

**This article Reprinted from *Western Roofing* magazine, January/February 2007, Volume 30, number 1**

## Roofing Apprentices

Division of Apprenticeship Standards Hosts Roofing Industry Forum

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A report released by the California State Auditor in September was highly critical of the performance of the Division of Apprenticeship Standards (DAS) in virtually every area of its responsibility. While acknowledging that understaffing is a major factor explaining why the Division "inadequately oversees apprenticeship programs," the report nevertheless faults DAS for making little or no effort to manage its obligations more efficiently and effectively by establishing priorities and deploying its limited resources where they will have the greatest impact.

The state auditor's harsh assessment of DAS came as no surprise to anyone, least of all the agency itself. Many of the deficiencies listed in the report were recognized by the new chief, Dave Rowan, shortly after he assumed stewardship of DAS in late January. With a strong background in management, and lacking the partisan "baggage" that has hampered many of his predecessors, Chief Rowan was leading a concerted effort to re-engineer DAS well before the audit was requested. Thus, the appearance that DAS is now responding to the state auditor's report at "warp speed" is deceiving. The agency was already implementing a comprehensive self-improvement plan that coincidentally deals with many of the same concerns.

With respect to apprenticeship program audits, for example, the state auditor's report recommends that DAS focus its efforts on programs with "high risk profiles," such as those with low graduation rates. Chief Rowan had already reached the same conclusion independently and was discussing ways and means of addressing this issue with representatives of several such programs, including roofing, well before the report was released.

On the surface, roofing industry apprenticeship programs appear to have a very high-risk profile, making them ideal candidates for focused assistance from DAS. The average graduation rate for roofing programs is only 13%, which is significantly lower than the next lowest trade. Moreover, the sheer number of roofing apprentices who do not complete their programs is staggering. From a pool of nearly 5,300 active apprentices, only 115 journeymen are produced each year. High intake and low completion characterize virtually all roofing programs in the state, regardless of union or non-union sponsorship or geographic location.

In an effort to initiate a constructive dialog on this apparent problem, DAS hosted a Roofing Industry Forum on October 12 in San Francisco. Every roofing apprenticeship program in the state was invited to send representatives to attend and participate and most did so.

Chief Rowan opened the program by emphasizing the informal nature of the proceedings. No minutes would be taken, no recording would be made, and participants were under no obligation to even identify themselves. He stressed that he had no pre-conceived notions about what graduation rate should be expected of a roofing apprenticeship program and how (or even whether) existing programs need to be improved. He said that he simply wished to engage the industry in frank discussion and brainstorming about these matters.

Rowan's opening remarks did an admirable job of assuaging attendees' suspicions and concerns about DAS' intentions. After some initial hesitancy, attendees quickly became engaged in a wide-ranging and surprisingly candid two-hour discussion of the realities of the

roofing industry, the strengths and weaknesses of their respective apprenticeship programs, and ideas for improving apprenticeship training and graduation rates. The specific topics discussed during the forum included:

- Factors influencing the high intake of roofing apprentices, such as the lack of program entrance requirements, the seasonality of the roofing industry, and the rise of firms that specialize in tearing off (and not re-applying) roofs;
- Immigration, naturalization, and cultural issues and their impact on the roofing workforce;
- Emerging technologies, increasing specialization among roofing contractors, and the possible need to discard traditional notions of what constitutes a "journeyman;" and
- Innovative approaches to related and supplemental instruction, such as web-based learning and concentrated training, where apprentices attend classes full-time for several weeks per year rather than a few hours at a time on nights and/or weekends.

Refreshingly, there was very little posturing by or overt hostility between the union and non-union apprenticeship program personnel present. This was due in part to the fact that some of them had recently worked together at the behest of the California Apprenticeship Council to adopt consensus Minimum Industry Training Criteria for roofing. The fact that DAS Chief Rowan is a neutral party who has never been associated with either a union or a non-union apprenticeship program also helped to promote a civil and productive process.

The October 12 Roofing Industry Forum did not produce a "solution" to the high intake/low completion problem in roofing apprenticeship. Given the complexity of the issues and the long history of conflict between the union and non-union roofing training programs, none could possibly have been expected. The best that DAS could have realistically hoped for was what it actually got, a candid discussion of some important issues and agreement among the participants that it makes sense to address these issues together on an industry-wide basis.

The next Forum will be co-hosted by DAS and Roofers Local Union No. 95 (San Jose, Calif.) early next year. Stay tuned. ●●●