendations put forward by the committee reflect the findings in the study.

The study found that similar hiring programs elsewhere in the U.S. have seen good results from keeping close tabs on apprenticeship participation. Researchers also called for Milwaukee's Residents Preference Program to be placed under the guidance of a public-private advisory committee.