

**BILLIONS\$ HAVE BEEN INFUSED INTO THE STATE TO CREATE JOBS,
BUT WHY HAVEN'T YOU SEEN ANY HMONG WORKERS?**

Take a drive down any major road in Minnesota and you will most likely run into the bright orange tape, big machines and long traffic lines endemic to the hundreds of construction sites that are scattered throughout the state. One major reason for the increased levels of construction can be attributed to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act passed by the Obama administration in February of 2009. According to the government's website, recover.gov, more than \$3.5 billion has been infused into

the state, with the intention of creating jobs and stimulating the economy. In fact, the site claims that more than 12,500 jobs have been created in the state as a result of the Act. However, take a closer look at most of these work crews and you might discover a disturbing trend in the demographic make up of these workers: The lack of minorities and women. On a recent visual survey of worksites in the East Metro, staff at Hmong Today

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were able to find just one minority worker from 15 separate worksites—an African-American male holding a sign at the White Bear Ave road construction project in Maplewood. Unfortunately, not one construction worker of Asian descent could be found among the many worksites performing in those neighborhoods—even in areas where Hmong home owners make up more than 15% of the neighborhood, such as the East Side of St. Paul. With billions of tax dollars at stake and thou-

sands of potential livable wage jobs on the line, Hmong Today is joining the long list of community activists who have been asking, "Where are all the jobs going?" At the forefront of these discussions is ISIAAH, a coalition of religious leaders committed to seeking social justice. Among those at ISIAAH, Pastor Paul Slack, chair of ISIAAH's Jobs and Workforce Development Campaign, has been pounding at the doors of MN/DOT (Minnesota Department of Transportation) for the last five years. "It was very difficult to get any kind of answers at first," Pastor Slack explained. "But now I feel like we are making some progress—definitely

not where we need to be yet, but compared to then, we are finding an increase in minority hiring and the accessibility and transparency at MN/DOT is much better now."

Although expressing optimism towards the future of minority hiring on MN/DOT projects, Pastor Slack is not ready to call it a success yet.

"I look at this as the beginning of the conversation. Until you can regularly see minority faces at the work sites, we still have a lot of work to do." In their study "Equitable Recovery in Minnesota", ISAIAH analyzed MN/DOT hiring numbers and found some stark numbers. One report from July 2009 showed that out of 1,873 workers on MN/DOT jobs, only 114 (6.1%) of the workers were people of color and only 62 were women (3.3%), concluding that "minorities and women are grossly underrepresented in the jobs created by these public dollars."

ISAIAH's commitment to improve MN/DOT's hiring practices went beyond the meeting table. They participated in hearings at the State Capitol and held over 10 public meetings involving more than 6,000 people who wrote letters and postcards to their politicians showing support for changes in MN/DOT's hiring practices. ISAIAH's activity directly led to legislation authored by Sen. Mee Moua and Rep. Alice Hausman requiring MN/DOT to report on their hiring goals.

More importantly, the perseverance has made a huge impact at MN/DOT where officials say the rising numbers of minority and women hirings are a clear sign that they are on the right path.

"We went beyond just reacting to criticism," says Emma Corrie, Workforce & Business Development Project Manager for MN/DOT. "Cooperating with community stakeholders and contractors, we are taking a proactive and inclusive approach to solving the inequity issues."

Solidifying MN/DOT's efforts to improve the hiring numbers is their commitment of spending one-half of one-percent of the federal money that it receives each year to train and place minorities and women into the workforce. In this first year of funding, MN/DOT will reportedly contribute \$700,000 with projections doubling within the next four years.

Corrie emphasized that the infusion of money is only one part of what MN/DOT is doing to

improve minority and women hiring. Working closely with contractors, MN/DOT has stepped up enforcement from the time bids are submitted all the way until the job has been completed.

"Every contractor knows that we are very serious about raising our minority and women hiring. Even before a bid is placed, we want to see a plan on how that contractor intends on meeting MN/DOT numbers," Corrie explained about the accountability and enforcement placed on prospective contractors.

