



Podcast Transcript | *The Fix*

Season 1, Episode 7

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Guests: Carol Ross

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Questions or Feedback: thefix@oatey.com

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Katherine: Welcome to *The Fix*, the podcast made for the trades, where we sit down with inspiring individuals across the trades to discuss their unique take on the industry, including career paths, job site stories, overcoming challenges, and everything in between. I'm your host Katherine, a marketer here at Oatey with my co-host and friend, Doug, one of Oatey's resident experts in all things trades. *The Fix* is more than a podcast. It's a community, a community built to support trades people and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation.

[music]

This episode is going to be amazing. We have a legend with us today. Carol Ross serves as the Executive Secretary of the Ohio Construction Industry Licensing Board, the OCILB. Doug, are you so excited?

Doug: I'm going to tell you something, Katherine, didn't sleep last night, made sure the defibrillator batteries were charged this morning, but today it's like that special gift that you just want to share with everybody, and by golly, we got her in house.

Katherine: I know, it's amazing. Carol's going to be able to tell us stories and be able to walk us through. She's seen it all.

Doug: Absolutely.

Katherine: Well, welcome Carol.

Carol: Thank you. It's a pleasure being here.

Katherine: That's great. We are so excited that you're here. Wanted to start off. If you could give us, please, a brief overview of the OCILB, and the important role the organization plays, particularly in keeping the industry safe.

Carol: The Ohio Construction Industry Licensing Board also known as OCILB, we license the five specialty trades, which are electrical, plumbing, hydronics, HVAC, and refrigeration for commercial buildings, all of the local building departments, still regulate residential. Although our licensing law says to those building departments, "You shall require this license before you issue a commercial permit," and then it goes on and says, "You may require this license for your residential."

Many of them have chosen to do that. They say it's a win-win for us because the state is already set up to screen these people, test them, make sure they take continuing education, make sure they carry liability insurance, we'll get good residential contractors in our area. Our trades were chosen to be the regulated trades many, many years ago because our trades are the ones that can blow up, burn down, or flood a building. They kill people.

Katherine: Yes. It's really important that there is that type of regulation that oversees because it is providing that safe haven for all of us.

Carol: Yes.

Katherine: Absolutely. Doug, did you ever participate or do anything with the OCILB throughout your tenure as a plumber?

Doug: I'll be honest with you, it's a continuous involvement in that relationship. We're constantly reaching out to the state, we're getting updates, we're getting the right information we need, we're getting input on the bills, what's important about those bills, what might affect us. It's just basically a lifetime relationship, and we rely on them so much to do what they do well. I'll be honest with you, here in the state of Ohio, our board does very well.

Katherine: That's because of, I think, a lot of the tenure that Carol and her team have put into place. Walk us through a little bit the key steps in the Ohio licensing process. What does that look like?

Carol: When a contractor wants to obtain our license, they have to apply to the board. They had to have worked under a licensed contractor and they have to show five years experience. The reason they had to work under a licensed contractor for the last five years is because they have to show one permit that they worked under, one for each of the last five years. They can't pull permits. An unlicensed contractor can't pull permits. They had to have worked under a licensed contractor for the last five years, show one permit for each of the last five years, and then show 1W-2, not a 1099. Our licensing law says you must be employed by the contractor.

Katherine: That's a good thing to point out.

Carol: You have to show 1W-2 for each of the last five years to prove that you've been employed with a W2 with that licensed contractor. You need five permits, five W2s.

Katherine: That's great. Can you talk to us a little bit about the difference between contractor and master plumber licenses? Many people might not know the difference and it can be tricky because it's not the same in state to state.

Carol: Correct. In Ohio, the contractor license is also the master. They are one of the same. If you go to, say, West Virginia or Kentucky, they have a contractor and a master license. In fact, we have reciprocity with six states and we have more reciprocity than any other state than I'm aware of. We have reciprocity with Kentucky and West Virginia. Our agreement says that when their contractors want to obtain the Ohio license, they must have the contractor and the master license. Then their two licenses equals our one.

Katherine: That makes sense. What are the states in which have reciprocity with Ohio? I know you said Kentucky and West Virginia. What are the other ones?

Carol: North Carolina, South Carolina, Louisiana, and Tennessee.

Katherine: That's great. It gives people the ability, if they need to, go into those other states to work on a job.

Carol: Yes. Reciprocity means that you just show them your license, you fill out their application, pay their fee, but you do not have to test.

Katherine: That's great. What is the value of obtaining and maintaining a contractor license? How can this advance in individual's career?

Carol: As I stated earlier, we are a commercial license. When you get into the commercial buildings, well, the residential homeowners also, but mostly the commercial buildings, they're looking for licensed people to perform the work for them, because they know that licensed person went through a very rigorous test. They know they go through the continuing education. Above all, they know they carry liability insurance. You don't know those things about an unlicensed contractor. The license makes their business more valuable.

