APPRENTICESHIP RATIOS: ADVOCATING FOR CHANGE TO MEET DEMAND

PHCC MEMBERS WORK TO ENHANCE OPPORTUNITIES FOR WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT
Currently, there are state regulations governing the ratio of apprentices to journeymen. The current ratios – and any preferences for potential changes – differ from state to state. In fact, a recent survey conducted by PHCC – National Association found a wide variety of current established ratios, as well as a mixture of ideal ratios desired by contractors. As several PHCC chapters have discovered, any changes to current ratios must first be pursued at the state Department of Labor (DOL) and, if not approved, appealed at the regional level.

Ensuring Safety and Proper Training

In Connecticut, Jack Cawley, owner of Cawley Plumbing and Heating and president of PHCC of Connecticut, serves on a state task force to evaluate the apprenticeship ratio and determine how to set ratios that ensure a safe working environment in which apprentices can learn and still meet the company’s needs to hire and train staff for the future.

“In our state, we have different ratios for hiring and for field work, which creates problems for companies that want to hire more apprentices,” says Cawley. In Connecticut, the complex program starts with a field ratio of one apprentice to one journeymen, which provides the supervision needed to ensure safety and train well. “The problem is that the hiring ratio, which looks at the entire company, is 1:1 for the first three apprentices and then goes to one apprentice to three journeymen,” he says. This means that a company with three licensed plumbers would be able to hire three apprentices but would need three more licensed plumbers before they could hire an additional apprentice. This is a problem for companies that want to hire more apprentices because they can’t afford to hire the three additional journeymen required for one new apprentice, he adds.

“I would like to see the 1:1 ratio apply to both field supervision and overall hiring, but there are some opposed to this approach,” says Cawley. “The 10 members of the task force are split on the issue of increasing the hiring ratio to 1:1, partly because some want to limit the number of journeyman licenses issued, which is not in the best interest of the industry’s future,” he offers from his point-of-view.

Safety is often a concern expressed by proponents who want a higher number of journeymen to apprentices, but Cawley says that liability issues and safety concerns are dependent on the year of training for the apprentice. “One of our arguments for changing the ratio is that after two or three years [of experience], an apprentice is less of a liability risk than a first-year apprentice,” he explains.

If a company cannot hire enough licensed employees to handle a project, the company can apply for ratio relief from...
The DOL Board, but Cawley says that this is not the best way to handle apprentice ratios. He says that the process seems arbitrary, and a company can only apply after attempts to hire journeymen are made.

**The Challenge for Small Contractors in Iowa**

The 1:1 ratio is in place in Iowa, but Kevin Kruse, executive director of PHCC of Iowa, says that the ratio is a challenge for small companies in his state. “Our chapter and members have been working for two years to change the ratio to two apprentices for one journeyman,” he says. The state guidelines follow the federal DOL guidelines, but Kruse says that the chapter has asked the DOL regional director to approve a variance for the PHCC of Iowa apprenticeship program that would allow the 2:1 ratio to apply. “The national standard is fine, but we believe the regional directors should be able to make these decisions at a local level because they understand how needs vary from state to state based on population, rate of growth, availability of workforce, and quality of apprentice program,” says Kruse.

Ratio variances often are based on a variety of factors that include the quality of the apprenticeship program in the state and the degree of hazardous work. “We also believe that there should be a subcategory in the hazardous work category,” says Kruse. “For example, a lot of our members provide service and residential repair, which is not as much of a safety concern as installing plumbing or HVAC systems in a 30-story building that is under construction.” The ability to differentiate the different levels of safety concern would result in a more realistic ratio, he adds.

One step that PHCC of Iowa has taken is to recommend that DOL regional directors seek input from the state DOL apprenticeship director when they receive variance requests. This will give DOL regional directors more detailed information about a specific apprenticeship program to assist them in making their decision.

Another issue with ratios for small companies is a licensing issue in Iowa, says Kruse. “To be eligible to sit for a journeyman license exam, the person must complete a four-year DOL-approved apprentice program,” he says. “This means that a two-person shop can hire two apprentices but then must wait four years before hiring another.” If the company wants to grow, it must hire experienced journeymen from another company, which does nothing to ease the workforce shortage and alienates other contractors, he adds. “One alternate way to address this is a hybrid 2:1 ratio, which pairs two apprentices with one journeyman if one of the apprentices is in the third year of the program.”

**What is Needed to Meet Workforce Demands**

“Texas is a right-to-work state, so if our project is not a federally-funded project, I can work any number of apprentices as long as there are general supervisors and field supervisors who...”
“Every contractor has to be involved to improve apprenticeship ratios because apprentices are a valuable asset in our industry. Not only are they important to the future of our industry and our companies, but apprentice programs give young people a chance to get a free education and a meaningful career that will support them and their families.”

~ Dickie McCurdy

are journeymen or master plumbers,” explains Dickie McCurdy, owner and president of MMM Plumbing, Heating & Air Conditioning in Amarillo, Texas. “When I am handling federal work, my apprentices have to represent 50 percent of the number of journeymen on the job.”

MMM has its own DOL-approved apprentice programs for sheet metal and plumbing as a way to attract potential employees and to create a well-trained workforce that can handle retirement of more experienced employees. When the recovering economy resulted in a building boom, McCurdy could not train enough employees due to the 1:1 ratio restrictions.

“This is a problem throughout our state because we need more apprentices due to the 40-percent completion rate for most apprentice programs in the state,” says McCurdy. “People drop out of these programs because they decide that they don’t want to do this type of work, but then you have to start at the beginning with another apprentice.” The ability to train two apprentices to one journeyman keeps apprentices in the pipeline and on track to journeyman licenses, even when some drop out, he adds.

McCurdy and others are continuing to lobby for changing the DOL ratio to 2:1, asking that the new ratio be tested and data reviewed after two or three years to determine the effect on safety and education quality and the impact on the workforce.

“Every contractor has to be involved to improve apprenticeship ratios because apprentices are a valuable asset in our industry,” says McCurdy. “Not only are they important to the future of our industry and our companies, but apprentice programs give young people a chance to get a free education and a meaningful career that will support them and their families.”

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