

Sacramento Kings promise arena construction gigs to disadvantaged locals. Will that happen?

Kings announced 70 priority apprenticeships for city residents earlier this year

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Construction on the new Sacramento Kings arena is imminent at the Downtown Plaza site. Some workers vie for one of the 70 available apprenticeships.

The wooden bones of a dwarf home stand on blocks inside of a warehouse dotting Fruitridge Road. Like the ones before it, it will be disassembled, then rebuilt again by a select group of trainees, now enrolled in a popular apprenticeship program that could soon lead to work on one of the region's highest-profile construction projects: building a downtown arena for the Sacramento Kings.

If Sisyphus wanted a union gig, this is the kind of repetition he'd have to endure.

"This is the fourth miniature house that they've built," nods David Semon, an assistant division chief at the Sacramento County Probation Department, which has a group of clients enrolled in Northern California Construction Training. As the name implies, the program primes students for careers in the trade-varied construction industry—carpentry, dry wall, concrete, electrical work, plumbing, landscaping, and heating and cooling among them—and gets them on to jobs where they can graduate from decently paid apprentices to OT-earning union members.

With construction of a new downtown arena approaching, NCCT and other organizations are lining up to get their clients hired to the 11,000-12,000 banded construction positions.

It's a competitive process.

In April, the Kings announced it was setting aside 70 priority apprenticeships for city residents who live in one of 11 ZIP codes, or those who are low-income or disadvantaged. To qualify in the latter category, applicants must be able to check off two of seven boxes, such as being on public assistance, emancipated foster youth, homeless or military veterans, among others.

That's on top of promises to hire 60 percent of all construction workers and 70 percent of all apprentices from the greater Sacramento area. As of June 5, the Sacramento Employment and Training Agency, or SETA, which is tracking outreach, tallied more than 1,700 calls to arena jobs hotlines.

Bob Erlenbusch, executive director of the Sacramento Regional Coalition to End Homelessness, said the process has been both thoughtful and frustrating. As of about a month ago, groups like Good Cause Inc.'s Men's Empowerment, Lutheran Social Services of Northern California, Next Move and Women's Empowerment—all of which represent low-income populations—weren't getting their calls returned, he said. "The implementation, unless it's improved, has been really disappointing," Erlenbusch said.

Good Cause Inc.'s director of programs, Malcolm A. Johnson, told SN&R that all the people he's sent to SETA were referred to the Greater Sacramento Urban League, also a partner in this process, and were told the jobs were taken.

According to a summary of a June 5 meeting of the SETA governing board, only three priority workers had been hired.

Kunal Merchant, vice president of strategic initiatives for the Sacramento Kings, said construction bids have to be awarded before subcontractors can begin assembling their crews. But, he added, the arena's main builder, Turner Construction Company, recently hosted a priority-apprenticeship event for the trade organizations that will be among the first ones to dynamite the downtown mall.

As one of three pre-apprenticeship programs for those wishing to get onto the priority list, NCCT instructor Nate De Marce said he's gathered more than 60 eligible names, none of whom have gotten hired yet. "Some of them are right in the city of Sacramento," he added.

On that list, about half live in the eligible ZIP codes, while the other half meet at least two conditions for being low-income or disadvantaged. Scanning the names, De Marce said many were previous offenders and on some sort of public assistance.

He said it probably wouldn't be until mid-July that NCCT met with stakeholders on filling those priority slots. By that time, demolition of the eastern half of the Downtown Plaza should be in progress, barring an injunction from one of two arena-related lawsuits, one of which was due to be filed today, June 26.

Since linking up with NCCT less than a year ago, the probation department has watched its most motivated, post-incarceration clients score decent, legal paychecks through the program. Some graduates are even working on the new Santa Clara stadium for the San Francisco 49ers, De Marce said.

He said NCCT, which boasts an 85-percent success rate at placing grads in construction apprenticeships, attracts "anybody and everybody," but added that most students come to the program out of work, on probation or parole, needing to obtain GED certificates or receiving public assistance.

Namely, the exact sort of people the Kings says it wants to employ as demolition nears.

"There's a lot of work that's going to be happening," De Marce said.

For the time being, the question remains: Who will do that work?