

**Congressional Testimony of  
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United States House of Representatives  
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Seapower and Expeditionary Forces Subcommittee

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Room 2212  
Rayburn House Office Building

Good morning,

I want to thank the subcommittee for the opportunity to deliver testimony on how our country can most effectively and efficiently meet the pressing manpower needs of our nation's military shipyards.

My name is Brett Olson. I serve as executive secretary of the Puget Sound Metal Trades Council. I began my career in the shipyards about 20 years ago. After working a little more than 12 years in the yards, I changed over to working as a construction electrician. When I entered the yard, I was privileged to work side by side with a large core group of skilled marine electricians. These mentors were the heart and soul of a marine industry on the West Coast that provided solid employment and upward mobility to 75,000 workers in the 1970s and 1980s – a work force that proudly built and maintained our nation's military superiority on the high seas.

How things have changed. Today only 2,500 shipyard workers are employed on the West Coast in private shipyards. Their average age is approaching 50 years of age. Veteran workers are retiring at a rapid pace. Each month two to three members of my union, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Seattle Local 46, hang up their tools and take their pensions. We are faced with nothing less than a manpower emergency. But I am pleased to be here today to tell you that we have developed a plan for not only dealing with that emergency, but for avoiding deeper crises down the road.

Our Apprenticeship Utilization plan, launched at our shipyard, mandates strong ratios of apprentices to journeymen on the construction and repair of all state ferries. This allows our dedicated and skilled workers who have not yet retired to pass their skills on to freshly-hired workers. And because apprenticeship training is funded by our union—not the military—and since apprentices progress from lower rates of pay to higher scales incrementally, costs are kept down, even while training is expanded.

A recent study by professors at the Universities of Texas and Utah shows the value of using apprentices in the construction sector. The report compares joint apprenticeship programs – which have the backing of both labor and management – to non-joint programs, where workers are effectively on their own. In comparing the nearly half-million workers in both types of apprenticeship nationwide, employees with union backing boast a 13-percent lead over the nonunion side when it comes to completing training programs. Minority workers and women also fare better on the joint apprenticeship side, enhancing a skilled work force that reflects the diverse makeup of our military and our nation.

Our Apprenticeship Utilization program will not succeed without access to a stable pool of potential journeymen, men and women who have the capacity to absorb training. We are answering that need every day through the development of a complementary program that is providing a thriving pool of enthusiastic workers. Our Veterans in Construction Electrical (VICE) program is actively recruiting military veterans to fill the labor gaps created by retirements with disciplined and well-prepared applicants.

The success of using apprentices and the promise of VICE can be seen on the faces of workers like Ken McMillan. After seven years in the Marines and Army, Ken joined the IBEW in 2006. McMillan is currently working on wiring a ship that rescues crews in boats that get stranded at sea. Ken says that, career-wise, his move into the marine trades is a no-brainer. He is proud to be helping increase the readiness of our military as a civilian while advancing up the skills ladder.

I am proud to report that our Apprenticeship Utilization and VICE programs have spread from Seattle to Oregon, northern California and Nevada, and they will be soon be presented to the rest of California.

The needs of veterans are close to my heart. My concern for our nation's military security is part of my very upbringing. My father had a career in the Navy. I remember all too

well the disgrace of hundreds of thousands of Vietnam veterans who returned home to dead-end jobs or no jobs at all.

Rather than reliving the painful plight that faced Vietnam veterans, we have within our hands the ability to reward our nation's heroes with the future that they deserve.

As a military brat, it is in my DNA to be concerned about our nation's military readiness. I am concerned about China and Russia vastly expanding their naval fleets.

And I remember what happened in 2006 when the USS Lincoln, an aircraft carrier, needed a massive infusion of skilled labor to put the vessel back on the seas. Managers summoned up all available labor at Bremerton Naval Shipyard and Todd Shipyard, including all nonunion and union subcontractors at the Puget Sound Naval Station. But we were alarmed to find that we were still 500 workers short of what was needed to put the USS Lincoln back to sea during a time of conflict.

That's just not good enough for a proud nation that still faces the prospect of serious military challenges.

We can do better. We must do better. And we are making progress. But a national apprenticeship utilization program – along with VICE – is necessary to keep our shipbuilding capacity up to date in the face of a huge shortage of manpower while giving men and women from our fighting forces a step-up in a critically needed, well-paying industry. This will ensure a thriving future for our shipyards, our national defense and our veterans.

Thank you.