



PRESIDENT'S CORNER



Our untapped rural workforce

*Sam Robert Brice
President*

In Alaska, contractors have a little known, under-utilized resource; our rural workforce. At our family business, Brice Construction, we have found this resource to be an invaluable asset on our projects for more than 45 years.

A large percentage of our state and federal infrastructure dollars are spent in rural Alaska communities, building and maintaining schools, utilities, clinics, airports, local roads and harbors or shore protection. Over the past several years, Alaska's construction industry has experienced a worker shortage that is likely to continue as we build our economy.

At the same time, our rural communities experience high rates of unemployment, which means there is good availability of workers there. We have found that construction work fits well with the rural subsistence lifestyle. We try to

hire and train enough folks for a project to ensure time-off for everyone throughout the project to catch up on subsistence activities and relieve the "burn-out" from a typical seven days a week, 12 hours a day during Alaska's construction season.

We've partnered with Alaska Works Partnership and labor unions on a number of our projects to train rural residents for jobs we have in their communities. There are training opportunities and assistance available to both union and non-union contractors throughout rural Alaska. The state of Alaska Department of Labor is always a good place to start when trying to determine local hire resource availability.

Union contractors will find that the participating labor unions are an excellent resource for local hire training programs and assistance.

They have always been supportive of our local hire efforts with bona fide local resident project hire agreements along with providing safety and operations training personnel. Our typical training program lasts a minimum of two-weeks. The first week focuses on project specific health, safety and environmental awareness training. The second week is spent on actual equipment operations and techniques (i.e.-grade checking, flagging) training in the field.

Safe operations are our company's No. 1 goal on all our projects and to that end, our rural hiring and training programs begin with ensuring a drug-free workforce per our company drug-free policy and membership in the Alaska Clean Card Program organized through AGC of Alaska. We have found screening for a drug-free workforce to be challenging in rural Alaska due to the coordination, lead-time, limited medical facilities and added expense of compliance in remote areas of the state. But we also know it is project money well spent and have seen the results in our EMR rating since joining the Clean Card Program.

Along with drug screening, the workforce is screened to find workers with the most experience for the type of position being filled. This process can also be challenging due to the sheer number of residents interested in working on a given project and the limited number of positions being filled. Not everyone in the community is going to be happy with your selection, but our experience leads us to select the

best people for the job and the knowledge that we are going to have to put up with some "heat" based on our decisions. This "heat" from passing over some residents while hiring others is much less than other companies experience working in rural Alaska without a local hire program.

A local hire program is only one component of the challenges that come with working in rural Alaska. But the result of these efforts, when a resident is able to work on a project in his or her community and earn a good wage to support their family, far surpasses the challenge. We have made a lot of friends during more than 45 years of working in the bush, and are able to use many of these now skilled construction workers on other projects outside of their local community, around the state. The results that come with giving rural residents a chance to prove themselves on the job are very gratifying. Local hire on rural projects is the right thing to do, keeping hard earned dollars in the community and creating pride of ownership.