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Sheet metal partners in Western Washington introduce lactation pods, helping break barriers for women

Lactation pods for nursing mothers offer safe, private space for women on construction sites

When SMACNA-Western Washington Executive Vice President Julie Muller was transferred from Southern California to Western Washington, she had one-year-old twins. She met a journeywoman with young children at an industry event and began talking motherhood.

“This young woman said the only way she could continue to breastfeed her baby was to go down to her car parked on the job site, cover the windows with sheets, and use the cigarette lighter to power her breast pump,” Muller said. “I instantly realized the inequality and that it was much easier for me to return to work with an office job than it was for her, working on a construction site.”

Muller acted, spear-heading a partnership between the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors’ National Association (SMACNA) and the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, and Transportation Workers (SMART) to provide a solution.

While in an airport, Muller discovered lactation pods—unobtrusive, attractive, tiny rooms set up with secure access for the privacy and comfort of breast-feeding moms.

“Right away, I thought about how these could be used for women in construction,” she says. Because the current models weren’t suitable for outdoor use, Muller found a company that could manufacture outdoor-ready pods and approached the Women’s Committees at SMACNA – Western Washington and SMART Local 66 for support.

“Julie is very supportive of all women in the trades,” said SMART Local 66 Women’s Committee Chairperson Tammy Meyen. “When she came to us to talk about support for lactation pods for use on construction sites, we said ‘Yes! Absolutely we would.’ As it stands right now, sisters have to use restrooms or their cars, and that’s not sanitary or comfortable.”

SMACNA and SMART backed the initiative, offering resources and funding through the Joint Labor Management Committee.

The first two outdoor lactation pods were manufactured in Southern California and delivered to SMART Local 66 training facilities in Everett and in Dupont this summer.

The pods look similar to a porta-potty but are larger, completely weatherproof, and accessed by remote entry. “They have a seating area, sink, cleaning supplies, solar plug-ins for equipment, a refrigerator to store the milk, air conditioning, and Wi-Fi,” Meyen said.

Additional pods can be transported by trailer to any jobsite or large shop in the Puget Sound area.

“We’ll have online access to put in a request for one,” Muller says. “We’re also developing some type of collateral for the contractor or union to be able to approach the general contractor and request permission to place a pod on the jobsite.”

Meyen noted that having this product available and discreetly in place takes away the awkward conversation on the jobsite about ‘What do we do with her?’ “It’s all set up and ready to go,” she says. “And our sisters will know that they’re cared for and valuable members of the team.”

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