

Center for American Progress



Public Sector Training Partnerships Build Power

By Karla Walter October 2019

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Introduction and summary

From building trades apprenticeships to the Culinary Academy of Las Vegas’ casino and hospitality worker training, labor-management partnerships are well regarded for their ability to connect private sector workers to high-paying jobs while ensuring that employers receive a steady stream of well-qualified employees. Yet, policymakers and advocates often pay less attention to existing partnerships between unionized public sector workers and their employers, despite the fact that these workers now account for about half of all union members and that there is a long history of public sector partnerships providing professional development opportunities to workers.¹

By expanding the use of public sector labor-management training partnerships, policymakers and unions can help government employers and unions work together to solve challenges and deliver good results for workers, employers, and the public. Labor-management partnerships—independent organizations that unions and employers jointly control—allow partners to collaboratively design and manage workforce training, professional learning, and apprenticeship opportunities. Research finds that these sorts of programs can help employers recruit and retain skilled workers; improve work quality; boost productivity; and strengthen employee relations.² Public sector training programs are also being used to increase the diversity of the public sector workforce; ensure that government is ready to serve diverse populations; and provide a pathway to a good job for workers, particularly those who face multiple barriers to finding employment.

Due to their mission and democratic structure, unions help to ensure that training is of high quality and serves the needs of workers. Indeed, union involvement in existing training programs—including everything from short-term training courses to ongoing, professional learning opportunities, to registered apprenticeships and partnerships with colleges and universities that support professional development—allow workers to access high-road jobs, advance in their careers, and navigate essential benefits. Throughout this report, the term “training” is used generally to include this broad range of programs.

Notably, labor-management partnerships provide a tangible example of the benefits of unionization to workers and thereby help to sustain public sector unions. This is increasingly important in the wake *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)*—a U.S. Supreme Court decision handed down in 2018 that weakens public sector bargaining protections by allowing free riding by nonmembers of public sector unions, which happens when nonmembers benefit from union gains without paying for them in the form of union dues.

Yet, as exemplified by the ongoing wave of teacher strikes and protests across the country, unionized public sector workers are more energized than they have been in decades—and public support for unions is rising.³ State and local policymakers and union leaders must work now to institute strategies to build on this momentum. Doing so will not only help to raise standards in government and sustain union membership but will also support all working families. Indeed, research shows that unions help support a robust American middle class, reduce inequality, and encourage investment in essential public services.⁴ For example, research shows that declining unionization rates account for approximately one-fifth to one-third of inequality growth over the past four decades.⁵ And from recent actions to raise state and local minimum wages to the defense of the Affordable Care Act, unions continue to advocate for policies that support the economic interests of the middle class.⁶

Labor-management partnerships are frequently used in some public sector occupations, including among teachers. However, when public sector employers do not partner with unions to provide training, too often the types of training provided are of lower quality or ad-hoc, or the onus is on workers to navigate their own career paths.

Even in existing labor-management partnerships, some partnerships can do more to elevate the role of worker voices in the training and allow unions access to train participants on how collective bargaining works and why it is essential to ensuring that workers receive high-quality training and facilitate opportunities for workers to join the union.

Moreover, expanding the reach of these programs in the public sector will help workers throughout the economy. Workers who could benefit from such an expansion include the employees of cities, counties, and states as well as school districts, transportation authorities, public utilities and sewerage districts, and even home care and child care workers whose jobs are funded through government spending.

In order to help facilitate the expansion of labor-management training partnerships, this report outlines research demonstrating that strong public sector unions are good for the

U.S. economy and democracy; examines how training partnerships benefit unionized workers, public sector employers, taxpayers, and an increasingly diverse nation; and provides four in-depth case studies of innovative public sector partnerships.

Emerging from this review, the report finds that key ingredients to help ensure success for communities interested in pursuing these strategies include:

