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SMART and SMACNA take proactive measures to help tackle the skilled labor shortage challenge in Florida.

It's no secret that while construction across the country has continued to boom, the sector is facing a massive skilled labor shortage. Especially so in Florida, where experts have said the situation is dire as labor demands continue to outpace the size of the industry workforce—and by a wide margin.

To help address this challenge, the Sheet Metal Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) Local 435 in Jacksonville and Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors' National Association's (SMACNA) Florida contractors have been taking radical recruitment measures that are proving to be incredibly successful.

In just over a year, Local 435 and its members have managed to almost triple its number of new applicants. "Last year, the Local interviewed 64 people for its apprenticeship program. That's a big increase from the 25 to 30 they usually recruit," said Florida SMACNA contractor, Ray Burnsed Jr., president of Ray's Metal Works Inc.

SMART and SMACNA's success comes down to some very strategic and focused recruitment efforts. With the help from some additional funding from the Partners in Progress Strive to Succeed Grant (a SMART/SMACNA initiative that recognizes those who have built excellent labor-management relationships), as well as some thinking outside the box, they have managed to raise awareness about the numerous benefits of entering the trades.

"Since January 18 this year we have organized more than 150 members," says Lance Fout, Local 435's business manager. "Marketing has been a top priority for us. From the union hall, Apprenticeship Committee, and Florida SMACNA, we have spent more than \$30,000.00 on TV, radio, billboards, news station, newspapers, and social media advertising. We have not had numbers like this year's in probably 15-plus years."

While many trades are focusing recruitment efforts on high school graduates, Local 435 has broadened its scope. "Aside from raising awareness among students leaving school and at jobsites, we have also reached out to community groups," Fout adds. "One has been Wealth Watchers of Jacksonville. Two of their students started their apprenticeship on July 1."

Wealth Watchers Inc. helps build viable communities by expanding the knowledge of low-to-moderate income individuals for the purpose of understanding the importance of basic finance and the accumulation of wealth. With the numerous benefits offered by SMART, including a four-year paid apprentice program, insurance benefits, retirement benefits, and a vacation policy, it was a perfect fit.

Even non-union members are starting to jump ship. "We have been able to recruit members from the non-union and now we have non-union contractors calling our contractors for pricing," Fout says.

And it's not just the union who is out there spreading the message.

Teairra Marshall, who is employed by Florida SMACNA member Ferber Sheet Metal and who is getting ready to finish her apprenticeship with Local 435, recently visited a trade school in the Jacksonville area where she had graduated from prior to applying to the union. Her purpose was to connect with students and tell them about her experience.

“During the visit it felt good to share the knowledge and truth about our union, as I was once sitting in that same chair four years ago without a concrete plan,” Marshall says. “I'm proud to be a part of Local 435. It's like family. If I need the help or encouragement on and off the clock, my brothers and sisters are always there.”

The International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART) and the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors' National Association (SMACNA) have a labor management partnership that is more than 75 years old. The goal of these Partners in Progress is to maintain an effective cooperative effort that demonstrates their expertise in the heating ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC), architectural metal, and industrial sheet metal markets. For additional information, visit pinp.org.