Katherine: For sure. I bet you probably saw that too, Doug, licensed versus non-licensed contractors.

Doug: Oh, I tell you, it was such a struggle for years because we would get a lot of unlicensed contractors who would compete against us in the industry as far as bidding out jobs. What they were able to do was they were able to underbid us because they never really fulfilled all the right commitments that are required by the state that you're working in, and it was always a struggle. I'm really happy to see that we keep getting closer and closer to having this statewide, you got to be licensed or you better not be on the road deal.

Katherine: That's part of the new bill that's right now moving forward, is that correct?

Carol: Yes. The PHCC and ACA is behind. It's the residential bill. Right now people will call me and they'll say-- Because our licensing law also says that you have to advertise your number on your vehicles on letterhead business cards, just to show the inspectors, the public, everybody that you're licensed. It's just really hard separating the residential from the commercial, because I'll get a call that says, "Yes, I'm sitting at this red light, there's a van beside me that says Joe's heating and cooling and there's no license number on it." I have to say, "Do they say commercial on their van?" If they don't say the word commercial, then I have to assume they're residential, which I don't regulate.

Katherine: Good point. Were there any misconceptions or barriers that the OCLIB must combat to garner license, like paying dues or completing CEUs that you could elaborate on?

Carol: First of all, it only costs \$25 to apply.

Katherine: I think we can all do \$25, right? [laughs]

Carol: Yes, and \$25 for us to issue your first license. Then it's \$60 a year to maintain it. A lot of the states and some of them that we reciprocate with, their yearly renewal fee is \$200 and \$300, but ours is \$60. The continuing education is eight hours. We really don't have a problem with either one of those, our contractors do not have a problem with either one of those.

Katherine: It's a great continuing education, which we know as a manufacturer, we're coming up with new ideas and new technology all the time and it's a great way for plumbers to really continue to stay up on all the things that are happening is to taking their CEU courses.

Doug: Yes. Absolutely.

Carol: Most of our contractors enjoy the continuing education classes. They do. There are some that don't, but most of them enjoy it and they do enjoy the technology.

Katherine: Sure, absolutely. Ohio has reciprocity with probably the most states and Ohio has one of the lowest rates for contractors. What a win-win situation for a plumber who's in the state of Ohio.

Doug: Yes. A lot of guys used to try to shy away from the licensing because they got nervous about the testing, because it's divided up into three areas. Most plumbers, they're going to know the code, because we work with it every day, but then they had a small section on the business and the law. Carol, is that still accurate today? Do they have the three parts?

Carol: Yes.

Doug: Okay. From what I understand is, there's a lot of facilities that will offer the training before you go to take that test so that they'll make you familiar with those two sections.

Carol: There are. My board does not endorse these types of people. My board says, "Here's the books, you need to study the books," but there are people out there that they say they prepare you to take the test. I know who they are, and I pass that information onto people who are struggling to take the test.

Katherine: Not all of us are great test-- Oh, gosh.

[laughter]

Katherine: Not all of us are good at taking tests. I was one of them. For me, even though I would love to do some at trades, it's hard sometimes. It gets you out of your norm of what you're used to doing. I'm glad to hear that there's options, even though not endorsed, but there's options out there for those who really want to complete that license, but maybe a little bit challenged to be able to get it. What additional challenges did you face due to COVID? How's COVID really changed how you've worked in the scenarios with CEUs and with your contractors?

Carol: It has been a challenge. I can tell you it's been a challenge. There was a law passed in the beginning of 2020. It said, from March until December of 2020, we had to issue licenses. Everybody had to issue licenses, whether you were a realtor, a cosmetologist, a barber, a contractor, everybody. This law said, "If you issue a license, you must issue that license even though they don't have their continuing ed." As long as they paid their renewal fee and submitted their renewal application and paid their \$60 renewal fee, we had to issue the license. The hours were not given. They still had to be made up, and that's been the misconception.

Katherine: Oh, I see.

Carol: Then to make matters worse, our computer is wonderful and it counts all of the hours. When the contractor has his eight hours, the computer knows, and his fee is there and his liability insurance and his renewal form. When everything's there, the computer just knows to issue him a license. We don't have to do that by hand. Our computer didn't know about the pandemic.

[laughter]

Carol: The problem has been, our contractors, a lot of them will take their 2021 hours, but they still didn't have their 2020 hours.

Katherine: Got it. They didn't know they had to make another eight hours in 2021.

Carol: Right. We sent notices out. When we sent their licenses out, we said, "You do not have your continuing education. You need to make this up, but you have until the end of December." Then the law was extended until July 1st of 2021. It's been a process. We have about 18,000 contractors in all five trades. We have to look at every one of them by hand now and not trust the computer because the computer still does not know about the pandemic.