- **Meeting key needs of all players:** Partnerships must meet the needs of all parties involved in the system in order to be successful. Public sector employers will value partnerships that help to recruit and retain employees; boost public service quality; or reduce government costs. Indeed, these goals are particularly important as government employers confront a wave of retirement among Baby Boomers. For unionized workers, labor-management partnerships must help expand employment opportunities; allow their members to advance in their careers and obtain higher pay; or benefit workers in another meaningful way. Finally, using training to help expand workforce diversity helps both unions and government because it allows unionized workers of color to advance in their careers and expands access to high-quality public services for residents by ensuring that the government workforce reflects the diversity of the communities it serves.
- **Elevating the role of workers and unions:** By featuring workers as well as the union's role in the partnership front and center, innovative programs are building connections and solidarity among workers and ensuring that participants are successful in their new positions. This includes involving workers in the development of curricula and as trainers and mentors as well as providing opportunities for the union to explain the role of collective bargaining in ensuring that the high-quality training occurs and to offer participants opportunities to join the union.
- **Building on existing power and trust:** Union locals and employers report having had strong working relationships prior to partnership formation and cite this mutual trust as essential. In turn, training programs help to strengthen trust and cooperation between workers and union locals even further. Typically, the unions involved in these programs represent a significant portion of the public sector workforce, and the majority of lawmakers in the jurisdiction are supportive of public sector collective bargaining rights. However, it is important to note that this report also features successful partnerships that have been formed in right-to-work states.

- **Focusing on reaching more workers:** Policymakers can help successful models reach more workers through a variety of means, including creating funding opportunities for new labor-management training partnerships; requiring government agencies to hire a certain portion of their workforce through these programs; and instituting needed training requirements for specific sectors or across the government. Unions are also working to disseminate best practices to affiliates and using the bargaining process to negotiate employer support for training and professional development opportunities. Finally, in jurisdictions that have existing partnerships, the organizations can potentially grow to include more government employers or provide pathways for other workers to access the funds.

State and local policymakers are increasingly interested in expanding the use of public sector partnerships.⁷ Even in areas where there is little hope of new legislation being enacted to fund these sorts of partnerships, mayors, governors, and superintendents can support these sorts of initiatives through collective bargaining, executive action, and agency-level partnerships. By supporting and expanding labor-management training partnerships, cities and states can raise standards for workers and employers, provide a meaningful benefit to the workforce, and help to sustain unions in the long term.

Americans need strong public sector unions

Unions benefit all Americans by raising workers' pay and benefits; combating economic and racial inequality; giving workers a voice in U.S. democracy; and helping to ensure that government services are of high quality. Yet, years of legislative and judicial attacks backed by corporate interest groups are eroding the ability of unions to deliver these benefits. Before examining the specific benefits of labor-management training partnerships, this section reviews the larger societal benefits of public sector unions.

Today, nearly half of all unionized workers in the United States work in the public sector. Through collective bargaining, unionized workers negotiate for better pay and benefits than nonunion workers. The so-called union wage premium—or the boost in pay for unionized workers compared with similar nonunionized counterparts—in states with strong public sector bargaining laws is 10 percent, according to research conducted in 2012 by Richard B. Freeman and Eunice Han.⁸ And analysis from the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) finds that the wage premium for unionized public sector workers is 8 percent, while the overall compensation premium—which includes the value of pay and benefits—is 9 percent.⁹ Moreover, research shows that while public sector workers earn lower wages than comparable private sector workers, union membership significantly narrows the pay gap.¹⁰

These effects are particularly important for women and African Americans, as they are significantly more likely to be public sector workers. Women account for nearly 57 percent of government workers but comprise only about 41 percent of private sector workers.¹¹ Similarly, African Americans account for more than 12 percent of government workers but only 9 percent of private sector workers.¹²

The benefits of unions extend beyond the workers they represent. Research finds that in communities where unions are strong, all workers—regardless of union status—earn higher pay, and low-income children have a better chance of moving up the income ladder as adults.¹³

Unions also help increase the quality of public services. For example, research finds that school districts with strong teachers' unions do a better job of retaining high-

quality teachers that support student achievement and dismissing poorly performing teachers than districts with weaker unions.¹⁴

Moreover, unions help ensure that taxpayers receive good value by providing structures through which workers can voice recommendations and institute changes. For example, in 2015, unionized sanitation workers in Chicago saved the city more than \$7 million by identifying more efficient truck routes.¹⁵ In addition, Service Employees International Union (SEIU) locals have partnered with the two largest municipal health systems in the United States to institute quality improvement programs that resulted in improved patient outcomes—such as reduced asthma readmission rates among children; increased patient satisfaction and reduced wait times; and fewer workplace safety hazards.¹⁶

Public sector workers are also increasingly using their bargaining power to support the broader needs of their communities such as smaller class sizes in schools and adoption of restorative justice methods to stem the school-to-prison pipeline; full funding of essential government services; and the end to unfair deals with Wall Street firms as well as costly privatization deals that provide poor-quality services.¹⁷

