

Pathways with Purpose: Expanding Access to Water Careers

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Abstract

Through complementary funding from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (Project WTRHub) and the Water Research Foundation (WRF Project 5307), The Water Tower is expanding traditional workforce development approaches to addresses recruitment, training, and retention across the water industry. These initiatives explore how utilities can build a resilient and inclusive workforce by expanding access to careers, strengthening instructional capacity, and creating clear, equitable pathways for long-term advancement.

A central feature of Water Workforce and Recruitment Hub (WTR Hub) is to design a comprehensive post-secondary career development program, developed with a coalition of utilities, higher education institutions, and mission-driven social-service nonprofits to explore innovative approaches to holistically support the water workforce. Through the WTR Hub, The Water Tower developed the Water Needs You campaign, which reframes water careers in ways that resonate with younger and more diverse audiences. The development of this campaign leveraged partnerships with organizations serving women, unaccompanied youth, justice-involved individuals, homeschool and ACTE initiatives, the Latin community, and more. By engaging trusted community partners, the WTRHub lowers barriers to entry, expands access to training, and connects utilities with talent pools historically overlooked by the industry. Combined with tailored training pathways and employer technical assistance, this approach demonstrates how nontraditional recruitment strategies, implemented through nontraditional partners, can meaningfully expand the water workforce. Highlights of these campaigns can be seen on the website: www.waterneedsyou.org

In addition to recruitment, the WTR Hub prioritizes the people responsible for training the next generation of water professionals through a Train-the-Trainer certificate program. Developed in partnership with Water Professionals International, this initiative equips experienced utility staff with the pedagogical skills, confidence, and instruction tools needed to deliver high-quality training. Designed as a four-day intensive, the program focuses on adult learning principles, instructional best practices, and practical teaching strategies, to ensure that subject matter experts are providing effective and engaging instruction. The first launch of this Train-the-Trainer course is scheduled for March 2026, with data collection in place and plans to further develop the course.

Utilities can support the communities they serve by recruiting from underserved populations, but retention depends on clear advancement opportunities, knowledge transfer, and intentional upskilling of staff. Recruitment and training efforts are only effective if workers remain in the industry and view water as a long-term career rather than a temporary job. Through WRF 5307, The Water Tower is researching and documenting best practices for career progression pathways that support employee retention while meeting utility operational needs. This work has resulted in a best-practices guide that outlines efficient, equitable progression pathways benefiting both employers and employees, highlighting pathways that strengthen institutional knowledge, improve workforce stability, and positively influence public perceptions of water careers as lifelong opportunities.