



STEPHEN E. SANDHERR, Chief Executive Officer

February 27, 2023

Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

As the voice of the commercial construction industry, we took great interest in your comments during the National Association of Counties Conference about how the bipartisan infrastructure law provides an opportunity to expand and diversify the construction workforce. We share your objective to ensure that there are opportunities for all Americans to participate in high-paying construction careers. However, we respectfully take issue with your implication that construction employers are reluctant to hire workers from within the communities where their projects are located.

As you may be aware, the construction industry is struggling with a significant shortage of workers. According to the [2023 Construction Hiring and Business Outlook](#) we released in early January, over 80 percent of commercial construction firms report having difficulty finding qualified workers to hire. This is nothing new, for the past decade an overwhelming majority of our members have reported difficulty finding qualified workers to hire. In other words, nothing would make our members happier and more successful than to be able to hire and retain workers from anywhere, including the communities where their projects are located.

Unfortunately, too few communities provide the kind of career and technical education classes – particularly at the secondary level – that are needed to expose future workers to construction as a career path or to provide them with the kind of skills needed to qualify for most entry-level construction positions. This is a key reason why our members have struggled not just to hire workers from the communities where their projects are located, but even to get people to attend the many hiring fairs they typically host when starting those projects.

As you noted several times during your February 13th remarks, one of the key roles of the federal government is to provide the funding needed to help local officials solve key problems. Unfortunately, the federal government has failed to provide close to adequate resources to support career and technical education programs. For every five dollars the administration spends on urging students to enroll in college and enter the service sector, it only invests one dollar in career and technical education. As a result, the relatively few successful construction-focused public education programs have had to become as adept at fundraising as they are teaching.

The “barrier” you urged county officials to break down was not erected by a construction industry that is desperate for workers. It was erected by federal funding policies that discourage the creation of construction education programs and signals to parents and caregivers that construction careers are somehow second tier.

The solution to creating more economic activity in long underserved communities is investment and education

and not forcing contractors to hire workers who have little interest in construction careers and too often lack the basic skills needed to safely operate on complex and dynamic infrastructure job sites.

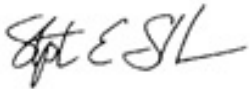
Despite the lack of federal support and resultant meager public education focus on construction career prep, our members and our association are working aggressively to recruit, prepare and retain a new, larger and more diverse workforce. A new [report](#) we published in late February catalogues the many steps our industry is taking to address labor shortages. We also list several dozen new workforce approaches that our members crafted during a recent workforce summit we hosted.

We look forward to working with the U.S. Department of Transportation and the entire administration to find meaningful ways to expand and further diversify the construction industry. While our workforce is currently more diverse than the nation's workforce, that is largely due to the fact construction has traditionally served as a stepping-stone to the American dream for generations of Hispanic immigrants. These new Americans are continuing a national legacy of immigrant groups whose first-step to middle class prosperity was through careers in construction. Unfortunately, too few women and African Americans are exposed to construction as a career opportunity or encouraged to pursue such a path.

We believe exposing more people to the field via career and technical education will help. That is why we urge you to use your considerable influence within the administration to push to end the severe funding gap that favors college and the debt that comes with it over high-paying careers in fields like construction.

I respectfully request a meeting with you and your team to further discuss our industry's workforce needs. I am sure that, working together, we can craft effective measures that will help prepare, recruit and retain an even more diverse workforce that will help America rebuild and improve its infrastructure and transportation systems.

Sincerely,



Stephen E. Sandherr