Finally, unions give Americans a stronger voice in our democracy. Research demonstrates that union-led voter mobilization efforts increase voter turnout, particularly among voters of color and working-class voters.¹⁸ Moreover, unions are one of the few types of advocacy groups whose positions align with the economic interests of working people.¹⁹ In recent years, unions have led efforts to raise state and local minimum wages, support the passage of the Affordable Care Act and defend it from right-wing attacks, and fight against President Donald Trump's corporate tax cut bill.²⁰

Yet, the Supreme Court's *Janus* decision is part of a decadeslong attack that threatens the freedom of millions of government workers to come together in strong unions. The ruling overturns a precedent established more than 40 years ago that protected the power of states to enact public sector bargaining laws that promoted labor peace and prevented free riding by nonmembers of public sector unions.²¹ As a result, workers now have a perverse incentive not to join unions because they can receive all the benefits of unionization without having to pay the cost of negotiating for those benefits.

Janus is just one tactic in a long-term effort to dismantle the rights of workers to bargain collectively. In recent years, corporate lobby groups backed *Harris v. Quinn*—a case in which conservative Supreme Court justices eliminated the ability of states to require fair share fees for unionized public sector home care workers—and successfully championed legislation in Wisconsin and Iowa preventing nearly all public sector bargaining.²²

Other states have passed legislation to chip away at the number of public sector workers who are allowed to bargain, limit what they can bargain over, preempt progressive municipal lawmakers from raising local workplace standards, and enact private sector right-to-work laws.²³ Worse still, corporate interests continue to advance legislation and lawsuits designed to weaken the power of public sector workers. The Buckeye Institute—an anti-union, right-wing advocacy group in Ohio—has filed multiple lawsuits to challenge public sector unions’ right to represent everyone in a bargaining unit.²⁴ And the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council is shopping model state legislation that attempts to weaken support for unions by requiring workers to opt into union membership by signing disingenuous forms certifying they waive their “right to free speech.”²⁵

Over time, these attacks have eroded the power of unions and diminished their ability to build a strong middle class. Studies show that state laws that eliminate fair share fees are associated with a nearly 10 percentage-point reduction in union membership rates and a 3 percent reduction in wages compared with states without right-to-work laws.²⁶

At lower membership levels, it is harder for unions to win strong collective bargaining agreements or broader societal benefits because they have less ability to fund this work. They also have less sway in negotiations, as employers do not see large-scale strikes or other labor actions as a consequence of inaction. For example, the decline of unions between 1973 and 2007 explains up to one-third of rising wage inequality among men and one-fifth among women, according to sociologists Bruce Western and Jake Rosenfeld.²⁷

Finally, restricting public sector bargaining rights also reduces the quality of government services. After Gov. Scott Walker (R-WI) signed into law the highly controversial Wisconsin Act 10—a law that virtually eliminated collective bargaining rights for government workers—studies show that teacher turnover rates increased; teacher experience levels dropped; and statewide student achievement fell—particularly on science and math assessments in already lower-performing schools.²⁸

Despite the far-ranging consequences of declining unionization rates on the middle class, corporate lobbyists and conservative lawmakers continue in their efforts to dismantle Americans’ right to unionize and collectively bargain. While growing excitement and energetic organizing efforts among public sector workers have helped mitigate the short-term negative consequences of the *Janus* decision, state and local policymakers should do everything they can to support strong public sector unions.

Training partnerships benefit workers

One key strategy to help raise standards for workers and expand workers' collective power is the establishment and expansion of labor-management training partnerships that help workers advance in government careers. Labor-management training partnerships—which can take the form of a range of interventions, including apprenticeships, prehire and new hire trainings, professional learning and development opportunities, mentorships, and even benefits navigation—can help workers access good jobs; support career advancement and promotion; and further union organizing goals.

Providing access and advancement opportunities

Labor-management training partnerships have long been used to provide access and advancement opportunities for workers in the public and private sectors. For example, according to academic research by Robert Glover and Cihan Bilginsoy, nearly 70 percent of apprentices in the construction industry graduate from joint labor-management programs.²⁹

For workers, union involvement in training and professional development helps to ensure that training is connected to a job or advancement opportunity as well as industry-recognized credentials. Unions also support workers' ability to access training during paid work hours and help ensure that managers prioritize their participation in training.

