

# AN EQUITABLE WATER FUTURE

# Milwaukee





# ABOUT THE WATER EQUITY TASKFORCE

Water shapes economic growth, the environment, and the social fabric of our communities. Ensuring that all people have access to safe, reliable, and affordable water and wastewater services is the cornerstone of a sustainable and prosperous nation. We all have a role to play in forging progress.

The Water Equity Taskforce is a network of cities that work together to develop more equitable water policies and practices. Convened by the US Water Alliance—and composed of cross-sector teams in the cities of Atlanta, Buffalo, Camden, Cleveland, Louisville, Milwaukee, and Pittsburgh—this initiative is advancing the understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and promising interventions to promote equitable water management.

The Milwaukee Water Equity Taskforce came together to expand workforce opportunities tied to the water sector. The Milwaukee team brings together leaders from water and sewer utilities, local colleges, workforce agencies, nonprofits, philanthropy, environmental organizations, and community organizations focused on workforce development. The team developed this report as a collaborative framework for advancing equity in Milwaukee’s water workforce.

## Milwaukee Water Equity Taskforce



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The US Water Alliance is grateful to the Berkman Charitable Trust, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, The Joyce Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, and the Turner Foundation for their support of the seven-city Water Equity Taskforce.

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# PREFACE

Milwaukee positions itself as a water-centric city—a hub of innovation and investment in water technology and infrastructure, and an area rich in water resources that provide opportunities for recreation and well-being. Yet, Milwaukee’s water workforce does not reflect the diversity of its residents. To build a more equitable workforce, we must identify, understand, and address barriers to entry, particularly for people living in communities that face limited economic and social opportunities.

The Milwaukee Water Equity Taskforce was convened to explore pathways to a more equitable water future and inclusive workforce in Milwaukee. Its members represent a range of stakeholder interests—utilities, nonprofits, neighborhood associations, workforce development organizations, and educational institutions. Together, we spent the last two years investigating the factors that limit entry into the water workforce for members of historically marginalized communities and defining actions that can be taken to remove those barriers. This Water Equity Roadmap and the accompanying Needs Assessment are the outcomes of our work.

The issues affecting workforce equity are deeply ingrained. In Milwaukee, a history of racial segregation, rising income inequality, and the growth of mass incarceration prevent many workers from climbing above the poverty line. Changing the way things are will require a commitment from all of us in the water sector. We are energized by this challenge and by the many conversations we had with community members during this project.

Notably, a number of efforts are already underway to advance water workforce equity in Milwaukee. The Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District (MMSD), in collaboration with Cream City Conservation and Employ Milwaukee, recently launched the Fresh Coast Ambassador program to prepare young adults in Milwaukee to enter the water workforce. MMSD has initiated an apprenticeship program along with “banning the box” on job applications—meaning that the applications no longer include questions about applicants’ criminal records. Milwaukee Water Works (MWW) is defining new partnerships to build a stronger pipeline for potential future employees, with outreach starting in grade school and extending through colleges and universities. MWW has developed a youth apprenticeship program to provide high school students with experience working in the water distribution and machinery repair programs. Partnering with Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC), MWW welcomes interns from the Environmental Health and Water Quality Technology Associate Degree program to gain experience working in MWW’s treatment plants and water quality laboratories.

The recommendations in this document call for stronger collaboration among all those in Milwaukee’s water sector and meaningful changes to workplace culture, policies, and practices. We believe that advancing these recommendations will help ensure that the economic, environmental, and social benefits resulting from community investments in water are more equitably shared by all.



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# INTRODUCTION

The name “Milwaukee” is a settler variation of the Anishinaabemowin word *minowaki*, which means “good land.” The city of Milwaukee sits at the confluence of the Milwaukee, Menomonee, and Kinnickinnic rivers and along the shores of Lake Michigan. Water is foundational to the city, and it is at the root of the lives of the many people who have lived here.

As with many US cities, Milwaukee’s history is also rooted in environmental and economic injustice. Milwaukee is one of the most segregated cities in the country, a condition that is reflected in its socioeconomic disparities. Milwaukee’s historically marginalized communities disproportionately bear the weight of environmental challenges associated with water quality, climate change, flooding, aging infrastructure, and combined sewer overflows. This reality calls for actions that advance equity and environmental justice.

Over the past two years, the Milwaukee Water Equity Taskforce focused its efforts on equitable, living-wage employment as a priority for water equity. First, to better understand the barriers to equitable employment in Milwaukee’s water sector, Milwaukee Water Commons contracted with the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Center for Economic Development to undertake a comprehensive water sector Needs Assessment as part of the team process. National and local water sector research, interviews with selected stakeholders, and multiple community focus group discussions on barriers to living-wage employment in Milwaukee’s water sector augmented this assessment. The team also participated in monthly meetings, quarterly learning exchanges with the US Water Alliance’s seven Taskforce cities, and constant team communication and collaboration.

This Roadmap is the outcome of the Taskforce’s efforts. It outlines how Milwaukee’s history has shaped our current challenges, and it sets forth an agenda for pursuing progress, with recommendations for action that apply to stakeholders across the water sector. This is a template for member organizations, stakeholder organizations connected to Milwaukee’s water sector, community organizations, and affected communities to advance change. By acting together, Milwaukee’s water stakeholders can positively reshape the opportunity landscape for our most vulnerable communities and establish a more equitable foundation for future generations.

