



Building the Great Lakes Water Workforce of the Future

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Recommendations for Water, Wastewater, and Stormwater Utilities

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 Whether nested within local government, standing as a separate public authority, or privately-owned, water utilities are the front line in providing clean water services to their communities. The following recommendations offer methods for water, wastewater, and stormwater utilities to build and maintain the Great Lakes water workforce of the future.

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.



Water/Wastewater/Stormwater Utilities

- Recognize staff as water heroes and offer communications training to staff interested in youth engagement or other outreach activities to raise community awareness.
 - For outreach activities, adequate resources for staffing and supplies should be provided.
 - Larger utilities should share communications materials and training opportunities with smaller neighboring utilities.
- Establish and sustain relationships with statewide rural water associations to support utility-led rural water apprenticeships.

CASE STUDY: The two-year Registered Water and Wastewater Apprenticeship Program at the Alliance of Indiana Rural Water (AIRW) was developed in response to the industry’s need to train the next generation of skilled workers and standardize training across the state of Indiana. The first rural water association in the nation to launch such a program, AIRW has 108 current active apprentices and 94 program graduates since enrolling its first apprentice in 2018.⁵

- Develop and implement Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs)/mutual aid agreements to support sharing staff and resources in neighboring communities.
- Build partnerships with educators and community partners such as youth councils, 4-H programs, and other community-based organizations.
 - Connect with scouting organizations to offer site visits and other educational offerings to fulfill merit badge requirements.
 - Partner with high school technical centers to offer field trips and other learning opportunities.
- Boost workforce retention by providing benefits, training opportunities, and pathways for operators to become supervisors.
- Adopt continuous asset management practices to plan for the future, including both infrastructure and staff.⁶
- Develop partnerships with educational institutions to tap into their institutional knowledge regarding grant procurement and administration.

⁵ Alliance of Indiana Rural Water. Water & Wastewater Operations Specialist Apprenticeship Programs. <https://www.inh2o.org/apprenticeship-program>

⁶ Great Lakes Commission (2022). *Approaches for Improving Great Lakes Water Infrastructure: A Blueprint*. <https://www.glc.org/work/glw/>