



How Apprenticeship Programs in Construction Trades Can Establish Family-Friendly Policies

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At a Glance

The construction industry's lack of pregnancy and family medical leave policies can limit women's ability to complete apprenticeships successfully and safely, often forcing tradeswomen to choose between their work and their families. This brief provides information and best practices on how construction employers can offer these crucial benefits.

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Chicago Women in Trades (CWIT) is a nonprofit tradeswomen's organization dedicated to increasing women's economic equity through access to high-wage, skilled trade jobs. CWIT's National Center for Women's Equity in Apprenticeship and Employment is the leading national entity advancing policy, conducting advocacy, and offering technical assistance to increase the number of women entering and being retained in male-dominated jobs and apprenticeships in the construction, manufacturing, and transportation sectors. www.womensequitycenter.org

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The Need for Family-Friendly Policies in Construction Trades

Construction trade apprenticeships offer a pathway for parents to earn a family-sustaining wage, yet women remain underrepresented in these roles. The industry's lack of pregnancy and family medical leave policies can limit women's ability to complete construction trade apprenticeships successfully and safely and are often a factor in tradeswomen leaving the industry. In a 2021 survey of tradeswomen by the Institute for Women's Policy Research, 63% of parents with children under age 18 who said they had seriously considered leaving the trades mentioned a lack of pregnancy accommodations as a very or somewhat important factor.¹ Equally telling, 56% of tradeswomen who are younger than 35 and do not have children cited a lack of pregnancy accommodations among their reasons for considering leaving the industry.

The working conditions and requirements of construction and skilled trades jobs can put the mother's or fetus's health at risk. Many pregnant tradeswomen must work because a break in work hours can cause them to lose their health insurance. Concerns for pregnant women in construction trade apprenticeships include:

- Performing physically strenuous work.
- Getting laid off if a supervisor discovers they're pregnant, in an industry where layoffs are common and cause is hard to prove.
- Being fired for requesting light or less-strenuous work.
- Working in hazardous conditions or being exposed to toxic materials that could cause a miscarriage.
- Missing the required thresholds for federal or state Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) policies.

The Pregnancy Discrimination Act makes it illegal for employers to fire a woman because she's pregnant, or to deny a pregnant woman alternative or lighter work if such an accommodation is available to other workers with injuries or a disabilities. However, enforcing such provisions can be difficult. In an industry where workers tend to move from contract to contract with frequent hiring and dismissal, it's hard to prove that the termination of one's contract was due to discrimination. These rules also apply to situations where a woman is seeking a new job while visibly pregnant.

The federal Family Medical Leave (FMLA) provides individuals with 12 weeks of unpaid leave when they need time to handle the birth or adoption of a child, a family member's illness, or their own health condition. It applies to employers of 50 or more employees. To be eligible, employees must have

worked 1,250 hours for at least a year. If qualified, they can receive job protection and continuation of health insurance.

State paid family leave laws have varying thresholds for coverage and eligibility requirements. These benefits are funded through payroll taxes paid by employers and/or employees.

Women working in construction might not qualify for protection under any of those regulations because they may only work intermittently and may not be with a single employer for a long enough period of time, or they might work for small employers that don't meet the required thresholds for coverage.

While one of the benefits of union membership in the construction industry is coverage by collectively bargained labor-management disability and health and welfare plans, these may not cover extended time off, and those gaps may leave a pregnant woman or new mother facing the difficult decision to forgo wages and health benefits in order to have and care for a child—when the need for such benefits would be the greatest.

Until 2017, there were no specific policies for the construction industry that address these concerns. In the absence of a formal union, apprenticeship program, or employer policy, or of a public policy that adequately considers the nature of construction work, most tradeswomen who want to or do become pregnant have to find individual solutions. An inability to do so compromises their ability to complete their apprenticeships successfully and safely or build long-term careers in the industry. A clear accommodation policy could protect the health and safety of pregnant workers, the children they carry, and those working with them while fulfilling a company's liability and legal obligations.