"And if the numbers are not met, we will continue to work with the contractor to find ways to make it work."

Throughout the years, contractors complained about the lack of qualified applicants from the minority pool. With the infusion of money from Recovery Act, MN/DOT is now in the position to help train and place new crops of applicants. One such training project is the "On-The-Job (OJT) Program Supportive Services" in which

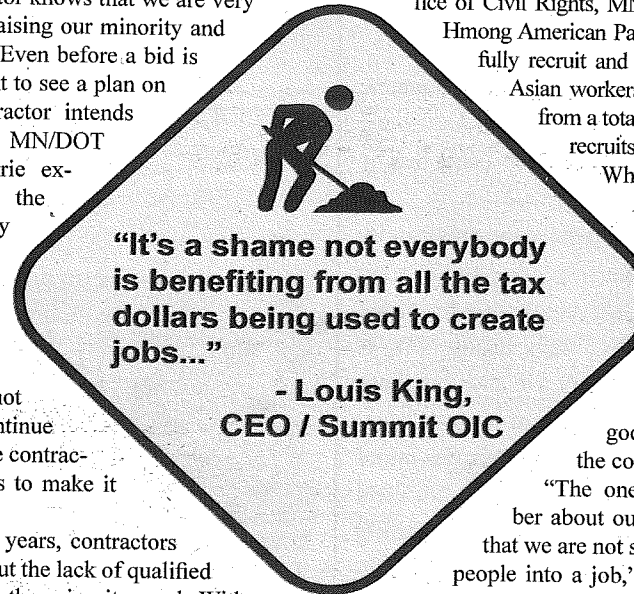
MN/DOT works with a community organization to recruit, train and place applicants into the workforce.

According to Ashanti Payne from MN/DOT's Office of Civil Rights, MN/DOT worked with Hmong American Partnership to successfully recruit and place five Hmong / Asian workers as of August 2010 from a total pool of 87 minority recruits.

While the numbers for Asians are considerably still very low, Payne explains, it's only a matter of time before more Asians see that there are good opportunities in the construction field.

"The one thing to remember about our OJT programs is that we are not simply trying to get people into a job," Payne stated. "In most cases, we are getting people into careers."

Nobody in town may know more about getting people into careers than Louis King, president and CEO of Summit OIC, the Twin Cities' leading nonprofit educational and vocational train-



SUMMIT OIC: TRAINING THAT 'WORKS'!



Looking for a career? Summit OIC offers a variety of different career training options ranging from carpentry, heavy equipment operator, to nursing assistant. In most cases, tuition can be covered by financial aid so you won't be burdened with more loans and debt.

Additionally, Summit OIC provides transportation to those coming from St. Paul.

For more information on Summit OIC, go to:

www.saoic.org or call 612-377-0150



Student Tou Xiong sits behind the heavy equipment simulator. After graduating from this 20-week program, students can earn up to \$20-30 / hour right away!

ing center.

Along with ISAIAH, King has been a vocal critic of MN/DOT's hiring practices, stating "It's a shame that all citizens couldn't benefit from the money coming from the federal government."

Acknowledging the need to increase the pool of trained minority candidates to choose from, Summit OIC has teamed up with MN/DOT and the unions to create a 20-week Heavy Equipment Operators course in which trainees spend the first half of the course in a classroom setting and the second half in the field working with real machinery.

"We're talking about jobs that pay more than \$20 per hour to start," Says an optimistic King. "The moment they graduate from this program, they will belong to a union. We are preparing our students for the future."

In terms of billion dollar construction projects that will greatly affect the Hmong community in the very near future, King brings up the Central Corridor LRT project that will be transforming University Avenue into a light rail transit way.

"When you begin to think about what will happen on University Ave., you better see some Asian faces working on construction sites to counter the impact that the LRT construction will have in those neighborhoods. There will be a lot of losses in terms of what is currently in place, but one positive impact can be found—in the name of jobs."