When they renew for '21, we have to go back and look at every one of them because they had a license last year, but did they take their continuing ed? We have to

physically look at every one of them. I'm hoping by the end of this year, the end of December, 1st of January, we will have worked through all of that.

Katherine: Oh, my gosh. That's quite the hurdle. [laughs]

Carol: It has been.

Katherine: You've been in industry for a long time and you have seen the industry evolve a lot over the years. What are some of the most rewarding parts of your tenure being in the industry? That's a big question, isn't it?

[laughter]

Carol: The thing I like about this, the most rewarding thing is helping our contractors. Helping them through the system to get approved, guiding them, not really helping them, but guiding them through the system, and then guiding them through taking the test, and just being unable to listen to them. They call me for their words of encouragement and I love doing that.

Katherine: You shared with us a really special moment. Can you tell our listeners about one of the things that you just did with a contractor who was trying to get his license?

Carol: This happened just recently. I had a contractor from Cincinnati, Dan. He owned his own business and he mostly did residential, but he needed the commercial license to expand his business. Plus, a lot of the building departments now are requiring our license for their residential too. He really needed the license to make his business grow.

He first contacted me to see what he had to do. I told him about working. Of course, he didn't work under a licensed contractor because he owned his own company, but he had been pulling residential permits, and my board will accept residential permits, even though we're a commercial license. He had the permits, he didn't have any W-2s, he owns his own business, but he had a Schedule C. That's fine. Then had the things that he needed to apply. He applied, he was approved.

Then he wanted to know where he could go to prepare to take the test and I gave him some ideas of people who prepared you to take the test. He did that for a couple months and then he was ready to take the test. He took it, he failed by one question.

Katherine: Oh, my gosh, Dan, I feel you.

Carol: He calls me again for words of encouragement, and then he took the test again. He passed it, I framed his license, I drove two hours and hand-delivered his first license to him.

Katherine: How fun.

Doug: Dan and I are best friends forever.

[laughter]

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Carol: I had never met him prior to this.

Katherine: Did you surprise him or did he know you were coming?

Carol: I kept telling him, "Dan, if you ever pass this test, I'm going to hand-deliver that license to you."

Katherine: You lived to your word.

Carol: He called me one Saturday morning after he had taken the test a second time, and he said, "Carol, are you ready for a road trip?"

[laughter]

Carol: I hand-delivered it and that was special.

Doug: That's fantastic.

Katherine: That is so cool. That makes it so worth it, doesn't it? What would you say to someone who is considering getting into the trades, that if they're at that point where, "I don't know if this is where I want to be," through what you've seen and the experience you've had with contractors, what would you say to someone who's like, "Carol, should I get in the trades? Is it a good option for me?"

Carol: I encourage young people whenever I get the chance. I always encourage young people, give it a try if you like working with your hands. The trades are not for everyone, but if you like working with your hands, it's-- I know people who have apprentices and journeymen, and I know a journeyman starts out at \$47 an hour. I'm not knocking college, but I know college graduates that don't make that money and they have a lot of debt, student loan. Most of the contractors will pay for your schooling. It's just a great thing to get into and it's a wonderful way to feed your family. It's an industry to be proud of.

Katherine: We talked about a little bit on this show, it's recession proof, it's pandemic proof?

Carol: Yes.

Katherine: I don't know what else you can throw at it, but it's proof. It can't go anywhere, and it is a trade that you always need.

Carol: We will always need plumbing, we will always need electrical, we will always need heating. It's a job for life and it's fun.

Katherine: For sure. Anything you want to leave with us as we close out today that you want to make sure that our listeners here can be those who are, I think like we just said, thinking about getting into trades, those who maybe are listeners that have been in the trades for a long time and want to learn a little bit more about Ohio licensing or the process, or anything you want us to highlight or mention today?

Carol: I would just like to take this opportunity to tell anyone, especially young people, we need young people in the trade. I'd like to take this opportunity to tell everyone out there, young, middle-aged, old, if you're wanting to get into the trade, please call me. I would love to guide you through the process.

Katherine: That's great. We'll make sure that that happens. We really appreciate your time today. Thank you so much for being on *The Fix*, and, Doug, what an amazing conversation we just had.

Doug: Absolutely. The other thing that people won't know out there is Carol spent two hours driving up to us today.

Katherine: Yes. She lives up to her commitments, so she will do it. You ask her and she will come. We're super excited. We're going to spend some time with Carol today at Oatey University so she gets to see all the work that we're doing here in continuing education and trying to get more people into the trades. Thank you, Carol. We appreciate your time.

Doug: Thank you, Carol.

Carol: Thank you for having me.

[music]

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