

Minorities crucial to filling Marcellus shale gas drilling jobs
By Timothy Puko / TribLive
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For Jade Morel, the labor landscape in Pennsylvania looks a lot different from what it did when she was growing up near Johnstown.

Morel, 35, had to move to Texas for a job in the drilling industry after she graduated from Penn State in 2001. She's now living in Sewickley with steady work as an engineering manager at Chief Oil & Gas LLC in Wexford.

As a member of the Young Professional Women in Energy, she is spreading the word to other young women that they can be a part of the shale gas boom, too.

“If somebody I meet has an aptitude for math and science, I definitely encourage them to pursue something in engineering or (science) fields, because I feel there are so many job opportunities here now that weren’t here before,” Morel said.

The shale revolution has led to a spike in drilling-related jobs in Pennsylvania and other oil and gas states. The oil and gas industry employed 919,428 workers in 2010, according to an American Petroleum Institute study, which projects an additional 202,160 jobs by 2030.

The growth will be in addition to jobs that will become available as workers retire. Oil and gas companies know they might not be able to hire enough workers if women and minorities don't join their ranks in unprecedented numbers.

The industry is one of the least diverse, said Vera Krekanova Krofcheck, director of strategy and research at the Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board, an organization that provides employment services for companies and the unemployed.

The industry's research shows a workforce dominated by white males: Only a quarter nationwide are black or Hispanic, and only 17 percent are women, according to data the American Petroleum Institute released on Wednesday.

With minority populations growing faster than the rest of the population nationwide, drillers and petrochemical companies will have to do a better job of connecting with them and with women to meet workforce demands, the petroleum institute's CEO Jack Gerard said.

“They feel like they’re one step removed from it. They can see it, they can observe it, but they’re not quite part of it. That's told us we need to alter our approach and figure out a better way to approach these communities,” he said. “If we don’t do this now, we run the risk that we’re going to fall behind.”

Pennsylvania has been at the center of the nationwide growth in the oil and gas industry. It added 15,144 oil and gas workers between 2007 and 2012, according to an analysis released last week by the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics.

That's more than 2.5 new workers for every one it had before, a growth rate faster than every state except North Dakota, the analysis showed.

API and other industry groups are pushing alliances with political and labor groups that work with women and minorities, Gerard said. They hope those alliances blossom into programs that can inspire young people and train recruits, he said.

Because many of the companies moved from out of state to drill into the Marcellus shale, it is important to make locals feel included, said Amelia Roncone, an energy entrepreneur from the South Side who founded the group Young Professional Women in Energy.

California-based Chevron Corp., which bought the local driller Atlas Energy Inc. about three years ago, has been looking for opportunities to build the local workforce, said Trip Oliver, the company's local spokesman.

It invested about \$200,000 into the Mentors Community Wealth Building Initiative, which in February opened a center in the Hill District. Its goal is to reach the urban poor, especially people who might otherwise never think of working in the drilling industry, said Kristine Kirk, the program's CEO.

“For the industry to be successful, it's important that everybody has an opportunity to participate,” Oliver said. “We're supporting this program less out of an idea that it will contribute to the success of Chevron and more out of the idea that Chevron wants to be a good community partner and help get opportunities to areas that might not otherwise be in reach of them.”

And it is a critical opportunity, Kirk said. Oil and gas jobs can pay \$12 to \$14 an hour to start, as much as double the rate for the food and service jobs that the urban poor and minorities often funnel into, Kirk said.

The state's unemployment rate for blacks and Latinos was in the double digits in 2013, as much as double the 6.8 percent rate for whites, according to federal labor data. So Kirk sees the drilling industry as a unique chance to provide jobs and growth that can lead to family-sustaining careers, even for people without a lot of education, she said.

“This is it. This is what could possibly change that workforce for generations,” Kirk said. “I don't know (if the industry cares) about diversity. I know they all want to build a workforce, and they don't care what color they are.”

Part of what makes Kirk's program unique is that she has her students focus on the chance to build wealth — long-term financial security — and not just landing a job. She emphasizes that by pointing to the industry executives who make millions. She said she shows them photos of the members of the governor's Marcellus Shale Advisory Committee, which included 10 energy company executives but no minorities and only one woman from an environmental group.

Morel, the engineer at Chief, wants to be one of those executives, and she said she is not deterred by the lack of diversity at that level. She tells other young women that the sky is the limit for anyone willing to work hard, she said.

“I think I have the necessary skills ... to reach that level,” she said, “and I don’t think there’s anything that could hold me back.”