



Building the Great Lakes Water Workforce of the Future

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Recommendations for Local Decision-Makers

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 The need for water infrastructure investment in the Great Lakes basin spans the region, affecting urban centers, rural areas, and suburbs. While water systems at each scale require a robust water workforce, small towns and municipalities often have limited resources to meet staffing needs. A fully trained, competitively compensated water workforce is necessary to supply drinking water for communities and treat wastewater from industries that power Great Lakes economies. The skills required for these careers are also easily transferrable to other local government positions and are resistant to the rising influence of artificial intelligence on the workforce. The following recommendations will help local decision-makers boost local economic output and ensure high-quality and reliable water services by developing a skilled water workforce.

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.



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- Implement employment programs for high school students following an “earn while you learn” model focused on a variety of local government career paths, emphasizing the transferability of skills from these positions.
- Recognize the value of water operators and offer pay commensurate with the importance of the work.
- Increase collaboration between public works offices and school districts, higher education and other public institutions, potentially through locally led public events.

CASE STUDY: Multiple partnerships across the Great Lakes region have produced successful public events to engage and educate community members on water stewardship and the vast array of careers available in the water sector. These events have included STEAM Along the Lakeshore in Muskegon, Michigan;⁵ Rouge River Water Festival in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan;⁶ and Diggers and Dumpers in Erie, Pennsylvania.⁷

- Assess the feasibility of establishing private funding mechanisms to support the industrial and commercial water workforce.
- Develop partnerships with nonprofit organizations, community colleges, or universities to collaborate on grant applications for water workforce development funding opportunities, especially when local governments are ineligible.

⁵ Muskegon Community College. STEAM Along the Lakeshore. <https://www.muskegoncc.edu/events/steam-along-the-lakeshore-2/>

⁶ Cranbrook Institute of Science. Rouge River Water Festival. <https://science.cranbrook.edu/discover/freshwater-forum/rouge-river-waterfestival>

⁷ Macaroni KID. Diggers & Dumpers at Erie County Technical School.

<https://erie.macaronikid.com/events/68cafe5be0f4886296380fda/%EF%B8%8F-free-diggers-and-dumpers-at-erie-county-technical-school>