While public sector training partnerships are little studied, in interviews conducted for this report, labor representatives typically stated that their primary motivation for initiating new training partnerships was to increase access to high-road government jobs, raise standards for workers, and support workers' career advancement. For example, Jennifer Grøndahl, organizing and field services coordinator at Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) Local 777, approached the city of Phoenix with the idea of establishing an apprenticeship program for city gardeners—a position that typically requires a two-year associate degree. She got the idea after attending a graduation ceremony for a similar apprenticeship in San Francisco and hearing personal sto-

ries of how the program allowed its graduates to move from unstable, near-minimum wage work to middle-class employment.³⁰

At their strongest, training partnerships can help to raise job-quality standards and support efforts to boost worker protections. After voters in the state of Washington allowed home care workers to organize, SEIU 775 partnered with the state and private employers to provide required training to workers through the SEIU 775 Benefits Group.³¹ The training, which coincided with pay increases, helped professionalize the workforce and improve the quality of care. In order to be certified, home care workers must now complete 75 hours of training and comply with ongoing continuing education requirements.³² The training partnership—which reaches approximately 49,000 workers—has also created opportunities for career progression within the field, including an Advanced Home Care Aid Specialist course with tracks focusing on behavioral and holistic health; a registered apprenticeship program; and peer mentorship opportunities.³³ Indeed, Benefits Group representatives are very clear that caregiving is a field that requires a highly skilled workers and deserves respect and dignity. For these reasons, the group prioritizes training that ensures that home care is destination job rather than programming to provide pathways to related occupations.

Similarly, Washington state’s Imagine Institute is providing high-level training to build career pathways that allow workers to advance in their careers without leaving the child care industry and builds on providers preexisting expertise.³⁴ The training supports child care center workers, licensed family child care providers, and caregivers that provide care for a family member, friend, or neighbor.

Founded three years ago, the partnership between the state of Washington and SEIU Local 925 reached more than 1,000 workers in fiscal year 2019, with training modules and internships in English, Spanish, and Somali that prepare participants to be certified as licensed family care providers; participate in Washington State’s Early Care and Education Substitute Pool; and provide instruction in topics such as business planning, enriching practices and promoting resilience, and anti-racist and trauma-informed care.³⁵ Trainers and mentors are all experienced caregivers, and the program provides stipends in order to ensure that low-wage workers are able to participate.³⁶

In addition, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) have long partnered with local districts to provide professional learning opportunities for teachers—including through partnerships with local colleges and universities as well as job-embedded professional learning. The unions are increasingly using these partnerships to help teachers access more affordable con-

tinuing education options; prepare new teachers to manage classrooms; and provide paraprofessional educators opportunities to move into teaching positions. Indeed, the NEA is now working to expand educators' ability to receive recognition and compensation for professional learning work that occurs outside of higher educational institutions by integrating the use of microcredentials—digital forms of certification indicating demonstrated competency or mastery in a specific skill or set of skills into existing professional learning opportunities.³⁷ While their recent development means the quality and outcomes of these microcredentials are yet to be determined, microcredentials provide educators with a much lower-cost alternative to traditional coursework in a college or university setting. In addition to developing the credentials, the NEA is providing grants and technical assistance for training partnerships working to implement the system.

While quantitative analysis measuring the effects of labor-management training partnerships on workers focuses primarily on the private sector, research generally confirms that partnerships are associated with good outcomes for workers.

For example, research looking at the construction sector finds that apprenticeships led by labor-management partnerships deliver better results for workers than nonunion apprenticeships. A 2017 report from the Midwest Economic Policy Institute finds that completion rates among apprentices trained through a joint labor-management partnership in Ohio were 21 percent higher than those trained through nonunion programs.³⁸

Similar analysis of apprenticeship programs in Kentucky found that programs that included unions had 35 percent higher completion rates than nonunion programs.³⁹ Looking at apprenticeship quit rates nationwide, Bilginsoy likewise finds that workers enrolled in union-sponsored construction apprenticeship programs were less likely to quit.⁴⁰

Finally, a 2003 study examining five years of survey data, found that unionized workers in Great Britain were not only more likely to get training and receive more days of training than nonunion workers, they also had higher wage growth than those nonunion workers that did receive training.⁴¹

Sustaining strong worker organizations

Labor-management training programs can also sustain high union membership levels in the public sector. When unions play a role in connecting workers to good jobs, allowing them to advance in their career, or navigating essential benefits, not only does the quality of training improve, but workers become more likely to join and maintain their union membership.

