



MAINE AFL-CIO

A Union of Unions Standing for Maine Workers

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Good afternoon – Senator Tipping, Representative Roeder, distinguished Members of the Joint Standing Committee on Labor and Housing. My name is Sam Boss and I am the Apprenticeship and Workforce Equity Director at the Maine AFL-CIO, which represents 40,000 working people in Maine. We work to improve the lives and working conditions of our members and all working people. I am here to testify in support of LD 2280, an “Act to strengthen Maine’s Workforce through Pre-Apprenticeship”.

I serve as the Director of the Union Construction Academy pre-apprenticeship program, a four-week intensive training that prepares graduates for careers in building and construction trades. For those who may be less familiar with pre-apprenticeship, programs like the Union Construction Academy prepare graduates to thrive in registered apprenticeships, where they earn good wages while learning lucrative, in-demand skills with the guidance of experienced journeymen. During our program, participants attend daily classes and earn industry-recognized credentials such as OSHA-10, First-Aid/CPR, Flagging, Scaffolding User, and Asbestos awareness. They gain hands-on skills from expert instructors who show them how to hang drywall, erect scaffolding, pour concrete, read blueprints, and weld. Through all of their hands-on activities, they build skills and confidence in construction math.

Our pre-apprentices also learn about a range of careers by meeting with representatives from different trades – electricians, carpenters, plumbers and pipefitters, sheet metal workers, ironworkers, laborers, operators, elevator constructors, ship and submarine builders, and more. Pre-apprentices may come into our program wanting to do one thing, but then find that their skills, interests, and life situations are better suited to a different trade, which helps to ensure that they will stay on the job when they get started. Similarly, our pre-apprentices learn professional skills and values that will allow them to thrive once they start an apprenticeship, from showing up early and making a good impression, to prioritizing safety and managing personal finances effectively.

Once our pre-apprentices graduate, we help them to apply directly to apprenticeships or other high-wage, in-demand jobs. We are often able to get them out to work right away in critical positions that are otherwise difficult to fill. Graduates have gone into jobs as carpenters, building apartments in Portland; as Laborers, doing demolition work to make way for the new Roux institute; as electricians, installing solar panels at sites around Maine; as operating engineers, helping with mill renovations in Rumford; as mechanics and drivers for Public Works departments; and as ship and submarine builders at Bath Ironworks and Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, just as a few examples. In addition to helping our pre-apprentices find employment, we also help them to connect with mentors and support services that can help them to buy tools, boots, and other equipment that will help them on the job. This support helps our program graduates to overcome some of the early challenges they may face as they get started in rewarding but highly demanding careers in construction.

We are proud that our pre-apprenticeship provides this support and training to many individuals who hadn't even considered apprenticeships in the trades because there were so few people like them doing that work. Our graduates have included women who have spent their entire lives working in low-wage jobs with no healthcare coverage. We've trained refugees from Afghanistan who served with our U.S. military as helicopter pilots and aircraft mechanics, but lacked the certifications they needed to use their skills in the U.S. We've trained working class Mainers who were couch surfing because of unstable housing situations, and we've worked with people with disabilities that prevented them from getting a fair chance when they interviewed for other opportunities. We've worked with highly skilled welders, carpenters, and electricians from all over the world who have ended up in retail jobs because they couldn't find employers who recognized their past experience and training.

Pre-apprenticeship is a proven model that helps people from a wide variety of backgrounds to enter stable and rewarding careers with good wages and excellent benefits. This not only helps the individuals in our program, but also helps their families and inspires others within their networks to pursue careers in the trades. This in turn helps us to bring new talent and energy to our Maine workforce, as we work to enhance our housing stock, increase our supply of clean energy, and improve our infrastructure. Funding from LD 2280 will allow our program and others to grow and provide outstanding training and workforce development in communities around the state.