

Posted March 5, 2009 – Daily Reporter, Dustin Block

Olatoye Baiyewu grimaces in the hallway of the First Choice Pre-Apprenticeship Training offices in Racine, takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes.

"I'm skeptical," said the program's executive director, about the effect federal stimulus dollars will have on putting new construction workers to work. "There are a lot of out-of-work skilled individuals. They'll be the first to go."

In the room next door, 10 people were taking exams Wednesday to get into one of First Choice's training programs for road builders. Nine people took the exam the day before, and more than 100 people attended an introduction meeting in Kenosha on Tuesday night to learn about applying for the program. The Wisconsin Department of Transportation hired First Choice to train workers for the Interstate 94 expansion project between Milwaukee and the Illinois border.

There is intense interest in training programs that could lead to good-paying construction jobs, Baiyewu said. But the interest and training might not lead to jobs.

The state's construction industry lost 11,000 jobs from January 2008 to January 2009, according to the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. That decline helped increase the state's unemployment rate to 7.6 percent in January.

It also left a lot of road builders sitting at home waiting for a call to go back to work, said Tom Fisher, president and business manager of the Wisconsin Laborers' District Council. Many apprentices worked on the Marquette Interchange project in Milwaukee and are using the downtime to receive additional training for the upcoming I-94 expansion.

"We'll work any way we can with First Choice once there's availability," Fisher said. "Right now, we've got a pool of workers ready to go."

Eugene Jackson, 41, of Kenosha, said he is working through First Choice to get a job as a laborer or a sprinkler-fitter. He learned about the program through a transitional work facility where he is serving a prison sentence.

Another inmate completed the program and is making \$20 an hour, Jackson said. He said he hopes he can do the same.

"This opportunity is a great thing," Jackson said. "I came from the streets, really living on the streets, and I never thought I'd have a chance to make this kind of money."

But even if Jackson completes the program, he might have a difficult

time getting a construction job.

In 2008, 37 of the 110 people who completed First Choice's program got a construction job, Baiyewu said. A slow economy and bad weather limited the construction season last year.

Baiyewu noted First Choice's job is to train workers, not find them jobs.

"Our job," he said, "is to expand the pool of available workers."

Federal stimulus dollars should pick up the slack in the construction work force and create new jobs, Fisher said. Laborers say they are hoping the state doubles the number of jobs sent out for bids in April, May and June to create more jobs this summer.

"That will definitely help," Fisher said.

Terry McGowan, business manager for the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 139, said he has 2,000 members out of work. He said he promised state and federal officials he has enough workers to cover additional stimulus jobs and will train extra workers as needed.

But in the short term, McGowan said, his commitment is to his members.

"I hope to have a thousand guys out after the April letting," McGowan said. "We'll be darn close to clearing up our bench by this summer."