The Roadmap is organized as follows:

- **Background** describes Milwaukee’s demographics and socioeconomic context;
- **Water Workforce Challenges** reviews factors related to Milwaukee’s water workforce that disproportionately affect vulnerable communities; and
- **Recommendations for Action** highlights priority actions that stakeholders in Milwaukee can take to build an inclusive, diverse, and prepared water workforce, now and for decades to come.

# BACKGROUND

This section of the report explores demographics and disparities that shape the lives of vulnerable communities in Milwaukee. These communities are concentrated on the city's north and south sides, in neighborhoods including Lindsey Heights, Amani, Silver City, Harambee, Metcalfe Park, Muskego Way, Sherman Park East, Franklin Heights, Clarke Square, North Division, Silver Spring, Halyard Park, and others affected by segregation, economic disinvestment, and redlining.<sup>1</sup>

While the individual challenges these communities face may seem distinct, they are interdependent and compounding with the effects of one tending to amplify another. For example, lower educational attainment is interwoven with higher levels of poverty and incarceration.<sup>2</sup> These interconnections intensify the challenges that vulnerable communities face.

## Defining Terms

**Water Equity.** Equity refers to just and fair inclusion—a condition in which everyone has an opportunity to participate and prosper. Water equity occurs when all communities have access to safe, clean, affordable drinking water and wastewater services; are resilient in the face of floods, drought, and other climate risks; have a role in decision-making processes related to water management in their communities; and share in the economic, social, and environmental benefits of water systems.

**Vulnerable Communities.** Vulnerable communities face historical and/or contemporary barriers to economic and social opportunities and a healthy environment, with some key factors being income, race or ethnicity, age, language ability, and geographic location. Vulnerable communities may include low-income persons, certain communities of color, immigrants, seniors, children, persons with disabilities, persons living in public housing, and currently or formerly incarcerated persons.

## Economic Shifts

Over the past five decades, Milwaukee's deindustrialization has created challenges for the region's economic base and workforce, particularly in historically marginalized communities. Due to globalization and economic restructuring in the US, Milwaukee lost 54,700 manufacturing jobs—a decline of almost 50 percent—between 1967 and 1987.<sup>3</sup> These manufacturing positions paid well and served as anchors for middle-class families, but jobs with higher education requirements and lower-paid jobs in the service industry soon replaced them. Between 1990 and 2018, manufacturing jobs decreased by another 27 percent while service-based employment increased by 30 percent.<sup>4</sup> In Milwaukee County, the average annual income in 2016 was \$22,476 for leisure and hospitality and \$28,157 for other services, as compared to \$65,856 for manufacturing positions.<sup>5</sup>

## Population and Intra-Regional Migration

Milwaukee's population shifted at the same time as its economy. The city's population peaked at 741,000 in 1960, and by 2010 it was 595,000—a 20 percent decline.<sup>6</sup> During the same period, the total population of the eight counties in the Milwaukee-Racine-Waukesha Combined Statistical Area grew from 1.28 million to 2 million.<sup>7</sup> This shift reflects a historical trend of white residents moving from the city to Milwaukee's suburbs, prompted in part by redlining practices that labeled in-city neighborhoods as "declining" or "hazardous" for investment, and suburban neighborhoods as "best" or "desirable" for investment.<sup>8</sup> Over time, this migration pattern has made Milwaukee one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States. Segregation is a product of structural racism: a system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate inequality among racial groups.<sup>9</sup>

## Race and Ethnicity

With shifts in population have come changes in the city's racial and ethnic makeup. Between 1980 and 2015, the representation of white, African American, and Latinx residents in Milwaukee went from 71 percent, 23 percent, and four percent of the population to 36 percent, 39 percent, and 18 percent, respectively.<sup>10</sup> Between 2000 and 2014, over 12,000 people immigrated to Milwaukee, making the population more diverse.<sup>11</sup>

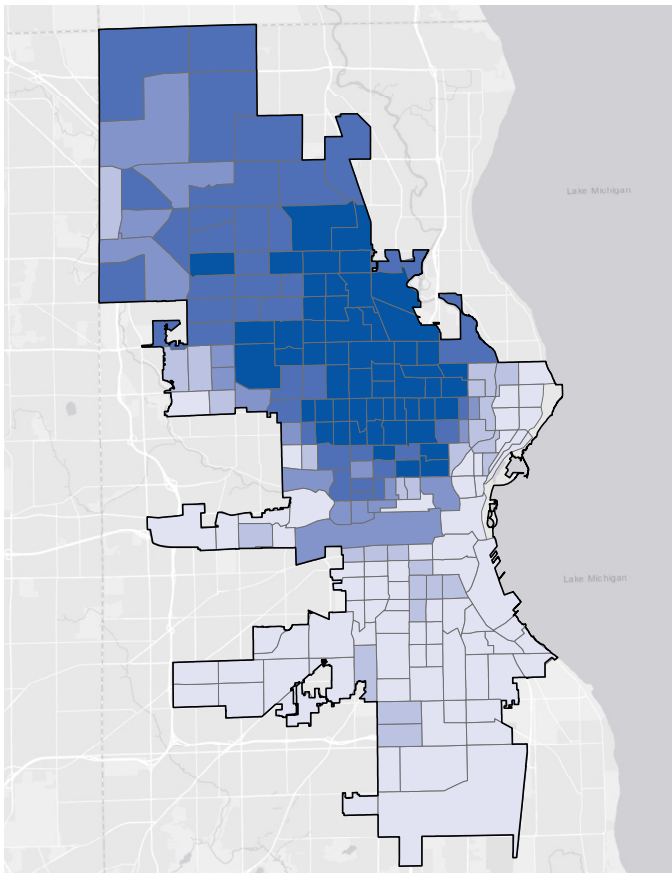
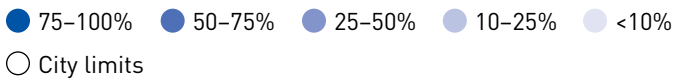
## Educational Attainment