Precedent-Setting Pregnancy and Maternity Policies in Building Trades

When tradeswomen organized and spoke up about the need for more family-friendly policies within the industry, it spurred building trades to adopt groundbreaking new practices. As outlined in a brief by the [National Center for Women's Equity in Apprenticeship and Employment](#), the first national breakthroughs in obtaining pregnancy and maternity leave benefits in the trades came after Bridget Booker, a third year apprentice ironworker in Illinois, shared her story during the Ironworkers Caucus at the 2016 Women Build Nations Conference.²

Booker recounted how, as a second-year apprentice, she miscarried after a very heavy day on the job. She said that she felt she had had no option but to continue to work when she became pregnant—without work, she would have lost not only her earnings, but also her health insurance. Almost as tragically, she didn't think it was possible to be open about her pregnancy and perhaps ask to be shifted to less strenuous work. She was certain, based on her experience on that work site, that she would have lost her job if she did.

"At that moment," Booker said, "the trades were not keen on having pregnant women on the job site. So you would hide it. [The question was] do I provide for my children . . . or do I quit? Do I provide for my rent and my bills, or do I tell them I am pregnant and lose everything?" The Ironworkers International Union General President Eric Dean was in attendance, and Booker courageously asked him, "Why did I have to endure the mistreatment and take such a devastating loss to work?" She said she told him "everything about every 'ism' I was faced with" and then asked, "What's the proper procedure in following the chain of command when *no one* is listening, or doing their job, or working together so that you don't get the help that you need because of the 'good ol' boys' culture?"

Booker urged Dean to act so other women wouldn't face similar tragedies. Several women encouraged the union to address the issue at the national level and not leave it to local chapters, as Dean initially suggested. He assigned a tradeswomen leader to the effort, and within a year, the International Association of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental and Reinforcing Iron Workers (IW) and its management partners rolled out a policy funded through the Ironworker Management Progressive Action Cooperative Trust (IMPACT) short-term disability fund.

Booker says she takes some comfort in the new policy. "I'll never get my son back, nor can I forget him. Yet, from me sharing my story, being a voice for my son and myself, the Ironworkers along with Impact Fund developed the first-ever maternity leave policy in construction. Other women won't have to endure what I went through. They have a voice now."

This model inspired other unions and tradeswomen to push for pregnancy accommodation and family leave policies. As of 2023, five international trade unions have adopted these policies: the IW; the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail and Transportation Workers (SMART); the International Union of Bricklayers and Allied Craftworkers (BAC); the United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipefitting Industry of the United States and Canada (UA); and the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT). Some local unions or regional entities, like SMART Local 265 and IUPAT District Council 30, layer their benefits with those of other local, regional, or national union organizations to provide a more generous package. Others, like the National Electrical

Contractors Association-International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (NECA-IBEW) Local 48 and the North Central States Regional Council of Carpenters (NCSRCC), develop their own policies.

Benefits of Creating Family-Friendly Policies for Industry and Apprenticeship Programs

Protecting the health and safety of pregnant workers through strong, clear policies and benefits makes good business sense for the construction industry and the apprenticeship programs that grow its skilled workforce. The industry is motivated in part by national attention focused on improving equity and inclusion in the workforce and the recognition that supporting work and family balance and infant care is the right thing to do. In announcing the paid maternity program, IW General President Eric Dean said, “It’s about time we make our industry a level playing field for women and make diversity and inclusion a priority.”³ These policies also demonstrate efforts to meet federal and state equal opportunity regulations for apprenticeship.

The policies also pay off through increased retention of apprentices and journeymen. Apprenticeship programs invest an average of \$35,000 to train an apprentice to journey level. Someone who leaves as a result of pregnancy represents a loss on that investment. Bill Brown, CEO of Ben Hur Construction Co. and the IMPACT Fund’s co-chair, said, “I wasn’t sure how we’d pull it off and what it would cost, but we realized that it’s an investment because we want our well-trained ironworker women to come back to work.”⁴

Best Practices for Establishing Family-Friendly Policies for Apprenticeship Programs

The IW set the initial standard for paid pregnancy and maternity leave with partial wage replacement. Other unions are now raising the bar. Here are some goals the construction trades can aspire to as they rework or implement their leave policies.

Benefits

Offer 100% wage replacement by layering international and local union benefits to share the costs.

