Working like a champ

One man's career change led him to CHAMPIONS Initiative

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Carlton Prince was ready for a change.

After building a career as a youth development specialist, Prince was eager to pivot to a trade that would allow him to provide for his family. He was drawn to the construction industry, where he knew a handful of people pursuing successful careers.

Prince's search for such work led him to the CHAMPIONS Initiative, a partnership between Plumbers & Pipefitters Local 562 and the Mechanical Contractors Association (MCA) that is designed to bring underrepresented populations into the pipe trades.

Prince entered the CHAMPIONS Initiative last year. Now employed with Jarrell Contracting Company as a pre-apprentice plumber with Local 562, he is working hard to skill up and build a successful life as a skilled tradesperson.

"I have learned and grown so much," he said. "I had no idea there was so much to plumbing. It has been an eye-opening experience."

The CHAMPIONS Initiative is part of a growing movement of partnerships between labor and employers that are opening doors to life-changing employment for minorities, women, people who have experienced incarceration and otherswith relatively little or no historical ties to the skilled trades.

The program offers six weeks of hands-on technical training and professional development specific to the pipe trades, concluding with placement as a pre-apprentice with an MCA member contractor. Participants also receive a weekly stipend to support their living expenses while they participate in this full-time educational opportunity.

In addition, the CHAMPIONS Initiative provides peer groups and intentional mentorship to participants as they progress into apprenticeship and beyond.

More than 75 participants are currently employed as union plumbers or pipefitters. The seventh cohort began its journey in June; the first cohort, which launched in 2020, graduated from Local 562's apprenticeship program in July.

While the CHAMPIONS Initiative is focused on the pipe trades, other programs seek to provide a broader introduction to the building trades as well as manufacturing.

Now in its 12th year, Missouri Apprenticeship Ready Programs (ARP) is an intensive program designed to introduce participants to construction and manufacturing careers. The program, which is sponsored by the Missouri AFL-CIO's Missouri Works Initiative (MWI), is offered statewide at no charge to selected individuals who meet the admission requirements.

Hundreds of graduates, representing dozens of cohorts, have been placed in every building trades union in the St. Louis region. ARP coordinates with individualized training programs in many unions, such as the CHAMPIONS Initiative, to provide additional specialized training in graduates' chosen trade before starting work.

Courtesy photo

Carlton Prince's eagerness to pivot to a trade led him to the CHAMPIONS Initiative.

Recognized as a comprehensive apprenticeship readiness program by North America's Building Trades Union, the program offers enrollees a comprehensive introduction to construction or manufacturing employment by using NABTU's nationally recognized Multi-Craft Core Curriculum providing relevant national skills certification training, with a particular focus on job safety.

The three-part training model includes classroom coursework that covers both technical skills and life skills such as financial literacy; hands-on training; and placement advising to help participants find a place in one of a wide variety of skilled trades. The program also provides financial and in-kind support, including a weekly stipend, a bus pass, free work gear, and a tool allotment.

This approach "connects Missourians with the skills, training, and support they need to build lasting careers," said Megan Price, MWI executive director.

ARP has broadened its development of the skilled workforce within the last year, introducing a six-week Apprenticeship Ready Program in Manufacturing alongside its longstanding five-week Apprenticeship Ready Program in Construction.

Candy Harrison was struggling to make ends meet before learning about the Apprenticeship Ready Program in Manufacturing. Thanks to the program's specialized skill training and wraparound support, she was able to secure a job as an electrical assembly technician at Darwin Chambers Company, a maker of cold storage units for research and medical care.

"This program has helped me in a major way," Harrison said. "I have a job that is great for my health, it has full benefits, and I can afford to support my family."

Harrison added that the multifaceted exploration of different trades was critical to finding the right career path: "It's OK to try different things until you find a good fit for yourself."

Some sectors of the skilled trades are expanding their outreach to youth. The Heavy Metal Summer Experience brings together Sheet Metal Workers SMART Local 36 and the Sheet Metal and Air Conditioning Contractors National Association (SMACNA) to host high school students – particularly young women and students from underrepresented communities – for a two-week summer camp with hands-on construction projects and tours of local contractor shops.

