



Chicago Fed Insights, February 2024

Childcare for Women in the Trades: The Milwaukee Pilot Program

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Article Childcare Community Development

Read more about the Chicago Fed's [Spotlight on Childcare and the Labor Market](#).

The Federal Reserve's Seventh District is home to one of a handful of programs in the country that are addressing childcare barriers for workers in the trades.¹ As billions of dollars from [infrastructure](#) and [economic development legislation](#) make their way to state and local projects, the anticipated need for more construction workers is focusing new attention on the role that childcare can play in expanding and diversifying the construction workforce.² Across all industries, access to childcare enables parents of young children to work. Yet when it comes to the building trades, these jobs often have unique requirements, such as early hours, long days, variable schedules, and lengthy commutes, that add logistical challenges to finding care.³ These burdens tend to fall harder on women than on men. Women make up about 11% of the construction sector, with just 4% of those working in skilled construction trades occupations, despite being almost 50% of the total workforce (see figure 1).⁴ In this *Chicago Fed Insights* article, we report on our conversations with the organizers of a pilot program in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, who are motivated by the idea that women represent an untapped pool for the infrastructure workforce and that childcare solutions can bring more of these workers into middle-class careers.

1. Women represent a small share of employment in the construction industry



Note: Annual averages for 2023.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Pilot program pays childcare costs for construction workers

The pilot program, organized by the [North American Building Trades Union \(NABTU\)](#), and its nonprofit arm [TradesFutures](#), offers childcare subsidies to participants of pre-apprenticeship programs in two cities, Milwaukee and New York City.⁵ The Milwaukee pilot, which started in 2022, offers financial assistance to ten workers in the construction trades, with potential applicants identified through Milwaukee Building Trades Council meetings, as well as through job sites, flyers, and emails. For women and men who meet its qualifications, the program pays half of their childcare costs at licensed facilities. For families not using a licensed facility, the program offers a one-time payment of \$500 dollars to the caregiver, though individual caregivers have the option of filing a 1099 so that expenses can be similarly paid. When needed, the program operator provides case management for finding transportation, nanny care or other services that workers use to manage their nontraditional schedules. TradesFutures contributed \$139,000 for the Milwaukee site through funds pooled from trade unions across the country. With money left over from the first cycle, the Milwaukee pilot is extending its program into a second year.

Early lessons

According to the program organizers of the Milwaukee pilot, much has been learned so far. Principally, they have found that the initial design to match workers with a site-specific childcare facility was not the right model. The program organizers had identified a construction project site, they had chosen a facility, and they had negotiated seats at the nearby center for children of apprentices and journey workers. However, subsequent interviews between organizers and potential pilot participants revealed that the benefit did not fit workers' needs. Participants were not willing to change their existing providers, and they wanted childcare located near their homes. In a career like the trades, where work sites change frequently, people did not want to face having to switch childcare providers with each job. The Milwaukee pilot thus pivoted to voucher payments made directly to childcare providers.

The organizers also reported that they could find better solutions when they were able to speak with the people that they were trying to serve. Few organizations collect specifics on what (potential) tradespeople need in their own communities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that women who have young children and are successful in the trades almost always have nonformal care arrangements with family members. That would not be unique to construction. But some advocates for women in the trades report that they do not have a complete understanding of the factors that enable parents to make it through apprenticeship and journeymen programs. There are many questions still to answer, including whether there are other benefits (e.g., sick time or funds to pay for car repairs) that people need in addition to flexible childcare hours and help with lowering expenses. Learning about what workers want is itself an evolving process, according to the program organizers.

An additional takeaway from our conversations with the organizers of the Milwaukee pilot is that solutions are likely to look different in different communities. For example, apprentices in New York City can qualify for state childcare assistance through their first year of apprenticeship, whereas workers in Wisconsin generally no longer qualify for state support after six months into an apprenticeship. What they are learning in Milwaukee, they said, is that childcare is about personal choice. Different families may have quite different views about what constitutes an optimal program design and the type of support that would benefit their family the most.

With the Milwaukee initiative, the program organizers have been adding to the broader discussion around childcare policies and practices for jobholders with nontraditional hours. A handful of programs are already demonstrating results in other parts of the country, such as [Care that Works](#), a Massachusetts program that connects union-represented parents to state-licensed family childcare providers and covers overtime for childcare workers through investments from unions, contractors, and the city of Boston;⁶ and [Apprentice-Related Child Care](#), an Oregon program that uses federal highway funds to fund workforce development for pre-apprentices, apprentices, and highway construction tradespeople. Oregon's program also offers a voucher payment of up to \$2,500 per child per month, including to family and friends that become certified childcare providers through Oregon's Department of Human Services.⁷ According to organizers, sharing their experience with the pilot has created a platform for others to talk through ideas and exchange thoughts about how initiatives are working in different parts of the country.

Potential to expand scale

The near-term goal of the Milwaukee pilot is to attract and retain people from nontraditional backgrounds into the trades and for childcare subsidies to help people complete their apprenticeships when they might not otherwise do so. As a longer-term goal, organizers hope that other entities will support their mission and help them achieve scale. The New York City site has been able to secure funds from the state budget to expand services to other apprenticeship-readiness programs within the city. In 2016, the Oregon state legislature passed a law requiring the Oregon Department of Transportation to spend a percentage of federal funds on training highway construction workers and ensuring that apprentices do not have to

spend more than 7% of their income on child care.⁸ These examples demonstrate the possibility of working with policymakers to address childcare needs for workers in the construction trades, and show how institutional partners can extend beyond childcare and workforce agencies.

For women in the trades, the unprecedented level of federal investment in infrastructure presents a unique opportunity for the U.S. to diversify its construction workforce.² The Milwaukee pilot has focused on one major issue to make it easier to attract and retain women in the construction sector. For the organizers of this project, overcoming barriers for parents working in the trades and putting more people into middle-class careers requires figuring out how to address the childcare needs of workers with non-standard schedules.

Notes

¹ Skilled jobs in the construction trades are those where individuals apply technical knowledge and skills in the building, inspecting, and maintaining of structures and related properties. See National Center for Education Statistics [CIP user site](#).

² In addition to funding infrastructure and clean energy, the federal government has set out [requirements](#) in the CHIPS and Science Act that companies provide construction workers with affordable childcare as they build facilities for producing semiconductors (and seek more than \$150 million in tax credits).

³ Details available [online](#).

⁴ Details available [online](#).

⁵ The operator of the Milwaukee program is [EmpowHER](#), a mentoring cohort for women in construction. TradesFuture contracted with [Nontraditional Employment for Women \(NEW\)](#) to be the [program](#) operator in New York.

⁶ More information available online [here](#) and [here](#).

⁷ Details available [online](#).

⁸ Details available [online](#).

² See [online](#).

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