



Building the Great Lakes Water Workforce of the Future

 APRIL 2026

Recommendations for Trade and Professional Associations

More than two million people make up the water workforce nationwide. They operate drinking water and wastewater treatment plants; manage stormwater; construct and maintain critical water infrastructure; oversee water rates and utility revenues; educate the public through communications materials and public meetings; and much more.¹ Across the Great Lakes region, our water resources provide drinking water for more than 47 million people and directly generate more than 1.5 million jobs and \$62 billion in wages annually.² A fully staffed water workforce is essential for public health and water quality; however, almost 30% of the workforce is currently over 55 years old and only 5% is 20-24 years old.³ That is why the [Great Lakes Commission](#) (GLC) convened participants from state agencies, water/wastewater utilities, trade/professional associations, and educational institutions for a Water Workforce Roundtable in Grand Rapids, Michigan in July 2025. Roundtable participants and additional contributors helped the GLC shape this suite of recommendations to address water workforce challenges in ways that will strengthen this sector for generations to come.

Investing in the water workforce creates well-paying, family-sustaining jobs that produce a staggering return on investment. According to a recent study, every \$1 million invested in water creates \$2.6 million in economic output, including more than 10 jobs and \$830,000 in labor income.⁴ Advocates for and representatives of the water workforce have organized various trade and professional associations for the water sector, including the American Water Works Association (AWWA), National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA); Association of Metropolitan Water Agencies (AMWA); National Rural Water Association (NRWA); and the Water Environment Federation (WEF), as well as state chapters of national associations. These groups provide technical and educational resources for their members and host forums to share knowledge. The following recommendations present opportunities for professional and trade associations to support the water workforce across the Great Lakes region.

¹ U.S. EPA Office of Water (2024). *Interagency Water Workforce Working Group Report to Congress*. https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2024-09/interagency-water-workforce-working-group-report-to-congress_august-2024-508-compliant.pdf

² Great Lakes Commission. Great Lakes Investment Tracker. <https://investments.glc.org/>

³ U.S. Water Alliance (2025). *Tapping Potential: The Economic Benefits of Investing in Water Infrastructure*. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/67dd711d1a117219a03e4f7a/t/6917b2fbc2843b7310c7ace1/1763160827739/FINAL+VOW+Economic+Report.pdf>

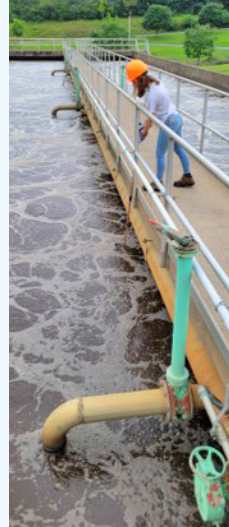
⁴ Ibid.



Trade/Professional Associations

- Provide allotments for high school students to participate in summer internship programs.

CASE STUDY: Since 2021, the Pollution Control Facility (PCF) in Watertown, New York, has participated in the Work in Water Program,⁵ sponsored by the New York Water Environment Association, to introduce high school students to careers in the water and wastewater sector. The PCF has seen a clear increase in student interest in water and wastewater careers as a direct result of participation in the Work in Water Program. Several students have returned to the facility as college interns, demonstrating the program’s success in creating a tangible workforce pipeline.



- Partner with states to conduct statewide “earn while you learn” apprenticeship programs through rural water associations while providing funds for rural utilities to supplement salaries and pay for equipment.
- Offer special sessions or pre-conference workshops for meeting attendees interested in youth engagement or workforce development.
- Provide technical assistance to municipalities for workforce development.
- Support partnerships to develop a statewide one-stop shop for educational resources, including self-paced learning modules, training videos, and plug-and-play curricula.

CASE STUDY: American Water Works Association New York Section’s One Water Workforce initiative is a one-stop shop for educational resources to connect students in Boards of Cooperative Educational Services, Pathways in Technology Academies, community colleges, and trade organizations to careers in New York’s water, wastewater, and public works sectors. The initiative’s shared curriculum helps utilities and educators partner to build local talent pipelines for entry-level utility roles, provide hands-on learning, showcase the value of careers that protect public health and the environment, and create a clear pathway from education to initial certification and employment.⁶



⁵ New York Water Environment Association. Work in Water. <https://nywea.org/operator-certification/work-in-water/>

⁶ American Water Works Association New York Section. One Water Workforce. <https://nysawwa.org/about/oww>