Dr. Gaal Goes to Washington

by Tom Finan, Executive Director, Construction Forum STL

Last Friday John Gaal, EdD, director of training and workforce development for the Carpenters District Council, had the opportunity to present the St. Louis construction industry’s BUD program to an audience that included both U.S. government cabinet members and experts on workforce training from across the country. Gaal was one of 150 individuals, selected for their expertise in training and workforce development, who participated in the White House UpSkill Summit, a discussion of the programs that will be necessary to develop tomorrow’s workforce.

“Average Americans can do extraordinary things given a chance. They’re just asking for a shot,” Vice President Joseph Biden, who delivered the keynote address, told the group. He noted that the U.S. is the leader in energy for the foreseeable future and in investment potential, but will need skilled workers to deliver on that promise.

Dr. Gaal has been focused on quantifiable outcomes from worker training programs for years. He has also been an advocate of the notion that college is not for everyone at age 18. He has traveled to Switzerland and Germany to study programs that create career paths for high school students in manufacturing without a university degree. He has authored and co-authored research papers on the subject. He was instrumental in developing the “Youth Pathway” floor layers middle apprentice program at Bayless High School. That program was one of 40 programs recognized by President Obama at the White House last June.

At the White House conference last week, Gaal participated in a breakout session on apprenticeship led by U.S. Secretary of Labor Thomas E. Perez. In that session Gaal had an opportunity to present aspects of the Building Union Diversity program. That program, which takes non-traditional candidates through an intensive pre-apprenticeship exposure to various trades and to careers in construction, is currently training its second cohort of students. The group selected Gaal and two others to present their part of their report when the entire conference reconvened.

During the general session of the conference, Gaal also responded to a question from Secretary of Commerce Penny Pritzker about the fact that apprenticeship has been historically concentrated in the construction industry. Gaal responded that registered apprenticeship is a model that works and that it needs to be deployed horizontally across industries and vertically into the secondary level of education.

“How do we convince parents and industry that apprenticeship works? People in the US tend to think of apprenticeship as either construction or post-secondary. It doesn’t need to be either,” Gaal said. He noted that CVS has an apprenticeship program for pharmacy technicians. The U.S. subsidiaries of Blum, a manufacturer of high-end hinges and electronics giant Siemens have both developed programs based on the European model.

Gaal said the companies recruit students in their junior year of high school. Students who elect in their senior year to participate “work for the company four days a week while they’re in school and go to the community college on the fifth day for schooling.” The students complete the program...
with both a job and an associate’s degree. Bayless High School has a similar program with the Floor Layers.

Gaal said that having “registered” apprenticeship programs versus “on the job training” is key. “It ensures that there are standards that the government and industry have agreed to,” he said. For workers, those standards establish the credibility of their training and the portability of those skills to other employers, he stated.