Duration of Benefits

Provide the worker with access to full disability benefits during pregnancy, including time off, wage replacement, workplace accommodations, and apprenticeship training extensions. The duration of short-term disability benefits is typically 26 weeks. The worker should be able to use those benefits continuously or intermittently, and the tradeswoman and her doctor should have control over this decision. Other provisions:

- **Maternity:** Women should be able to take time off after giving birth, regardless of any pregnancy-related leave they might have already taken. Maternity leave plans typically follow the original IW model of six weeks of leave after a vaginal birth and eight weeks after a cesarean section.
- **Miscarriage:** IUPAT District Council 30 broke new ground when it began providing two weeks off following a miscarriage.
- **Intermittent use:** Allowing the intermittent use of time-off benefits enables a woman to work when she is able to, and to plan her leave to meet her medical and caregiving needs.

Continuation of Health Insurance Coverage

Ensure the continuation of health insurance at no or low cost.

Qualifying Hours

Make the benefit available to every worker with low qualifying hours, or the minimum hours of work necessary to qualify for coverage by the union health plan. (These ranges vary according to each plan.)

Doctor Certification

Minimize required documentation from physicians for pregnancy or maternity benefits. Make the process for the medical certification of pregnancy consistent with how other disability benefits are certified.

Ability to Continue Apprenticeship Training Without Penalty

Allow the worker to return to and complete an apprenticeship training after taking leave.⁵

Utilization of Benefits

Don't restrict the use of benefits. Women balance many factors when planning their family size, and benefit eligibility should not be their primary concern.

Funding Benefits

Take full advantage of available funding sources. Most benefits come from short-term disability plans; health and welfare funds are another frequent source.

Coordination With Government and Other Insurance Benefits

Layer all of the policies on top of other available benefits, without exceeding the allowed benefit amount.

Designation of ‘Go-To’ Staff and Resources

Ensure that women know who and where to go to access and use these benefits.⁶

Communication to Members

Develop a consistent means of communicating the benefits to members, such as brochures, videos, posts on websites and social media, and training sessions.⁷

Systematic Tracking of Utilization of Leave and Job Return and Retention

Develop and make available a tool for tracking members’ benefits that includes data on the pool of workers who are eligible, benefit use by month and quarter, the cost of benefits per person, and the frequency of benefits use, as well as information on job return and retention.

Maternity Benefit Plans in Action

The maternity benefit plan created by IBEW Local 48 in partnership with NECA and the Harrison Electrical Workers Trust Fund serving Oregon and southwest Washington also sets a high standard.

Designed to retain women in the workforce, [the plan](#) offers 13 weeks of paid leave before a doctor-certified due date and 13 weeks after, doubling the previous maternity leave offering.⁹ Union members

Painters District Council Plan

The Painters District Council No. 30 plan stands out for having layered local benefits on top of the basic plan that the IUPAT developed.⁸ The goal is to give pregnant workers all wages and benefits by offering:

- One hundred percent wage replacement.
- Job protection.
- Fully paid health insurance benefits.
- No loss of accumulated apprenticeship hours.
- The ability to continue apprenticeship training without penalty.

receive \$800 a week in time-loss benefits in addition to FMLA benefits. The trust also pays health insurance premiums, providing recipients with free health coverage for their entire family.

The plan has made all the difference for local tradeswomen. NECA-IBEW Local 48 apprentice Samantha Juarez said: “When I got into [the trades], I was so adamant about not having a child until after my apprenticeship. But I ended up getting pregnant, so without this program, it would’ve been hard on me with school and work.”¹⁰ Juarez, who worked for the first six months of her pregnancy, said even that was a challenge, and she couldn’t imagine working past her second trimester.

Apprentice Micialia Rea-Branch was grateful to have been able to take 13 weeks off before she gave birth. “At a certain point in the pregnancy, you just get really tired,” she said.¹¹

Caitlin Williams, a seventh-term apprentice, had about half a year left in her apprenticeship when she gave birth in May 2021. For her, the ability to take 13 weeks of leave postdelivery was the program’s most significant benefit. “It’s been really priceless to be able to be home and not have to worry so much about the financial side of things [and] to know that I’m being taken care of and I can just focus on helping [my baby] grow and really get as far along as she can before I have to go back to work,” Williams said.¹²

Apprentice sheet metal worker and member of SMART Local 265 Danielle Wilson was “amazed” to learn that she had maternity leave benefits and could stay at home with her son for six weeks. “It was a million pounds off my shoulders to know that I had that time,” she said.¹³

How to Promote Adoption of Family Leave Policies

The activism of tradeswomen—some in local or national leadership positions, and often with the support of a male leader at the local or regional level—has catalyzed the promotion of family leave and pregnancy accommodations and sparked slow but steady progress across trade unions. National and local leaders in labor and management in the trades must amplify these efforts.