Educational attainment is an indicator of access to stable, well-paid employment. In 2020, 38 percent of jobs in the city of Milwaukee require at least a high school diploma, 62 percent require some level of training after high school, and 39 percent require an associate degree or higher.<sup>12</sup> Between 2000 and 2017 in Milwaukee, the average income

was \$30,206 for residents with a high school degree, \$33,836 for those with some level of training after high school, and \$49,464 for those with a bachelor's degree.<sup>13</sup>

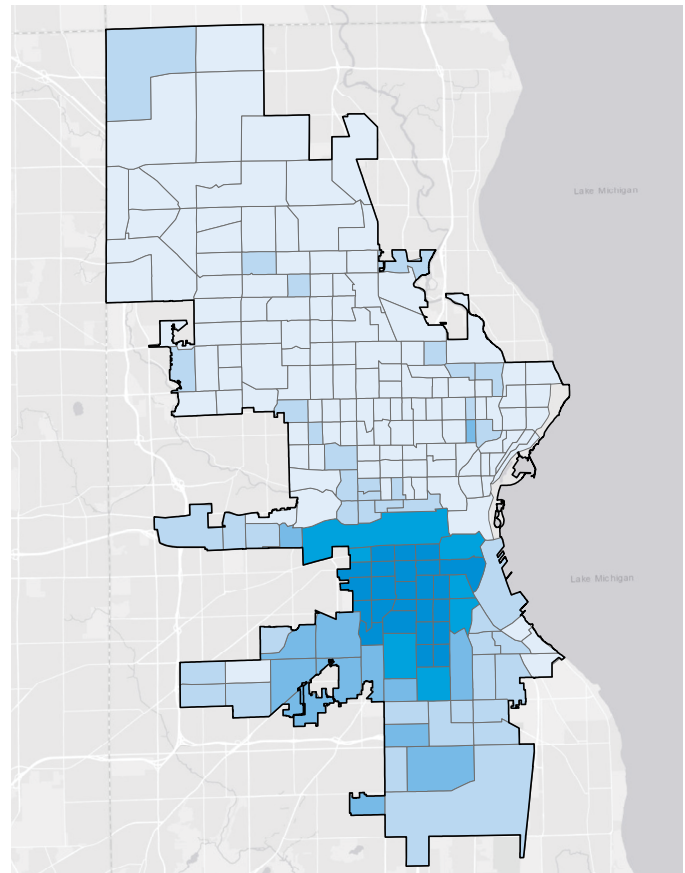
Among Milwaukee residents age 25 or older, 18 percent have less than a high school diploma,<sup>14</sup> but their distribution is not uniform across racial and ethnic distinction. In 2015, six percent of the city's white population had less than a high school diploma, as compared to 18 percent of the African American population, 28 percent of the Latinx US-born population, and 55 percent of the Latinx immigrant population.<sup>15</sup> Residents with some level of training after high school comprised 67 percent of the city's white population, 48 percent of the African American population, 42 percent of the Latinx US-born population, and 15 percent of the Latinx immigrant population.<sup>16</sup> These disparities in education level continue to affect residents' ability to thrive.

### Percent Black or African American, Milwaukee, 2017



**Source:** All data are American Community Survey 2017 5 Year Estimates at the Census Tract level for city of Milwaukee.

### Percent Hispanic or Latino, Milwaukee, 2017



**Source:** All data are American Community Survey 2017 5 Year Estimates at the Census Tract level for city of Milwaukee.



## Employment

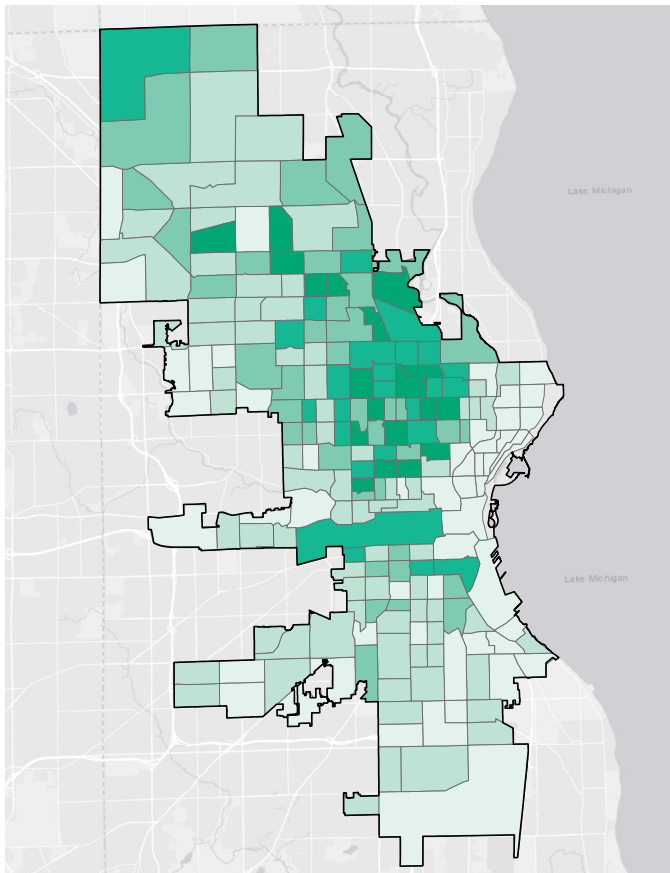
Research has shown relationships between access to living-wage employment and a number of factors, including race and ethnicity, gender, educational attainment, and transportation. A person's status in each context could restrict their access to employment and training. In Milwaukee, the unemployment rate for African American residents is more than three times that of white residents (15 percent vs. five percent) in 2017.<sup>17</sup> Among Milwaukee residents between the ages of 25 and 54, 44 percent lack full-time, full-year employment, compared to 34 percent of residents in Milwaukee's suburbs.<sup>18</sup>

