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Methodist-backed group tries to close Memphis' unemployment, skills gaps

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Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare and [Turner Construction](#) are looking for the under-skilled and the unemployed to help them build the \$280 million Methodist University Hospital expansion.

"That \$200 million project is just coming out of the ground, and we'll need a workforce," said [Patrick Johnston](#), a senior project manager with Turner Construction's Memphis office. "There's a high demand for workforce, and the skilled-labor workforce is just not there. From what we've seen, the trajectory is getting further apart."



A subcontractor speaks to a group of job seekers at a previously held job fair as part of... more

With more cranes on Memphis' horizon, Turner and Methodist are both part of the Minority Workforce Equity Program (MWEP), a grassroots council that is working to turn Memphis' unemployed into its working class.

In 2015, Turner was working with Methodist to meet minority participation goals on a new parking garage for [Le Bonheur Children's Hospital](#) when Methodist realized it could do more.

"Methodist surveyed [contractors] to see if they could share information about where their workers live, and Bartlett and Hernando [Mississippi] were big ones," said [Richard Kelley](#), vice president of corporate facilities management for Methodist Le Bonheur and a member of the MWEP council. "Very little came from inside the 240 loop."

In an effort to fuel the construction workforce pipeline – while simultaneously closing Memphis' unemployment and business equity gap – Methodist and Turner created a program that would intentionally hire minorities from the four Memphis zip codes with the highest unemployment and train those workers on site.

"The city and county have programs in place that give preference to minority business owners," said MWEP council member [Robert Abney](#), president of FL Crane & Sons Inc.'s Memphis and Nashville division. "Methodist has flipped this upside down, and is actually counting the people on the job site, getting paychecks, while giving them a skill set that will change their lives. A lot of the time we reward the guy at the top of the ladder when, in essence, we can help more people at the bottom."

As a construction management firm, Turner solicits bids for subcontractors who provide about 90 percent of the workforce on a project. Often times, subs hire additional workers on large projects such as the upcoming \$280 million tower expansion, which is expected to bolster the program with about 40 to 60 subcontractors involved over multiple years.

In partnership with Methodist's Congregational Health Network, a citywide network of religious communities who check on Methodist health care patients, Turner is planning a job fair this summer to help connect unemployed people to the additional work needed for the expansion.

"For the people sitting in their home who are not sure of the next step, this is not just a temporary job, but a way to establish yourself in a company and get in a training process to build a career," Johnston said. "So, at the end of the day, they have consistent, routine income, taking the next step to get out of the unemployment class and put food on the table for their families to ultimately help close Memphis' unemployment gap."

The job fair will be the fourth for FL Crane & Sons Inc., a Southaven, Mississippi-based contractor that installs commercial drywall, acoustic ceilings and floor coverings.

"We want to empower the less fortunate and unemployed or underemployed and give them training and a skill set that will improve their quality of life," Abney said. "We have plenty of construction projects in town where we can facilitate this. This is not a wish but a dream we can make come true."

The job fair will likely take place this summer as the project "begins to go vertical," Johnston said.

"If we're going to advance the city in drastic ways, it's going to take all of our population," Johnston said. "Until we get down to every individual employed in a viable, long-term job, we still haven't succeeded. We all feel, the folks at Turner and Methodist, that it's the right thing to do."

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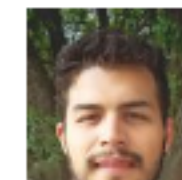
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Rank	Rank	Work Performed in 2016
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2	Flintco LLC	\$166 million
3	Linkous Construction Co. Inc.	\$145.8 million

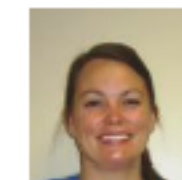
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