



# FORGING GENDER EQUITY IN THE SHEET METAL WORKERS LOCAL 28: THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP, GOALS AND REGULAR REVIEW

One of the strongest examples of what is possible when apprenticeship program leadership commits to building a diverse workforce can be found at the Sheet Metal Workers International Association Local 28.

Led by Leah Rambo, a veteran sheet metal worker and the program's first female apprenticeship director, local 28 has seen dramatic improvements in women's participation in apprenticeship, increasing the overall percentage from 3 percent at the beginning of 2011 to 11 percent in 2017, and achieving a rate of 16% for new apprentices entering the program in 2017. This achievement resulted from the consistent implementation of three core strategies: cooperation with feeder programs; sustained outreach; and monitoring and evaluation.

## Background

Sheet metal workers are responsible for the drafting, shop fabrication, field installation and maintenance of all types of heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems and architectural sheet metal fabrication and installation. The Apprenticeship School of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail,

and Transportation Workers' Local Union 28 (the School) trains sheet metal workers in the five boroughs of New York City and Long Island. A sheet metal worker apprenticeship takes five years, including an obligatory 6 months pre-apprenticeship program and 4 weeks of classroom instruction each year.

Entry to the apprenticeship program is highly sought-after. Pre-apprentices receive an hourly rate of \$16.64 plus benefits, rising to \$18.93 once they are indentured into the first term of their apprenticeship, and increasing each following term.<sup>1</sup> The pre-apprenticeship class is offered twice a year, typically with 30 to 35 students (depending



Local 28 Sheet Metal apprentices and journeywomen at Delta Sheet Metal, Long Island, NY

“In 2013, we learned a very important lesson: numbers don’t increase by themselves. If you take your eye off the ball and stop targeted outreach, women’s numbers will fall.”

**LEAH RAMBO**

*Director of Training,  
Sheet Metal Workers Local 28*

“I always wanted to work with my hands, and my dad taught me a lot. But it took until my 30s to finally get into the trades because as a woman, your parents do not want you to get dirty; they want you to have a nice desk job. So I got a degree, worked in buildings & maintenance, had four kids, and then finally a friend told me about NEW, and at NEW I learned about sheet metal. This job is everything I ever wanted to do.”

**FEMALE APPRENTICE**

*4th term, JPR Mechanical Inc.,  
Local 28*

on work availability) drawn from over 2,000 applications annually. All applicants must pass an entrance exam; applicants are either selected randomly from general applications or come through the certified pre-apprenticeship and recruiting organizations. Local 28 JATC has been under court supervision since 1978 because of race and national origin discrimination (EEOC 2015) and now, with over 70 percent participation from minorities and a realistic goal of achieve 20% participation by 2020, they are a model program for inclusion within the sheet metal workers union and the construction industry as a whole.

## Monitoring Progress and Setting Targets

**Training director Leah Rambo’s goal is to get to 20% by 2020,** ensuring that 20 percent of sheet metal apprentices are women by that time. To reach this goal, she monitors change in the composition of her apprenticeship classes- making sure that there is a steady increase in the number of women applying for and getting into the apprenticeship, and tracking their progress through their terms. In addition to monitoring women’s recruitment and retention, she also compares data for women with male apprentices to check for disparity in outcomes. Rambo recalled feeling encouraged by an initial upward trend, with the proportion of women in the program increasing rapidly, from 3% at the beginning of 2011 to 10% at the end of 2012. However, progress has not always proceeded in a consistent way, and the numbers plummeted back down to 4% in 2013. As a result she has adopted a more concerted focus on outreach and recruitment; recruiting a racially and ethnically diverse set of apprentices has not been a problem for the local- approximately 70 percent of apprentices are people of color—but given that overall numbers are still low, reaching women continues to require constant, targeted, effort.