## Income and Poverty

Disparities in employment and job stability mean that historically marginalized populations are more likely to be low income or live in poverty, making them more vulnerable to economic shifts.

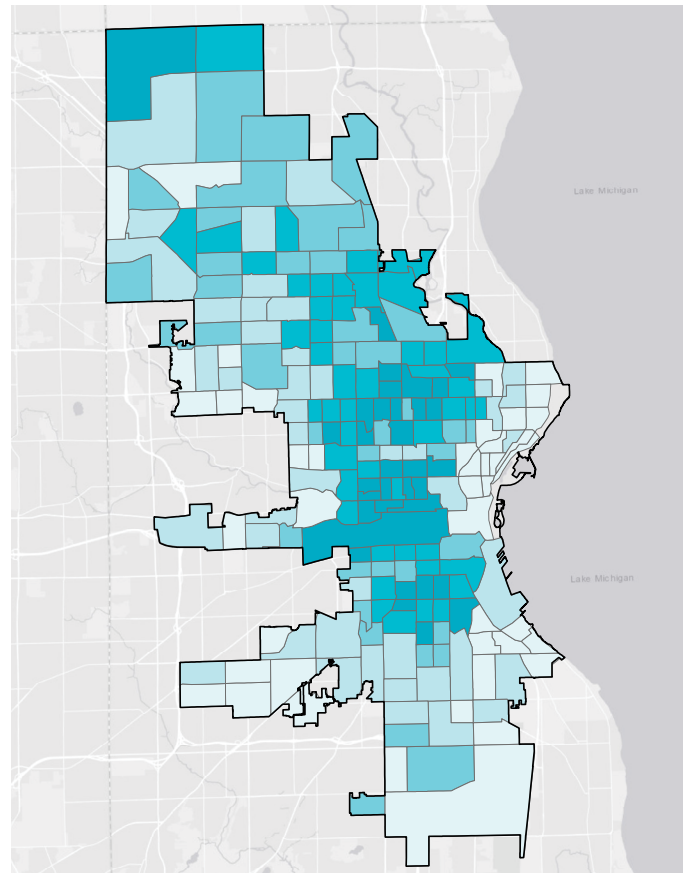
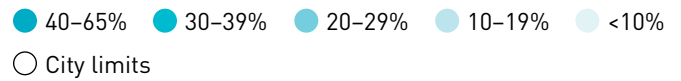
In Milwaukee, white, African American, and Latinx workers were paid average wages of \$20, \$16, and \$13 per hour, respectively, between 2000 and 2010.<sup>19</sup> The average household income in Milwaukee was approximately \$28,000 for African American residents, \$34,000 for Latinx residents, and \$53,000 for white residents in 2019.<sup>20</sup> Overall, 29 percent of Milwaukeeans live below the federal poverty line, but poverty is not experienced equally across all groups, with 39 percent of African Americans, 33 percent of Latinx, and 18 percent of white residents

### Unemployment Rate, Milwaukee, 2017



Source: All data are American Community Survey 2017 5 Year Estimates at the Census Tract level for city of Milwaukee.

### Percent Households in Poverty, Milwaukee, 2017



Source: All data are American Community Survey 2017 5 Year Estimates at the Census Tract level for city of Milwaukee.

living in poverty.<sup>21</sup> Segregation in the Milwaukee area also translates to differences in income potential. On average, residents in the city of Milwaukee stand to make \$10,000 to \$30,000 less than residents in the suburbs of Waukesha County with the same level of educational attainment.<sup>22</sup>