What works in one trade, apprenticeship program, or geographic location might not be the best approach in another. What does work consistently is sharing information, listening to members, and urging leadership to address the issues, as in these examples.

- Bridget Quinn, workforce development coordinator with NECA-IBEW Local 48, learned of the progress on family leave through the tradeswomen's network. She shared Booker's story from the National Center for Women's Equity in Apprenticeship and Employment brief with union business manager Garth Bachman. They worked together with actuaries and Harrison Trustees to show that benefits could be provided with nominal costs to the health plan.
- The NCSRCC's Sisters in the Brotherhood regional committees gathered stories from women about their experiences with pregnancy and maternity as carpenter union members. They assembled and presented the stories to John Raines, the NCSRCC's now-retired executive secretary-treasurer, with the proposed recommendations. He felt that the long-overdue benefits could be a valuable tool in recruiting and retaining women and diversifying the newest generation of carpenters.
- Louise Medina, a sheet metal worker, took the IW policies to her business manager, who sits on the board of SMART's National Stabilization Agreement of the Sheet Metal Industry (SASMI) Trust Fund. The SASMI board agreed to provide 12 additional weeks of benefits for pregnancy and maternity, based on the FMLA model. Under the plan, women can begin using that benefit four weeks before their expected delivery date and continue to earn 60% of their hourly wage; if the inability to work is medically certified, women can begin using the benefit sooner.¹⁴

“It’s about time we make our industry a level playing field for women and make diversity and inclusion a priority.” — IW General President Eric Dean

Adding Family Leave to Your Program

It's important to ensure that all policies abide by the federal regulations under the Pregnancy Discrimination Act, the Family and Medical Leave Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act.¹⁵ Best practices for bringing family leave and maternity policies to apprenticeship programs and sponsors include the following:

- Evaluate best practices.
- Conduct a cost-benefit analysis.
- Add family-friendly policies to apprenticeship program standards.
- Educate apprentices, contractors, and union leaders on leave policies and best practices.
- Educate and train instructors, staff members, and journeyworkers.
- Publicize new leave policies through union publications and other media.
- Develop shared communications using tested messages to support benefit use and expansion.
- Use leave policies as a recruitment tool to bring more women into the trades.

Best practices for union leaders, contractors, and employers to initiate better family leave and maternity policies include the following:

- Lead the way.
- Start a women's committee, and listen to female members.
- Initiate policies in your collective bargaining agreements and in relevant disability and health policies.
- Designate a senior staff member to coordinate these initiatives in your union and with employers.

You can find additional resources for requesting an accommodation due to pregnancy-related limitations at [AskJan.org](https://www.askjan.org).

Conclusion

Workers, apprenticeship program managers, union staff members and leaders, and contractors can help ensure that tradeswomen receive the benefits, time off, and support they need to maintain work and family balance and advance their careers. Apprentices and journeyworkers should feel that their jobs will be secure if they take leave to build a family. Everyone in the building and construction trades stand to benefit from addressing these issues of family and work-life balance.

For more information and other diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility resources for your apprenticeship program, check out Chicago Women in Trades' [National Center for Women's Equity in Apprenticeship and Employment](#) and [JFF's National Innovation Hub for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility in Registered Apprenticeship](#).

Endnotes

¹ Ariane Hegewisch and Eve Mefferd, *A Future Worth Building* (Washington, DC: Institute for Women's Policy Research, November 16, 2021), https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/A-Future-Worth-Building_What-Tradeswomen-Say_Executive-Summary.pdf.

² Ariane Hegewisch, *Pregnancy and Maternity Leave in the Trades: Good Practices for Apprentices* (Chicago: National Center for Women's Equity in Apprenticeship and Employment, October 2017), <https://womensequitycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Pregnancy-and-Maternity-in-the-Trades.pdf>.

³ Iron Workers and Contractors Announce Paid Maternity Leave Benefit," IMPACT, March 23, 2017, <https://www.impact-net.org/news/2017/03/23/iron-workers-and-contractors-announce-paid-maternity-leave-benefit>.

