



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

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July 22, 2021

Wisconsin, Let's Talk About Our Workforce

By Rep. Katrina Shankland, Rep. Christine Sinicki, Rep. Dora Drake, and Rep. Deb Andraca

In recent months and throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been much discussion in our local communities and in the Legislature about the state's workforce and what can be done to ensure a strong economic recovery.

A new [report](#) by the nonpartisan Legislative Council explains our state's 45 different workforce development programs, which provide assistance through nine state agencies for education, work readiness, job training, job searches, job placement, and work support. The report also includes suggestions and recommendations for workforce development and projections for our state's workforce needs.

Per the report, Wisconsin's labor force growth has remained "fairly flat" in recent years, primarily as a result of our state's population demographics. With more people aging out of the workforce than there are young workers to replace them, and an ongoing trend of increased job growth, the Department of Workforce Development (DWD) estimates that Wisconsin could be experiencing a shortage of workers as soon as 2030 that could significantly impact our economic growth potential.

For years, employers across the state have been managing workforce shortage problems, which in many cases were exacerbated by the pandemic. Today, while Wisconsin has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the nation and has been a leader in getting shots in arms, our workforce shortage problem still persists. According to Department of Revenue economists, pre-pandemic levels of unemployment were about 40,000 weekly claims, per a five-year average, whereas currently there are just above 50,000 unemployment claims filed each week. For those who have health concerns, are struggling to find adequate childcare, reliable transportation, or jobs that match their skill sets, or who face other barriers, an immediate return to work may still be out of reach. So, what's to be done about it?

Last week, [Governor Tony Evers announced](#) a new investment of \$130 million in federal funds into three workforce development programs to support workers with opportunities and incentivize innovative solutions to workforce challenges. Per the governor's plan, \$100 million will go to a Workforce Innovation grant program to help regions and communities develop long-term solutions to their unique local workforce challenges. Additionally, \$20 million will help subsidize training opportunities for unemployed individuals with local employers through the Worker Advancement Initiative, and a new \$10 million Worker Connection Program will make career coaches available to help those attempting to rejoin the post-pandemic workforce.

These initiatives, in addition to the many critical programs that received funding through the recently-signed 2021-23 state budget, will help those who are ready and able to work to do just that, while moving toward long-term answers to our larger scale workforce shortage problems. It's important to note, however, that as state legislators, we have an ongoing responsibility to do everything we can to facilitate a strong economic recovery. With most of the legislative session still before us, we have an opportunity to lean in to bipartisan collaboration instead of partisan division. We recently proposed legislation to prevent a rate increase on unemployment insurance contribution rates for employers. Just a few weeks later, our legislative colleagues introduced a similar bill to prevent a rate increase, the only difference being that the bill hinged on the passage of the state budget. The State Senate and Assembly unanimously passed this bill in late June, and Governor Evers signed it into law as [2021 Wisconsin Act 59](#).

Wisconsin's small businesses are counting on us to provide relief, security, and bipartisan solutions. It's with this spirit that, as members of the Assembly Committee on Workforce Development, we reaffirm our commitment to working towards finding solutions that uplift our state and local communities. We encourage our colleagues from both parties to join us in meaningful dialogue and collaboration about workforce solutions we can all agree on, starting with supporting Governor Evers' significant \$130 million investment in local workforce solutions.

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