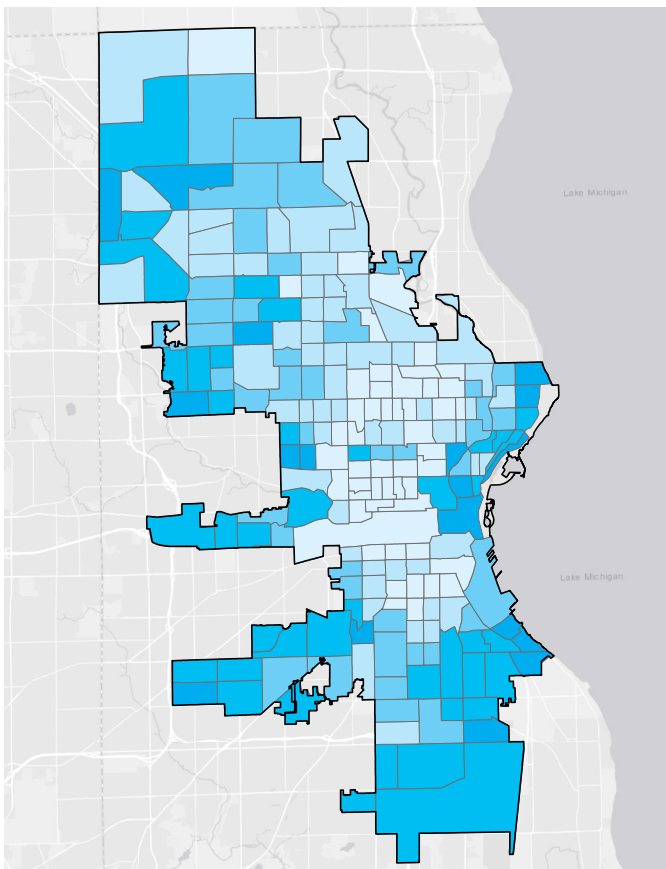
## Incarceration

Many of the factors described above, including unemployment, poverty, and racial discrimination, have shown to influence a person's likelihood of incarceration.<sup>23</sup> In 2010, the population of males over the age of 18 in Milwaukee correctional facilities included 12 percent of the city's total African American male population, two percent of Latinx males, and one percent of white males.<sup>24</sup> A 2013 study found that more than half of all Milwaukee's African American men in their 30s and 40s had been incarcerated at some point, more than two-thirds of them coming from the city's poorest neighborhoods.<sup>25</sup> Police activity disproportionately targets African American residents; for example, a 2018 study found that between 2011 and 2015, Milwaukee police officers pulled over African American drivers in traffic stops at five times the rate of white drivers.<sup>26</sup>

### Median Household Income, Milwaukee, 2017

- \$10,570–\$24,999
- \$25,000–\$34,999
- \$35,000–\$44,999
- \$45,000–\$59,999
- \$60,000–\$94,500

○ City limits



**Source:** All data are American Community Survey 2017 5 Year Estimates at the Census Tract level for city of Milwaukee.

**The challenges cited in this section greatly influence the lives of people in Milwaukee's historically marginalized neighborhoods. The next section explores how these challenges and others translate into barriers to water workforce entry.**

# WATER WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

This section focuses specifically on the challenges or barriers that restrict access to living-wage employment in Milwaukee’s water sector.

## Segregation

Segregation is a prominent part of Milwaukee’s history. In the present day, its effect produces direct barriers to job access and awareness of employment opportunities for lower-income people and communities of color. In the water sector, workers earn competitive wages and face lower educational barriers to entry.<sup>27</sup> Yet the people who work in Milwaukee’s water sector do not represent the diversity of the broader community: many positions in Milwaukee’s water sector are racially and gender homogeneous.<sup>28</sup>

## Disjointed Action

Actions focused on benefiting vulnerable communities are often disjointed due to a lack of communication and collaboration among organizations seeking to advance community support services<sup>29</sup> and workforce inclusion. This disconnection limits the ability of wraparound service teams to provide integrated community support services, and it stifles the effectiveness of scarce resources and funding. When these support systems work effectively, they can increase people’s ability to gain employment and move up the career ladder—for example, by raising awareness of, and access to, opportunities for mentoring and training. Greater coordination and collaboration among organizations focused on community support systems and workforce development could amplify the effectiveness of all actions.

## Training-to-Jobs Gap

The Taskforce spoke with a number of stakeholders and community members about their experiences related to the water workforce. Many of them mentioned a disconnect between training programs and employment opportunities. Skills trainings and certifications are often administered through agencies and organizations that are focused on workforce development but are not directly connected with employers or supervisors in Milwaukee’s water sector. Without a direct line of communication about the specific

job requirements and staff needs, workforce development organizations may administer trainings that are not always relevant to the needs of employers. This can also create mistrust among job seekers who have completed trainings and certifications and then cannot find employment.

## Transportation Challenges

In Milwaukee, 1,324 fewer employers are accessible by public transit in 2019 than in 2001, representing an estimated total of 30,923 positions inaccessible to workers who rely on public transit.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, 27 percent of African American households lack access to a car, compared with 11 percent of white households.<sup>31</sup> The lack of access to reliable transportation is a major barrier to accessing employment opportunities in Milwaukee’s water sector, and it was a common theme in the Taskforce’s conversations with community members. The cost of obtaining a valid driver’s license, the difficulty in getting a driver’s license for those with limited English-speaking or reading ability, the cost of a personal vehicle or private transportation, and distance from public transportation are barriers for members of vulnerable communities seeking employment. In many cases, water sector employers and apprenticeship and training centers are far outside city limits and are not easily accessible by public transportation.<sup>32</sup> In the private sector, most of the region’s water-related industries are outside the city of Milwaukee and not accessible by public transportation.<sup>33</sup>

## Workplace Cultural Challenges

Workplace practices and cultural expectations can influence hiring and employee retention and can create barriers for applicants from diverse backgrounds. Making Milwaukee’s water sector work culture more inclusive and supportive of diverse backgrounds will take many organizations’ intentional focus. Workplace cultures that are more inclusive, welcoming, and supportive of diversity benefit everyone and have shown to be more productive, innovative, and attractive for potential employees.<sup>34</sup> Examples of workplace cultural challenges include:

- **Cultural Competency.** Cultural competency is a set of behaviors, policies, and attitudes that form an environment where cross-cultural groups can work effectively. This encompasses behaviors, language and communication, actions, values, religious beliefs, social groups, and ethnic perceptions. Many employers in the Milwaukee area do not have experience creating an environment in which diverse cultures can be inclusively understood and engaged. Culturally competent policies and practices are essential for workplaces to be inclusive and are an important pathway to achieving workforce diversity goals.
- **Unconscious Bias.** Unconscious bias—a subconscious prejudice or unsupported judgment in favor of or against one thing, person, or group—can influence company culture. Without structural accountability, unconscious bias also plays a role in hiring, from how and where recruitment is performed to the screening of applications, interviewing, and candidate selection. A 2014 study showcased the phenomenon, revealing that among 59 freshwater environmental organizations around the Great Lakes, 98 percent of study participants expressed having no bias against minority applicants, though overall, white employees held 93 percent of the organizations’ staff and leadership positions.<sup>35</sup>
- **Language Barriers.** Milwaukee’s diversity is reflected in the languages spoken by residents. As of 2018, people spoke more than 100 languages in the region.<sup>36</sup> More than 18 percent of residents speak a non-English language, with Spanish the most common, followed by Hmong and other Asian languages. Slightly more than one-fifth of Latinx households in the city of Milwaukee are considered “limited English speaking.”<sup>37</sup> Limited-English speakers often face additional barriers to access to health care, social services, or emergency services. Milwaukee water sector employers interviewed by members of the Taskforce expressed having minimal organizational infrastructure to accommodate limited English language proficiency.
- **Employer Hiring Practices.** Many employers have not implemented policies around workforce diversity, or in some cases, have limited control over policies that affect workforce diversity. For example, for many employers, a criminal record disqualifies an applicant from employment, regardless of the relevance to the job requirements. Some water sector jobs require pre-employment exams that present barriers to entry—

for example, training and preparation for those exams may be inaccessible to people in historically marginalized communities.

- **Social Networks.** Insular hiring within one’s immediate social network also creates barriers to gainful employment for members of historically marginalized groups, because members of these groups have been excluded from many social networks. This creates a structural barrier to learning about career paths, job openings, and apprenticeship and training opportunities. In the Taskforce’s conversations with community members, many of them were not even aware that water sector jobs and career paths were options available to them.

## Procurement Barriers

Many of the water sector employers in the Milwaukee region are contractors, consulting firms, and nonprofit organizations that provide services to the water industry. Much of their work comes through contracts with utilities for the planning, design, construction, and maintenance of water infrastructure and for delivery of support services such as outreach and engagement. These companies also subcontract with smaller businesses for support in delivering services.<sup>38</sup> Across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, procurement policies can create barriers to workforce inclusion. Key issues include:

- **Single-Factor Evaluations.** When procurement bid evaluations are based on a single or small group of evaluation criteria, particularly those focused on monetary resources and capacity, firms owned by members of historically marginalized groups, and local and minority- and women-owned businesses, have a harder time competing for bids.
- **Bonding and Insurance.** In many cases, procurement bids require a certain amount of bonding and insurance to qualify as eligible to compete for the bid. These thresholds are usually proportional to the size of the bid. Such bonding and insurance thresholds can pose as a barrier for local and minority- and women-owned businesses and firms owned by members of marginalized communities, because of socioeconomic disparities—particularly those associated with intergenerational wealth and business ownership.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Achieving workforce equity in Milwaukee will require collective action and structural change, with leadership and commitment across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors. This section offers recommendations that can forge meaningful progress, organized into three categories:

- 1. Increase Collaboration to Advance Inclusive Workforce Development Practices**
- 2. Increase Awareness of the Water Sector**
- 3. Assess Internal Workforce and Procurement Policies and Practices**

**To forge positive change**, we call on all Milwaukee water sector stakeholders to deepen their commitment to creating thriving communities. Milwaukee's water sector delivers water and sanitation services, constructs vital infrastructure in the city's neighborhoods, and educates, trains, and employs people. It provides opportunities for recreation and builds community amenities such as gardens and green infrastructure. In some cases, these endeavors have been disconnected from one another and the communities they intend to serve. Building water equity requires that stakeholders in the water sector commit to:

- **Contributing to thriving communities.** A deeper connection between water sector employers and historically marginalized communities is essential for building workforce equity, and building this connection requires intention and commitment. Water equity can improve when organizations take into account the long-term effects of their actions. When planning and delivering a water project—be it an apprenticeship program, pipeline construction, or a rain garden—there should be a strong understanding of what community members want and need. Then organizations can structure the project to meet those needs and engage residents in project planning, delivery, and upkeep.

- **Strengthening collaboration.** The many stakeholders in the water sector are hard at work fulfilling their individual missions, yet there is a major opportunity to create stronger outcomes through collaboration. Many of the barriers to equity in the water sector are systemic and multi-layered. By working collectively, stakeholders can amplify their shared impact while more productively meeting their separate agendas.

We believe this context will create the conditions for the recommendations in this section to be successful in building workforce equity. It is our intention that employers, workforce development organizations, community-based organizations, educators, and others carry these recommended actions forward with a focus on heightened collaboration across the water sector.