## Outreach and Recruitment

Local 28 Training School relies on a number of different routes to publicize information about apprenticeship opportunities including stating on all recruitment materials that “Women and veterans are encouraged to apply” and “We are an equal opportunity and affirmative action employer.”<sup>2</sup> To ensure that the this message reaches an engaged and qualified audience, the program has also built strong relationships with feeder organizations such as Nontraditional Employment for Women (NEW) Helmet-to-Hardhats and The Edward J. Malloy Initiative for Construction Skills and Opportunities Long Island as well as career and technical high schools and colleges. The

school's relationship with Helmets-to-Hardhats has been fruitful, as many of the skills learned are highly relevant to the trades, including working in a male dominated environment. In the military's own craft apprenticeship programs, women are 21% of apprentices (US DOL 2017b). Since 2011 the share of veterans among Local 28 apprentices has increased from 1 to 10 percent, including two women. Since 2014, the partnership with NEW has continued to be an essential part of the program's recruitment strategy. NEW offers women a seven-week, full-time program, also available at nights and weekends, which provides a well-rounded, hands-on introduction to work in the trades; Leah Rambo regularly conducts information sessions for participants of NEW's programs to ensure that they are aware of opportunities in sheet metal. New York City's career and technical high schools are another source for women apprentices, and are now part of Rambo's regular program of talks and outreach. Both NEW and the CTE high schools teach classes based on the Building Trades Multi-Craft Core curriculum (MC3) which was designed as a pathway to registered apprenticeships and provides direct entry to the pre-apprenticeship, as long as individuals pass the entrance exams (NABTU 2017). As Leah Rambo explains, "If I can get more women into these preparatory programs, my pool of possible applicants increases, and it is more likely that we will meet our 20 by 2020 goal."

Architecture and engineering schools are another target for outreach. A female mechanic (the term for journey level workers used by the Sheet Metal workers) who is now working in drafting, came to her sheet metal apprenticeship after finishing a degree in architecture. She recalled that when she graduated college in 2011, the best she could hope for was making minimum wage, in spite of her degree. As an apprentice she earned substantially more, and liked the more varied work. She recalls, "I was 80 pounds. I did the full apprenticeship, including 4 years in the field- I put on 20 pounds of pure muscle. Yes, it is physically hard, but if you are not as strong, you find other ways. If you cannot physically do it, stop, and the guys will teach you how to do it safely."

## **Tapping Member Networks to Improve Diversity**

Less formal, but also very effective, Leah Rambo encourages members and apprentices to get the word out to friends and family about the opportunities for women in sheet metal. "In the past, family sometimes was used to unfairly block access to the trades for women and minorities; as long as we are absolutely fair and transparent- it can also be a good route for increasing diversity." Among the apprentices are several sisters, cousins, wives, daughters, or girlfriends of members. Having a family member in the union does not give anyone preferential access to an

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### **FEMALE MECHANIC**

*Delta Sheet Metal;  
member of Local 28*

“We are a family owned company, with about 40 workers. You still do not see many women in the industry but there has been a clear change in the last 4 years or so; currently 3 of our 10 pre/apprentices are women: as long as they work hard, they are welcome. As owners we also make it clear to our mechanics: this industry requires teamwork, and being able to work in a team--with whoever we allocate--is part of performance. If you can't do that, you are not a good worker.”

**GARY PORTMAN**

*Co-Owner, Karo Sheet Metal Inc. NY*

apprenticeship – everyone has to pass the test and use the official ways for competing for an apprenticeship—but it can provide support and, when the family member is another woman, strong role models.

## Placing and Supporting Women Apprentices

Local 28 apprentices are directly placed with contractors and apprentices are not required to find their own jobs. Leah Rambo recalls that when she started work as the Training Director some contractors' response to a female apprentice was “Come on, Leah, we don't have to have a woman, do we?” Her reply was always clear: “Yes, you do – you have to give everyone a chance. But, as with any apprentice, if she really does not work out, then let me know, and we will make sure you get someone who does.” This response has become much less common as employers not only have seen the quality of female apprentices, but also have experience with the school's responsiveness to real performance issues.

