



Building the Great Lakes Water Workforce of the Future

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Recommendations for the U.S. Federal Government

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 a 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 Federal initiatives like the Innovative Water Infrastructure Workforce Development Program have enabled educational institutions, local governments, and other partners to train the next generation of water workers. The urgency of water workforce needs requires a whole-of-government approach as reported by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) in its Interagency Water Workforce Working Group Report to Congress.⁵ To ensure communities and businesses can continue to depend on clean and safe water, the GLC and its partners offer the following recommendations for the federal legislative and executive branches.

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.

⁵ U.S. EPA Office of Water (2024). *Interagency Water Workforce Working Group Report to Congress*.



U.S. Congress

- Continue to fund the Innovative Water Infrastructure Workforce Development Program administered by the U.S. EPA at a level not less than \$20 million per year, with a specific new allocation of \$4 million for efforts supporting water workforce innovation within the Great Lakes region.

CASE STUDY: Between 2022-2025, the Toledo Metropolitan Area Council of Governments (now known as Lake Erie West Regional Council) and Owens Community College worked in partnership with utilities in northwest Ohio to develop a 16-week training program to recruit, train, and employ a new generation of water utility operators. A nearly \$495,000 grant from the U.S. EPA Innovative Water Infrastructure Workforce Development Program allowed for the development of the pilot program, which offered the training at no cost to nearly 70 students and to date has filled at least 24 operator vacancies in the region.⁶

CASE STUDY: The Water to Work Internship Program by Grand Rapids Community College, in partnership with Bay College and the city of Grand Rapids, offers a combination of academic learning, hands-on training, and paid internships. The program received two rounds of funding through the U.S. EPA Innovative Water Infrastructure Workforce Development Program, including a \$1 million grant in 2024.

The 12-month program delivers online coursework through Bay College for a Water Technology Certificate and a paid internship at a west Michigan municipality. As of April 2026, 100% of interns who completed the program have been offered full-time employment with benefits.⁷



- Continue to fund workforce development programs within U.S. EPA and the departments of Education, Labor, Agriculture, Veterans Affairs, and other relevant agencies, and support continued cross-agency coordination such as the 2023 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between U.S. EPA and the U.S. Department of Labor and the 2020 MOU between U.S. EPA and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.⁸
- Increase funding to U.S. EPA's RealWaterTA⁹ and U.S. Department of Agriculture's Circuit Rider Program¹⁰ (cooperatively administered by the National Rural Water Association) and direct both agencies to provide water workforce development assistance to utilities through these existing programs.

⁶ Toledo Metropolitan Area Council of Governments. Water Workforce Coalition Training Program. <https://waterworksforyou.org/program>

⁷ Grand Rapids Community College. Water to Work Internship Program. <https://www.grcc.edu/schools-departments/school-workforce-training/workforce-training-programs/water-sustainability/water-work-internship-program>

⁸ U.S. EPA Office of Water (2024). Interagency Water Workforce Working Group Report to Congress.

⁹ U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Real Water Technical Assistance. <https://www.epa.gov/water-infrastructure/real-water-technical-assistance-realwaterta>

¹⁰ NRWA. Circuit Rider Program. <https://nrwa.org/circuit-rider-program/>

- Direct the Department of Education to assure that federal financial assistance is available for eligible students enrolled in water workforce related skill certificate programs through universities, community colleges, and vocational schools for both credit and noncredit programs.

U.S. Executive Branch

- U.S. EPA should host and maintain a website detailing funding opportunities from all federal agencies engaged in water workforce development akin to the summaries and hyperlinks included in the 2024 interagency report to Congress.¹¹
- Improve the searchability of the U.S. Department of Labor’s Apprenticeship USA website by including specific codes for available positions and updating search terms (i.e., produce results for water workforce apprenticeships when searching for “water,” “wastewater,” and similar terms).

¹¹ U.S. EPA Office of Water (2024). Interagency Water Workforce Working Group Report to Congress.