## 1. Increase Collaboration to Advance Inclusive Workforce Development Practices

**Create a Water Equity Advisory Taskforce.** Achieving water equity will require a commitment to structural change from stakeholders and leaders across the water sector and city agencies. We recommend the formation of a Water Equity Advisory Taskforce to focus efforts, improve coordination, and support greater transparency across organizations. The taskforce would include leaders from public and private organizations in the water sector, as well as nonprofit and community organizations and government agencies. The taskforce would be charged with establishing shared goals for water equity, hosting a network to share learning, supporting emerging leadership, and exploring successes and failures. Leadership of the taskforce could rotate among members to deepen ownership and collective responsibility. Among the taskforce's roles would be:

- **Coordinating collective action on water equity.**

It is generally accepted that collective action requires five conditions: a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and backbone support. To embrace these conditions, we recommend that the Water Equity Advisory Taskforce work to coordinate collective action throughout the greater Milwaukee area and strengthen connections among workforce organizations. We envision the taskforce using this roadmap and the work of the Milwaukee Water Equity Taskforce as a basis for action, recognizing that steps toward water equity will need to be managed adaptively.

- **Sharing best practices.** We recommend that members of the Water Equity Advisory Taskforce connect with water equity efforts in other cities around the country to bring that learning back to the committee for consideration of whether similar practices may be effective in Milwaukee.

The Water Equity Advisory Taskforce could establish a framework for the region to spark collaborations and new action, but it would not finish the work alone. We envision water sector stakeholders building coalitions to take collective action to address structural disparities.

## 2. Increase Awareness of the Water Sector

**Establish a “Water Sector” among Regional Workforce Centers.** To create a higher awareness of employment opportunities in Milwaukee’s water sector, we recommend the official designation of a “water sector” through Milwaukee’s Workforce Board (Employ Milwaukee) and the state of Wisconsin’s Department of Workforce Development. Milwaukee’s water sector includes a broad array of jobs responsible for the operation, maintenance, improvement, promotion, and support of water resources, drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater management. The term “water sector” is generally an umbrella label, referring to positions across unique industry segments and trades. Without distinct designations, the promotion of water-centric careers and the analysis of growth and demographics within the water sector are challenging.

### **Build Water Sector Visibility through Partnerships.**

To increase workforce diversity, we recommend that employers and institutions across Milwaukee’s water sector collaborate on programs to raise awareness of water sector jobs and career paths, both in schools and in communities. Milwaukee is recognized globally as a water-centric city, with a cluster of water technology industries and institutions, The Water Council, and an emphasis on freshwater education. Yet as described above, Milwaukee’s water sector workforce does not reflect the diversity of the city. Outreach around water sector careers is often disjointed, with positions advertised in separate industry segments. A coordinated effort to strengthen awareness of the sector, and its role in supporting the community and environmental health, will build stronger interest in water careers.

## 3. Assess Internal Workforce and Procurement Policies and Practices

### Workplace Culture

**Assess Existing Policies and Practices.** Milwaukee’s water sector faces many barriers around workforce equity. To identify the structural change needed to address inequity, we encourage water sector leaders and employers to consult outside professionals to assess their existing policies and practices to identify barriers to maintaining a diverse and inclusive workforce. The best way to understand how policies and practices might inequitably burden job seekers, employees, or communities served is to engage a qualified professional trained in workplace diversity and equity. Equity auditing is a service designed to identify institutional barriers to workforce equity.

**Conduct Inclusion Surveys with Employees.** We recommend that water sector employers conduct surveys to identify and understand gaps in promoting diversity and inclusion in their workforces by allowing employees and stakeholders to provide input and reflect on their experiences in the workplace. Inclusion surveys also provide a data-driven assessment of workplace culture and how policies and practices affect diversity and inclusion.

**Provide Trainings in Equity, Cultural Competency, Inclusion, and Anti-Racism.** We recommend that water sector employers require trainings in equity, cultural competency, inclusion, and anti-racism as an entry to any position in Milwaukee’s water sector. Workplace culture can influence the wellness and success of employees, and these trainings support a safe working environment for diverse employees. Committing to water equity in Milwaukee’s water sector will mean promoting awareness of and embedding actions to implement equitable policies and practices, create a culturally competent work environment, maintain an inclusive workplace culture, and actively combat racism.

## Employment, Hiring, and Training

**Deepen Commitment to Workforce Diversity.** In Milwaukee’s water sector, advancing equity requires commitment from leadership to address issues of justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Some employers in Milwaukee have been making commitments to workforce diversity in partnership with the African American Leadership Alliance Milwaukee and the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce’s initiative A Region of Choice for Diverse Talent. Water sector employers should explore these initiatives and implement plans to achieve short- and long-term goals for diversity and inclusion across their organizations and businesses. This should include establishing structures to account for unconscious bias across all recruitment, training, and hiring processes.

**Eliminate Barriers to Employment of Formerly Incarcerated Residents.** We recommend that employers remove policies that eliminate previously incarcerated individuals from applicant pools and instead develop programs to work with and train recently incarcerated individuals to enter Milwaukee’s water workforce. A history of incarceration does not disqualify a person’s skills, initiative, or humanity, yet many employers disqualify recently incarcerated individuals from obtaining employment. Often, previous crimes have no direct association with job requirements.

