

Cleaning

EUROPEAN
JOURNAL

Equity for Janitors

Helping California's Most Vulnerable Frontline Workers

June/July 2023

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In the face of continual social inequality, stagnating wages, and an economic recovery from a global pandemic, many workers in America are finding it difficult to get ahead. Building Skills Partnership; a nonprofit organization serving thousands of workers from low-wage industries throughout California, in partnership with Service Employees International Union - United Service Workers West ([SEIU-USWW](#)) provides opportunities to fully address the unique barriers janitorial workers and their families face in realizing the benefits of social, civic, and economic integration.

For thousands of janitors in low-wage industries across California, the pandemic has exacerbated challenges for an already vulnerable workforce. Mostly immigrants with limited English-proficiency, they have lacked access to formal education —janitors often face multiple challenges such as financial insecurity and limited opportunities for career mobility. Since janitors do most of their work after hours or when business or entertainment spaces are not in use, they often go unseen, and the cleaning profession compounds that systemic invisibility.

“Now more than ever, we must invest in worker training and labor-protection solutions that address public health, worker retention, and career mobility,” says David Huerta, President of SEIU-USWW.

In partnership with SEIU-USWW, Building Skills Partnership continues to strive to create an equitable future for working families to build a better life, with union leadership thinking about Building Skills Partnership programs to help meet the needs of janitorial workers in their lives and communities beyond the workplace.

Building Skills Partnership was founded with the vision of creating an equitable playing field for California's working families to succeed in their careers and educational endeavors. Born out of the [Justice for Janitors](#) movement that helped thousands of immigrant janitors achieve a more just way of living and working, today, Building Skills Partnership represents a unique partnership between over 90 janitorial employers, over 60 commercial building owners, SEIU-USWW, and the broader community.

“In the last U.S. recession, many building owners cut janitorial services, but cleaning services can no longer be considered optional or a luxury—cleaning services are a public health necessity. Now is the time to pave the way for safer workspaces and a more highly skilled workforce,” says Huerta.

Building Skills Partnership reaches 5,500 workers annually through career and education programs that enable janitors and airport workers' personal and professional success, providing opportunities to fully address the unique barriers immigrant workers and their families face in realizing the benefits of social, civic, and economic inclusion.

"Building Skills Partnership's innovative training programs address the needs from frontline property service workers, industry and labor for skill training. Building Skills Partnership has worked closely with SEIU-USWW, employers, and building owners to develop various programs to train thousands of workers, helping to create upskilling and create pathways to progress," said Luis Sandoval, Executive Director of Building Skills Partnership.

The organization offers programs for janitors at leading worksites across California, including major tech companies in Silicon Valley and the Bay Area; and leading entertainment offices and commercial buildings in Los Angeles, Orange County, and San Diego. The janitors that Building Skills Partnership serves are at some of the dynamic companies in the U.S., though low-wages and inequality still exist in the janitorial industry.

"For the work I do now, I see through my own lens of experiences," Sandoval. "This work is personal, since both my parents and I have worked as janitors at one point. I understand the challenges, but also the resilience and opportunities to engage [our] communities who are often disenfranchised and marginalized."

To help janitorial workers and their families obtain a better quality of life, Building Skills Partnership programs are designed to develop high-road industry-driven partnerships that provide equity, sustainability, and job quality through skills strategies designed to support economically and resilient communities.

Among the janitors Building Skills Partnership serves, 97% are immigrants from Latin America, 70% lack basic English proficiency, and 50% are over 50 years old. An average annual salary of \$32,000 USD makes it hard for workers and their families to climb out of poverty.

A typical janitor begins their journey to work at 4:30 pm on public transportation, works from 6:00 pm to 2:00 am, sleeps from 3:30 am to 6:30 am, then cares for children, tends to the house and/or works their second job to make ends meet. They clean the buildings of some of the most advanced companies in the state.

Due to the skyrocketing cost of living in California and the business districts & nearby areas of worksites, many janitors commute long hours on public transportation from affordable neighborhoods. Janitors who own cars often resort to sleeping in their cars during the week to save commute time and gas money, while spouses or extended family care for their children. Cultural and language barriers, low digital literacy, and immigration status often prevent many families from accessing existing safety net programs and health resources.

Building Skills Partnership programs include infectious disease certification, environmentally sustainable cleaning program, financial capabilities courses, English as a second language (ESL), digital literacy, citizenship & civic engagement, health and wellness, parenting engagement programming,

higher education scholarships, and more.

To bring industry employers, workers, and partners together, Building Skills Partnership develops curriculum and trains thousands of workers statewide, which also enabled the organization to quickly address the workers' needs in 2020 during COVID-19 and helped janitors to safely conduct cleaning practices, supporting them and the business communities they serve stay safe and healthy throughout the global health crisis.

Through a sector approach, Building Skills Partnership brings together stakeholders connected to the property service industry to address the skills shortages while developing a pipeline of skilled workers to meet future demands. By partnering with employers and labor, Building Skills Partnership is able to improve worker training, career pathways, industry growth, and facilitate the advancement of workers at all skill levels.

The organization also partners with industry employers who support the professionalization of a certified workforce through an industry career lattice. Together, they offer partnerships that facilitate a career lattice to support employee training, upskilling, and certification while being responsive to the needs of industries, the economy, and the employees.

Building Skills Partnership has been working to address racial and social inequities for property service workers since its founding in 2007. The organization collaborates with workers and partners to promote workforce development and immigrant inclusion strategies, and the organization works to replicate its successful industry driven partnership model for the benefit of workers.

Through its Citizenship & Civic Engagement program, Building Skills Partnership emboldens vulnerable immigrant workers to raise their voices and advance social and racial equity for themselves and their communities.

Additionally, Building Skills Partnership works to achieve climate and racial justice through its Green Janitor Education Program (GJEP), a 30-hour certification that focuses on energy efficiency, recycling, waste management, water conservation, and other sustainable cleaning practices. GJEP enables large U.S. commercial office buildings to meet green performance standards while providing skills training and upward career ladder opportunities for workers. Furthermore, GJEP helps janitors understand the health benefits of green maintenance for their building tenants and themselves, as well as their families and communities at home.

In the coming years, Building Skills Partnership will be expanding its workforce development, immigrant inclusion, and community advancement programs to also serve more passenger service workers at LAX, one of the largest international airports in the world. Workers from these communities are composed of a diverse demographic including Asian Americans, Black, and other people of color. By extending its programs to serve workers beyond Latinx immigrants, Building Skills Partnership will impact more working families and build just systems that advance racial equity, diversity, and inclusion for all.

Workers of color and immigrant workers have been disproportionately looked down upon by society while working hard on the front lines to help keep the public safe, clean, and moving forward.

Building Skills Partnership is working to change the narrative for society to have a new understanding and appreciation of the work these types of employees do every single day, no matter what.

Some successful outcomes of Building Skills Partnership programs include:

- Thousands of janitorial workers trained in Infectious Disease Certification
- Health and wellness programs positively impact workers
- Full-time janitor and single mom better her family's quality of life
- Higher education scholarship recipient graduated from U.C. Berkeley
- Hundreds of immigrant workers have naturalized and become U.S. Citizens
- Helped numerous workers to gain financial literacy
- Supported workers and their family members to gain digital literacy skills