Building the Great Lakes Water Workforce of the Future

APRIL 2026

Recommendations for U.S. State Governments

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] Great Lakes states play a crucial role in the supply of safe drinking water, the collection and treatment of sewage, and the management of stormwater. Each state oversees its own operator certification program to maintain compliance with federal and state-specific regulatory requirements intended to protect public health and safety. Exam, education, and training requirements for operator licenses vary by state and require sufficient funding for programming, including guidance for utilities on compliance obligations and succession planning. The following recommendations highlight opportunities for state governments to better support the region's water workforce, including opportunities to improve the training for drinking water and wastewater operators and level the playing field for small systems competing for a limited pool of workers.

---

[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.

Great Lakes Commission
des Grands Lacs

State Legislatures

- Enhance funding for state operator certification programs to expand educational programming for drinking water and wastewater operators beyond operator certification test administration.
- Identify revenue sources to broadly support clean water, including water workforce development and training.
- Offer financial incentives for small and rural utilities to supplement wages for skilled water workforce staff, including access to statewide shared retirement/benefits pools so that wages in rural areas can be comparable to their larger and urban counterparts.
- Provide and/or expand tuition waivers or loan forgiveness programs for water workforce training and certification programs through accredited educational institutions.

> **CASE STUDY:** Michigan Reconnect is a statewide program that aims to ensure eligible Michiganders who do not have a college degree will have an opportunity to earn a tuition-free or deeply discounted associate degree or skills certificate. Michigan Reconnect covers any Pell-eligible associate degree or industry-recognized certificate programs at Michigan's public community colleges and tribal colleges.[5]

- Offer grant funding for small utilities to hire an apprentice(s)/intern(s) and plan for succession.

> **CASE STUDY:** The Wisconsin Wastewater Operators Association (WWOA) recently launched its Youth Apprenticeship Involvement Grant to help build the next generation of water and wastewater professionals. In its first year, WWOA awarded three $3,000 grants to member municipalities to support participation in Wisconsin's Youth Apprenticeship Program, helping offset wage costs associated with hosting a student apprentice. This initiative is intended to reduce financial barriers for small utilities while strengthening workforce development and succession planning.[6]

- Establish and fund a statewide water development advisory council of state agencies, utilities, academia, and other key stakeholders.

> **CASE STUDY:** Minnesota's Advisory Council on Water Supply Systems and Wastewater Treatment Facilities is comprised of state agency representatives, drinking water and wastewater treatment system operators, municipalities, and members of the public.[7] Its goal is to gather advice related to: the classification of water supply systems and wastewater treatment facilities; the qualifications and competency evaluation of drinking water and wastewater treatment system operators; and additional laws, rules, and procedures regulating the operation of systems.

[5] State of Michigan. About Michigan Reconnect. https://www.michigan.gov/reconnect/about

[6] Wisconsin Wastewater Operators Association. Youth Apprenticeship Grant. https://wwoa.org/education/youth-apprenticeship-involvement-grant

[7] Minn Stat. § 115.7411. https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/115.7411

- Financially support system consolidation when clear workforce benefits are anticipated, including additional resources for staff salaries, benefits, and professional development, and increased opportunities for staff specialization to provide support for planning, asset management, operations and maintenance, engineering, and finance.[8]
- Direct state departments of education to ensure that state-level 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.

State Agencies

- Establish water workforce awareness or recognition weeks, and if they already exist, emphasize outreach to youth around drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater employment opportunities.

> **CASE STUDY:** Michigan's Water and Wastewater Professionals Workforce Week honors the dedication of the state's operators, technicians, administrative professionals, and other specialists who work to ensure communities have safe and reliable drinking water and that rivers and lakes are fishable and swimmable.[9]

- Foster relationships and collaboration across state agencies – including environmental, education, and labor departments – and higher education institutions to define pathways for career development in the drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater fields.
- Partner with educational stakeholders to develop and share apprenticeship and certification program curricula.
- 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.[10]

ONE WATER WORKFORCE

[8] US Water Alliance (2019). *Utility Strengthening through Consolidation: A Briefing Paper.* https://uswateralliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Consolidation-Briefing-Paper_Final_021819.pdf

[9] Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy. Water and Wastewater Professionals Workforce Week. https://www.michigan.gov/egle/about/organization/drinking-water-and-environmental-health/water-wastewater-professionals-week

[10] American Water Works Association New York Section. One Water Workforce. https://nysawwa.org/about/oww

- Develop and manage a statewide database of available operators to share with systems when hiring needs arise.
- Incorporate activities on the water workforce within annual Earth Day programming.
- Create a system for rotating lecturers or shared programming, including a listing of utility-identified subject matter experts, to make certification/training courses accessible to educational institutions across the Great Lakes region, incorporating virtual and hands-on learning.
- Examine the application processes for operator certification and make necessary adjustments to remove any identified barriers.
- Develop a checklist for local governments and small systems to use when hiring contract operators, to ensure compliance requirements are met.