**Develop Paid Job Training Programs That End in Employment.** We recommend that water sector employers, workforce development organizations, and others partner to design position-specific, paid training programs that develop skills for participants leading to employment in existing job openings. Low-income job seekers frequently face barriers to attending job trainings that do not offer compensation. Organizations focused on workforce development can be a valuable bridge between employers and communities, adding capacity to focus on preparing job seekers to enter the workforce—with a direct connection to real jobs in the sector.

### **Examine Job Requirements and Preferences.**

Traditional approaches to setting job requirements do not account for employer preferences or cultural norms. Therefore, we recommend that water sector employers separate job requirements and employer preferences before entering job interviews. Diversifying a workforce requires moving past stereotypes and being inclusive of new cultures and perspectives. A diverse workforce often attracts unique skills and approaches that may not have been considered in an employer’s preferences. One recommended approach to building diversity is to consider supporting the development of multiple candidates by dividing job requirements and preferences among multiple full-time positions. This allows new candidates to build skills that meet an employer’s preferences, and it opens opportunities for new perspectives to strengthen an organization.

### **Invest in Wraparound Services and Employee**

**Development.** To attract and retain employees from vulnerable communities, we recommend that employers, workforce development organizations, and other stakeholders in Milwaukee’s water sector invest in coordinating wraparound services—for example, measures to assist with transportation and daycare needs. We recommend that employers identify and engage existing community resources to coordinate employee services, job training, and employee development. Many local organizations and community resources specialize in areas of workforce development, wraparound services, community wellness, community outreach, and inclusion, but often these groups are unfamiliar with the particular needs of water sector employers. Establishing connections with these organizations can help employers identify and assist job seekers who are experiencing barriers to employment.

## Procurement

**Establish Equitable Procurement Policies.** Business ownership and entrepreneurship are opportunities for wealth building, and, therefore, they are critical pathways for benefiting historically marginalized communities. Investments in contracting and procurement through Milwaukee's water sector should prioritize equitable access for vulnerable populations. We recommend packaging projects so that individual contract sizes are more accessible to smaller and minority-owned businesses.

**Support and Mentor Local Entrepreneurs and Youth-Run Businesses.** In the interest of attracting and retaining diverse talent, we recommend that water sector stakeholders develop programs to mentor, encourage, and incentivize youth-owned businesses and new entrepreneurs to pursue procurement opportunities and succeed in obtaining and executing contracts. There are many initiatives around Milwaukee working to find ways to attract and retain young professionals. Contracting and procurement is a competitive field of practice requiring expertise and experience. Inexperienced entrepreneurs may have difficulty navigating policies and processes that determine their success in obtaining contracts.

**Work with Business Development Centers to Foster Equitable Access to Contracts.** We recommend that Milwaukee's water sector businesses work with business development centers to build more equitable access to infrastructure contracts. Two ideas that hold promise in this area include:

- **Contractor Cooperatives.** Contractor cooperatives are an innovative approach to supporting small businesses' ability to execute on large contracts. By working together, small businesses can build experience and capital to manage larger projects. The sector can encourage partnerships and establish programs to build capacity and wealth for entrepreneurs and small businesses looking to access water sector contracts around the city.

- **Capital Funds.** To foster equitable access to large contracts, water sector businesses can work with business development centers across the city to develop a fund that start-ups and contractors representing vulnerable populations could access to subsidize bids on projects with sizeable insurance and bonding.

**Eliminate Single-Factor Procurement Policies and Implement Community Benefit Agreements.** We recommend that Milwaukee's water sector businesses consider the impact of contracting on community benefits. There are models for developing community benefit preference in contracting used by contracting entities around the United States and in Milwaukee with the construction of the Fiserv Forum. Community benefits should be valued as an investment in Milwaukee's communities and the sustainability of Milwaukee's water workforce. Contractors integrating community benefits into their proposals should be evaluated based on their success in coordinating with affected communities.

**Research Best Practices for Implementing Inclusive Procurement and Contracting.** Inclusive procurement has gained traction around the United States as a step toward advancing equity in community development. We recommend water sector stakeholders investigate national case studies and research on best practices for implementing inclusive procurement and act to integrate those policies in Milwaukee.



## CONCLUSION

To support an equitable future for all Milwaukeeans, leaders from all over the city must collectively work to address the systems that generate the disparities we see today. They must act with intention and purpose and in ways that do not reproduce or perpetuate existing inequalities. These efforts must partner with vulnerable communities through culturally competent means to realize a truly equitable future in Milwaukee's water sector.

This work is not only critical but difficult, necessitating the collective action of broad-based coalitions that honor the past while simultaneously looking forward to finding solutions. These efforts must reimagine how organizations within the water sector engage and build relationships with vulnerable communities, recruit and develop the workforce, and develop their organizational cultures to be more inclusive, equitable, and supportive of workforce diversity.

Leaders in Milwaukee's water sector developed this roadmap out of a commitment to pursuing an equitable water future in front of a national audience of innovators concerned with rethinking our nation's water systems. The connections and collaboration that have come from this commitment mark progress toward overcoming the challenges before us.

Finding solutions to these challenges is imperative. The painful effects of these inequities are real, broad, and deep. While challenges cannot be solved overnight, we owe it to our city to work diligently toward an equitable future. The Milwaukee Water Equity Taskforce believes that we are on our way.

## NOTES

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