The school realizes that women apprentices may face a more hostile environment at work than male apprentices, and that even in the best of cases, being the only woman can be tough. For this reason, all female apprentices receive an introduction to the realities of working in a male-dominated field, including information on how to respond



Local 28 Sheet Metal apprentices at JPR Mechanical Inc with James Orlando, VP Operations, and Local 28 Training Director Leah Rambo (on right).

and who to contact if they experience discrimination or harassment on the job. They are also encouraged to check in immediately with program staff if their experience anything that doesn't feel right at work. At the school itself, efforts are made to ensure that all classes include at least two women. Women at Local 28 have recently set up a women's committee, which includes apprentices, and provides further support for women in the field. To support the retention and development of its women apprentices, Local 28 is also sending delegations of women apprentices- 10 of them in 2017 – to the Women Build Nations Conference.

## Ensuring Fairness and Monitoring Performance

Apprentice's performance is written into the operations of the apprenticeship school. Contractors are required to submit monthly performance evaluations on each apprentice. The apprenticeship school consistently encourages contractors to complete their forms and makes it easy for them to do so. Given the fluctuation in demand that is typical of work in construction, such evaluations are essential when deciding on who gets laid off and, without objective data on attendance, for example, bias can easily creep in. A sole woman working among men is typically being observed much more closely than her male colleagues are; anything she does (wrong) will get noticed immediately, while equally wrong or worse behavior from male apprentices may go unnoticed. For Leah Rambo, letting go of an apprentice because she is not performing is part of ensuring that the program turns out high quality apprentices, but any such determination must be based in fact, not opinion or bias.

## Diversity as a Business Model

Focusing on gender diversity in its apprenticeship school makes a lot of business sense for the JATC. By being systematic about recruitment, setting targets, and being strict about performance, Local 28 is able to meet the expectations of its business partners. Gender diversity is also increasingly rewarded in competition for contracts. The NoVo Foundation, for example, was requiring that all bidders for the construction of their new headquarters in Brooklyn have an existing workforce that is at least 25% female. A Local 28 apprentice made the difference for her employer's (KARO Sheet Metal Inc.) successful bid. Currently 40 percent of workers on the NoVo site are women, so local 28 is not the only apprenticeship program competing for strong female applicants. As Local 28 Business Manager Kevin Connors notes, "Sheet Metal Workers' Local Union 28 believes the key to having a

"I put a lot of emphasis on sponsors submitting monthly evaluations for each apprentice. Without these data we cannot check, for example, whether a female apprentice is let go because her attendance was worse, or because everyone was watching the girl, and not realizing how many guys were also missing. Ensuring that decisions are objective and fair is essential for turning out good apprentices."

**LEAH RAMBO**

*Director of Training, Sheet Metal Workers Local 28*

“Business is booming in New York. If we have skilled staff, we can grow as a business. We currently employ three women mechanics, as well as several women pre-/apprentices, they are doing great work. We can rely on the apprenticeship school to send us good workers, and if someone does not work out, we can be confident that they will address this.”

**JAMES ORLANDO**  
*VP Operations,  
JPR Mechanical Inc, NY*

successful career in our industry is training. The training we provide results in male and female sheet metal workers who are skilled in a variety of areas.[...]. We are proud of the fact that our program is the prototype for other apprenticeship programs. Being a Sheet Metal Workers’ Local Union 28 apprentice is not just a job – IT’S A CAREER. Every parent wants their child to do better than they did, and I am proud that we provide that opportunity to anyone who is interested in a career in our industry. This not only meets but exceeds the expectations a parent has for their child.”



Linette Hooker, second term sheet metal apprentice, Local 28, working at the reconstruction of NoVo Foundation’s new NYC HQ

### **FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:**

SHEET METAL WORKERS INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION LOCAL UNION NO. 28 TRAINING CENTER

<https://p11.secure.hostingprod.com/@www.smwialu28.org/ssl/index-4.html>

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## ENDNOTES

1. A term typically lasts 6 months, depending on work availability.
2. See Local Union 28 <https://p11.secure.hostingprod.com/@www.smwialu28.org/ssl/images/Recruitment-Flyer-2017-2018.pdf>

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