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This is the fifth year in St. Louis for HMSE, which has hosted 85 local youth in the program.

"We're proud that a growing number of our former campers have become sheet metal apprentices," said Susan Miller, SMACNA's executive director. "Seeing students discover rewarding careers in the skilled trades and helping build our future workforce is why we're proud to bring this program to St. Louis."

As hands-on trades struggle to find the work-ready talent needed to meet increasing demand, pre-apprenticeship programs both general and specialized are working to close the gap – while connecting local workers with skills that build a meaningful life.

"This work benefits both the individuals we serve and the employers who need them," Price said.

For more information on the Apprentice Ready Program, visit moworksinitiative.org.

For more information on the CHAMPIONS Initiative, visit mca-emo.org.

For more information on Heavy Metal Summer Experience, visit smacnastlouis.org.

Tax

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they do not have transportation to reach brick-and-mortar stores.

"Some people don't have cars to go to the store, so that's their only means of getting what it is that they need," she said.

Prop U would have applied St. Louis County's existing 3.513% sales tax rate to qualifying purchases from out-of-state vendors. Online retailers would have collected the tax from shoppers at checkout and sent it to the Missouri Department of Revenue. The use tax would not have been charged on purchases already subject to the corresponding county sales tax.

On a qualifying $100 purchase, the county tax would have been about $3.51; on a $500 purchase, about $17.57.

Missouri already has a state use tax, and some municipalities in St. Louis County have their own voter-approved use taxes. Prop U would have established the county-level tax.

Supporters described Prop U as a way to put local retailers on more even footing with out-of-state online sellers.

Charlie Hinderliter, senior vice president of government affairs at St. Louis Realtors, said his organization supported Prop U both to help local businesses compete with large online retailers and to raise money for public services.

"For us, the reason we supported it is twofold," Hinderliter said. "First, it puts local businesses on an even playing field as out-of-state, billion-dollar companies like Amazon. Second, it's about services."

Hinderliter said the county's tax structure has not kept pace with changes in how people shop.

"Technology is always faster than the law," he said.

North County resident Ketrice Skinner said she understands the concerns of local businesses but ultimately has to consider what she can afford.

"I prefer the price of tax to be much cheaper because you still gotta pay for delivery fees," Skinner said. "And then when you go to the store, you gotta travel to go get it and you're spending money, traveling, spending more money paying for taxes."

St. Louis County officials expect a budget deficit of at least $50 million next year. County Executive Sam Page has warned that without additional dependable revenue, cuts could fall heavily on parks maintenance, road and street repairs and public safety, with nearly 100 police officers potentially losing their jobs.

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"Without additional recurring revenue, we have about a year left before the NFL settlement funds run out and we will no longer be able to operate county government normally, without a significant source of revenue or painful budget cuts," Page said the day after the election.

St. Louis County received about $169 million from the region's $519 million Rams lawsuit settlement. At the time of the election, about $56.2 million had been allocated, leaving more than $100 million unassigned.

Prop U revenue would not have gone solely to the county. The measure included a mechanism to distribute some of the money to municipalities, with the revenue going into their general funds.

County officials estimated the measure would generate between $50 million and $100 million annually countywide.

County leaders could eventually ask voters to reconsider the use tax. Page has said the County Council could seek a voter-approved property tax increase, use more of the remaining Rams settlement money to support the budget or put a use tax before voters again.

Page said county leaders would have to do a better job explaining what the loss of additional revenue could mean for county services.

"We need to put resources into educating the voters on what service cuts mean to St. Louis County," Page said. "If the council wants to see this pass, they should approve some money to help educate the voters on what it means to choose between cutting police officers or having an online sales tax like most jurisdictions in St. Louis County."

Bass said voters may hear the word "tax" and think first about the money coming out of their own pockets rather than the services the revenue could fund.

"When people hear taxes, they are not thinking about our roads or our cities," Bass said. "They are thinking about their pockets."

Still, Bass said she understands the concern about what online shopping means for local businesses.

"I realized that there's a lot of small businesses around, and I would much rather keep them," she said. "If we start buying everything online, we're gonna lose stores."

St. Louis American reporter Sylvester Brown, Jr. contributed to this report.