

# My Turn: Gregory A. Mancini: Lifting R.I. youth through apprenticeships

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With a modest planning grant from the United Way in 2006, the Building Futures pre-apprenticeship program was formed as an initiative within the Providence Plan.

The purpose of the program was threefold: increase the number of low-income minority residents from urban communities working in construction; assist the construction industry in meeting its anticipated future workforce needs; and develop a new policy framework that encourages public and private construction users to develop apprenticeship utilization requirements on their major capital projects to accomplish the foregoing objectives.

This initiative's elements included a comprehensive assessment, 200 hours of hands-on training, and programming that assists participants in addressing social challenges that low-income residents face. Building Futures graduates are placed in registered apprenticeship programs with local trade unions or with employers directly.

In its first year, Building Futures trained and placed 20 candidates in industry apprenticeship programs. From this modest start, the number of applicants and the number of entities providing grants to Building Futures has grown exponentially. And Building Futures has grown into a nationally recognized pre-apprenticeship model.

In 2015, in a highly competitive process, Building Futures was awarded a \$5 million grant

from the U.S. Department of Labor to launch Apprenticeship Rhode Island. The purpose of this initiative is to develop the capacity of the state's apprenticeship system in industries beyond construction. This initiative allows companies to develop registered apprenticeship programs tailored to their needs at no cost to the company and to the worker. It will also allow workers to develop a skill while being paid and without acquiring any debt.

In 2016, however, the Providence Plan's finance chief was found to have embezzled "hundreds of thousands of dollars" from the organization. Upon being made aware of this development, the exemplary Building Futures staff running the programming recruited interested community representatives to be the directors of a newly formed separate domestic nonprofit corporation that took the name (and the staff) of the program — Building Futures.

The best evidence of the success of Building Futures was that, after forming this new entity, the program's nine grant-funders transferred all existing grant commitments, worth a total of \$6 million, to the newly formed separate and independent corporation.

To date, this success includes 80 local construction projects that implemented apprentice utilization programs, which have placed 225 Building Futures apprentices primarily in a down economy, 70 of whom have completed their apprenticeship programs and are now journeypersons.

The first-year retention for Building Futures graduates is 97 percent, and nearly 80 percent since the program's inception. The average starting wage for these workers is \$17 per hour. The average wage of these workers upon completion of an apprenticeship program is \$37 per hour, with benefits.

Furthermore, to date over 100 apprentices have enrolled in 21 different new apprenticeship programs, created with the assistance of Apprenticeship Rhode Island, in occupations in health care, IT and advanced manufacturing sectors, among others.

Building Futures is now well positioned to meet its mission and the future demands of the marketplace in construction. We are training and providing career opportunities for hundreds of local low-income individuals who otherwise might not have had the opportunity to fill the existing and future marketplace demands for construction-skilled tradesmen and women. We are further expanding and diversifying our board to assist us in this regard, including adding a program alumni representative so we can

enhance our understanding of the constituency we serve.

The Apprenticeship Rhode Island initiative of Building Futures is also well positioned to serve our local economy by providing expertise to other industries that need skilled workers; the initiative assists employers in developing apprenticeship programs that will suit the employer's needs. This will not only serve the needs of the employer, but it will also develop a skilled workforce tailored to what the economy is demanding. And lastly, the workers will attain these skills without being burdened with debt. In fact, they will be earning while they learn.

In both instances, these are important, substantive contributions to Rhode Island's economy.

*Gregory A. Mancini is chairman of the board of directors of Building Futures.*