⁴ Iron Workers and Contractors," <https://www.impact-net.org/news/2017/03/23/iron-workers-and-contractors-announce-paid-maternity-leave-benefit>.

⁵ SMART Local 28 apprentices can receive New York temporary disability benefits for medically required pregnancy and maternity leave and for postnatal bonding following birth, adoption, foster care, or the illness of a child or family member after 10 months' work tenure with continuation of health insurance. However, the plan initially did not address a key issue of limitations on leave. Leah Rambo, director of training for SMART Local 28, amended the apprenticeship program leave limitations so that extended-leave provisions do not apply to pregnancy, and maternity and medical leave is unlimited. Another yet-unaddressed concern is the need to change the on-time graduation performance metric, which does not currently consider pregnancy, maternity, or family leave.

⁶ Designation of a union staff member at a senior level is the best way to ensure that there is a go-to problem solver who also has the resources to track the implementation of the program and address issues as they arise. In the IW, general organizer Vicki O'Leary informs women that they are entitled to these benefits. She produces and distributes informational brochures, ensures that women in local offices and apprenticeship trainers are educated about the benefits, and engages with union women's networks to spread the word and assist women on the job and in recruitment efforts. See *Maternity Provision Policy* (Washington, DC: Ironworkers International, June 2017), http://www.impact-net.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/maternity-brochure-2017-kenny-update-3c7feb15c78366c709642ff00005f0421.pdf?sfvrsn=38c8dd0d_0.

⁷ In a [Portland Business Journal article](#), several benefit recipients discussed the value of taking leave without penalty during apprenticeships to further their career advancement; the value of prolonged leave with health insurance to alleviate financial pressures; and the positive impact of these policies on job retention. The local union reaches out to members through traditional channels, and it has [produced informative and moving videos](#) on the benefit.

⁸ The plan guarantees 100% wage replacement (topping off the two-thirds provided by the IUPAT), offers two weeks off following a miscarriage, covers the first trimester of pregnancy (adding on to the IUPAT benefit that begins in the second trimester) for a total of up to 40 weeks of leave before childbirth, and allows for coverage for any pregnancy without restriction. (The IUPAT policy provides for use once every 24 months.) Women will be credited for the full number of hours for which these benefits are paid, allowing them to maintain and extend health and welfare and pension benefits. Importantly for apprentices, leave is not counted against the time required to complete apprenticeship training.

⁹ "Videos," NECA-IBEW, accessed January 10, 2023, <https://necaibew48.com/about/videos/#top>.

¹⁰ NECA-IBEW, "New Electrical Trades Maternity Benefit Sets Nationwide Standard," *Portland Business Journal*, August 13, 2021, <https://www.bizjournals.com/portland/news/2021/08/13/new-electrical-trades-maternity-benefit-sets.html>.

¹¹ NECA-IBEW, “New Electrical Trades Maternity Benefit,” <https://www.bizjournals.com/portland/news/2021/08/13/new-electrical-trades-maternity-benefit-sets.html>.

¹² NECA-IBEW, “New Electrical Trades Maternity Benefit,” <https://www.bizjournals.com/portland/news/2021/08/13/new-electrical-trades-maternity-benefit-sets.html>.

¹³ “Meet Danielle Wilson, an Illinois Sheet Metal Worker,” SMART, February 14, 2022, <https://smart-union.org/member-stories/danielle-wilson>.

¹⁴ This benefit is available to women across the country if the local union participates in the plan. Women are eligible beginning in their second year of apprenticeship, once they have worked 1,200 hours within 12 months. Both SMART International and SMART Local 265 support women’s committees.

¹⁵ (1) Discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth, or related medical conditions is unlawful under the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, which amended Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. §§ 2000e et seq., and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which prohibits discrimination against a job applicant or employee based on a disability, including a disability related to a pregnancy such as diabetes that develops during pregnancy.

(2) While pregnancy itself is not a disability under the ADA, some pregnant workers may have one or more impairments related to their pregnancy that qualify as a “disability” under the ADA. An employer may have to provide that worker with a reasonable accommodation for the pregnancy-related disability.

(3) Cite data from the Fact Sheet on EEO Pregnancy Discrimination and cite examples of pregnancy discrimination.