

Ivanka Trump is hitting the road to boost workers. Her father wants to gut job-training programs.

By **Danielle Paquette** June 13

Before he landed the apprenticeship that doubled his wages, Ron Robinson learned how to drive a forklift, mix cement and perform CPR. This training, he said, set him up for the lucrative construction job — and he got it all for free.

Over the past year, the Milwaukee resident went from cleaning houses for \$12 an hour to helping demolish them for \$24.

Now Robinson fears President Trump's proposed cuts to the country's job-training programs could jeopardize the very service the 49-year-old thanks for his upward mobility.

“It'd be a big mistake for our future,” he said. “Losing this stuff would be a minus for the construction world and the state of Wisconsin.”

On Tuesday, Trump, his older daughter Ivanka Trump and Labor Secretary Alexander Acosta will travel to a technical college in Waukesha County, Wis. — 20 miles from Robinson's home — to highlight the administration's plan to downsize government-funded job-training programs and replace them with private-sector partnerships.

The Trumps plan to tour job-training classrooms, meet with local business owners and talk about ways to connect job-seekers to talent-hungry companies. That's particularly challenging in places like Waukesha County, where the unemployment rate is 3.2 percent — significantly lower than the nation's rate of 4.3 percent. Employers in such areas can have trouble filling roles, even as they raise wages, Ivanka Trump noted in a press call last week.

“The reality is that there are still Americans seeking employment despite low unemployment rates, and companies are struggling to fill vacancies for positions that require various levels of skills and training,” she said. “So the Trump administration is committed to working very closely to close the skills gap.”

A White House spokesman said the president wants to tackle this issue by expanding apprenticeships and deploying federal funds more efficiently. Further details, they said, will come Wednesday in a labor policy speech.

However, critics accuse President Trump of hurting the people he says he wants to help.

The president's budget proposal for 2018 called for slashing the Labor Department's budget to \$9.6 billion, a reduction of about 21 percent, according to an analysis from [the National Skills Coalition](#), a national worker advocacy group.

That includes a 40 percent cut to the Labor Department's [Wagner-Peyser Employment Service](#), which supports about 14 million job-seekers annually and last year helped nearly 6 million people find jobs, and a \$1.3 billion reduction to programs that operate under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), which Congress reauthorized in a bipartisan move three years ago.

Angela Hanks, associate director for workforce policy at the left-leaning Center for American Progress said the reduced funding to WIOA initiatives could lead to about 571,000 adults and teenagers losing access to job-training opportunities in 2018. Those services include résumé polishing, literacy lessons and employment placement.

In her remarks last week, Ivanka Trump, who also works as assistant to the president, said raising more awareness about the benefits of apprenticeships will play a vital role in the White House's workforce development approach. "There are very viable and respectable career paths outside of a traditional four-year college experience that should be considered and invested in," she said.

The administration said only "unnecessary, overlapping, outdated and ineffective programs" will be part of the rollback, according to President Trump's proposal.

Diana Furchtgott-Roth, an economist at the right-leaning Manhattan Institute who served on Trump's transition team, said the budget cuts are intended to eliminate costly redundancies.

"Closing down programs that don't work and adding funds to those that do work would be a big step forward," she said. Apprenticeships, she added, put more people to work as they upgrade their skills.

Economic development leaders in Wisconsin, meanwhile, are concerned that cutting Labor Department funds will hurt job-seekers who desire to nab an apprenticeship.

Dawn Pratt, a human resources executive at Payne and Dolan, a construction firm in Waukesha, said federal money has helped support workers who want to take entry-level construction roles but lack adequate knowledge of the job. That includes reaching out to people in economically disadvantaged communities, she said, and helping them prepare for math-based tests that employers often require.

“One of the things we’re working on a lot now with some of the grants that are coming down is apprenticeship readiness,” said Pratt, who sits on Gov. Scott Walker’s workforce investment council. “Years ago, we didn’t have to do that because you had actual trade training in schools.”

Nowadays, she said, young people don’t know about the path to make good money without a college degree. Much of her work involves community outreach.

“When you’re in areas where there’s not a lot of income, and there’s not that generational influence, how would you even know about apprenticeships?” she said. “How to prepare for it? How do you pass that exam? Half the people we reach don’t know the opportunity exists.”

One focus that appears to have escaped the cuts was apprenticeships.

Trump maintained Barack Obama’s \$90 million in funding for apprenticeship programs.

Mark Kessenich, president of the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership/Big Step, said his organization trains about 800 people each year on how to prepare for apprenticeships in the building trades.

Robinson was one of them — he finished the program last December. A construction firm in town immediately hired him as an apprentice doing odd jobs — preparing paint, tearing out old flooring — as he trained to become a journeyman.

Robinson, who now rents a two-bedroom apartment, feels he is on track to buying a four-bedroom house with a big back yard. Then he’ll adopt a dog — perhaps a pit bull.

“It’s a lot of hours,” he said of his Big Step training, “but you have to start off slow before you get to running, you know?”

Construction companies hire on average 85 percent of Big Step participants, Kessenich said — but draining federal resources could stall the initiative.

His organization receives financial awards from the state workforce development board, which receives funding from the Labor Department.

Last year, about a third of his budget — \$1 million — came from those grants.

“It’s a major concern of ours,” he said. “When you cut resources, you cut access to properly trained workers. You get what you pay for.”

Danielle Paquette is a reporter covering the intersection of people and policy. She's from Indianapolis and previously worked for the Tampa Bay Times.  Follow @dpaqreport