A similar phenomenon occurs in countries where unions partner with the government to administer public goods. While union membership rates in most countries have been in decline for the past 30 years, countries that have adopted systems in which unions provide unemployment insurance have not experienced a similar erosion in membership levels.⁴² For example, Belgium's Ghent system provides unions a role in the delivery of unemployment benefits. While the government funds the unemployment insurance system, citizens can choose to access benefits through union-affiliated bodies or an independent agency. Workers typically choose to access their unemployment benefits through unions due to the general view that the unions do a better and more efficient job of delivering these benefits.⁴³

While administration of this program does not directly raise money for organizing or bargaining efforts, the relationships built with unemployed workers help Belgian unions recruit and maintain members.⁴⁴

High-quality labor-management training partnerships can play a similar role in the American public sector because they provide a tangible benefit to workers that demonstrates the value of unions. While some level of affinity and understanding of the benefits of unionization naturally flow out of labor-management training partnerships, public sector unions involved in training partnerships are increasingly focused on ensuring that recipients understand the union value-add.

At the most basic level, this means incorporating the union name into the partnership name; clearly branding all materials provided by the partnership; collocating training with the union; and maximizing union access to trainees. Union representatives should be able to provide trainees information on how the collective bargaining process helps ensure that workers have access to training and high-quality government jobs. These presentations should include an opportunity for new and existing members to join the union or renew their commitment while they are trainees. While this requires a union local to have sufficient staffing to conduct this outreach to training participants, even when training occurs through a third party such as a community college, unions in a partnership should prioritize outreach.

Programs should go further to provide ample opportunity for new workers to connect with existing leaders in the union and build solidarity among training cohorts. This can be accomplished by providing opportunities for existing members to help develop training curricula and interact with new members as mentors and training leaders. For example, the Oregon Education Association (OEA) requires instruction in its labor-management partnerships to be provided by members and has made a concerted

effort to ensure that participants understand the union's role in delivering professional learning.⁴⁵ In a recent survey, 570 out of 572 respondents said that their perception of the OEA became more positive or stayed the same after participating in a professional learning course led by a union member.⁴⁶

Moreover, by including experienced workers in curricula development, training content improves as does workers' feeling that their employer values and trusts their expertise. When the Santa Clara Valley Transit Authority (VTA) and Amalgamated Transit Union Local 265 initiated the Joint Workforce Initiative (JWI) labor-management partnership, incumbent worker involvement was built into every aspect of program design and administration. Previously, the VTA's new coach operator training focused primarily on the technical skills of driving a bus safely and learning transit routes. After experienced operators raised in focus group discussions the need for the new workers to master a much larger set of skills, including handling passenger issues on the bus; keeping to a schedule; complying with regulations; and managing stress, the JWI developed a New Operator Mentor program in 2008.⁴⁷

The program, which subsequently became a registered apprenticeship in 2015, committed to ensuring that the new curriculum would be developed, taught, and evaluated by workers themselves.⁴⁸ The New Operator Mentor curriculum includes both classroom training and on-the-job training. Veteran operator mentors conduct ride-alongs with their mentees, providing real-time support and advice during new operators' probationary period. Program facilitator Deborah Moy reports that this worker-to-worker peer-mentoring structure ensures that workers receive the practical training and support that new operators need to become professional coach operators.⁴⁹

Moreover, the program helps create solidarity among operators. In a 2018 report by COWS, formerly the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Tom Fink, a retired bus driver and former labor leader discussed the unions' goal of growing identification with the union. "I worked a lot with building trades," he said. "Their attitude to work was different. When you joined the profession, you were rolled into a brotherhood, a sisterhood centered around pride for the craft."⁵⁰

Due to this ability to strengthen ties, unions are interested in providing more training and new types of training to a wider cross section of public sector workers. While most existing training and apprenticeship programs are focused on job-specific training categories, trainings to help workers navigate employee benefits; obtain generalizable management skills; or be prepared for workplace emergencies may provide value across a much wider cross section of a state or local government's workforce.

As discussed below, public sector workers are collaborating with the state of Oregon to train state workers on navigating the state's health and retirement benefits plans. Other labor-management partnerships conduct broadly applicable trainings on conflict resolution, teamwork, and stress management.⁵¹

Finally, several cities, including Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, Denver, and Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, are partnering with unions through a labor-management partnership to institute emergency preparedness trainings in airports to ensure that passenger service workers are prepared to respond in cases of active shooters, terrorist attacks, extreme weather situations, or other emergencies.⁵² While the airport workers are typically employed by private sector contractors, similar training partnerships could be valuable at schools, government buildings, or other quasi-public spaces.

Case study: Oregon State Employee Benefits Navigation

While unions frequently partner with state and municipal employers to provide job-specific training, SEIU Local 503 and the state of Oregon recently launched an innovative program to help new and existing workers effectively navigate state benefit plans. Project coordinators from the union local and the state believe that the program will help workers select appropriate plans; prioritize retirement savings; and appreciate the value of the benefits in ways that help retain employees and recruit union members.⁵³

Gov. Kate Brown (D-OR) laid the groundwork for the partnership by signing an executive order in 2017 to improve and expand training focused on core skill sets common to all state employees.⁵⁴

For the state, ensuring that workers receive standardized, high-quality training on how to navigate the state retirement and health benefits system is important for several reasons. According to Nettie Pye at the Oregon Department of Administrative Services (DAS), the training could help boost workers' savings and ensure that they select the most appropriate health care plans to meet their needs and budgets.⁵⁵ This could result in immediate and long-term cost savings. Currently, a significant portion of state employees select the most expensive health plans when a lower-cost plan could otherwise meet their needs. And, by encouraging workers to save more now, state employees will not have to heavily rely on government services as retirees.

In addition, the state is increasingly focused on highlighting its provision of top-quality benefits as a tool for worker retention. Employee benefits represent a significant portion of total worker compensation, and the DAS wants to ensure employees understand that they are unlikely to find comparable benefits in the private sector.

Similarly, Molly Malone at SEIU Local 503 reports that retention of high-quality benefits is one of its members' top priorities during contract negotiations.⁵⁶ By participating in the training partnership, the union—which represents more than 22,000 Oregon state employees—can explain to workers how it plays a critical role in negotiating these

benefits.⁵⁷ Moreover, the partnership allows the union to help provide a value-added training to employees, often early in their tenure.

The DAS and Local 503 have a strong basis of trust and history of working collaboratively. For example, the groups have partnered to deliver joint trainings on collective bargaining agreement requirements and how to effectively utilize existing agency labor-management committees. While the DAS had previously developed training materials on the benefits systems, the agency did not have the capacity to deliver the training on its own as frequently as it now does through the partnership.

The pilot, conducted in the capital area, reached more than 450 workers who were able to attend on paid time. Although Local 503 is currently the only union partner, the training is open to nonmembers, members of other unions, as well as supervisors. While the state and union have not yet finalized their evaluation of the program, workers generally reported high levels of satisfaction with the training.

While the program began as a pilot, the state of Oregon and Local 503 negotiated a new union contract in 2019 that includes continued support for the partnership and will establish a training trust funded through employer contributions. Both parties hope that going forward they will be able to reach significantly more workers, and particularly new hires who may be most in need of training, unaware of the comparative value of the benefits, and unfamiliar with the union. In addition, the union is creating an online training portal. Other unions that represent a significant portion of state employees may enter into a similar partnership with the state.

Finally, to more directly use the training as a member-building tool, the program is implementing changes to ensure that the union is able to access trainees with a request for new employees to join the union and existing employees to recommit to membership.

Training partnerships benefit public employers

Strong and sustainable labor-management partnerships must also meet core needs of public sector employers—which often include recruiting and retaining public sector workers; preparing the next generation of workers to move into management positions and develop problem-solving skills; and boosting the quality of government services. Moreover, public employers often value union partnerships because their involvement helps support the long-term survival of training programs.

Recruiting and retaining state employees

Driving many of public employers' training-related concerns is the fact that the government workforce is aging faster than the private sector workforce. As a result, state and local governments are experiencing high levels of retirement, leading to staffing shortages and turnover among the most experienced workers.

According to a 2015 report in *Government Finance Review*, public sector employees skew significantly older than private sector workers.⁵⁸ While 38 percent of state government employees and 37 percent of local government employees are at least 50 years old, just 28 percent of private sector workers are part of the Baby Boomer generation. Indeed, in nearly every state, 30 percent or more of state employees were eligible to retire within five years, according to a 2017 article from the Council of State Governments.⁵⁹ Moreover, government employers are behind when it comes to attracting and retaining the youngest workers. While nearly one-quarter of private sector workers are younger than 30 years old, only 15 percent of state government employees and 12 percent of local government employees fit into that age category.⁶⁰

And many public sector employers are facing significant staffing shortages. For example, new research from the EPI shows that during the 2015-16 school year, 9 percent of public schools were unable to fill a vacancy in at least one field.⁶¹ Moreover, after the 2011-12 school year, nearly 14 percent of teachers either left teaching altogether or moved to another school.⁶²

While other factors such as low-relative pay as compared with private sector jobs certainly influence young workers' desire to enter the public sector, state and local governments will value partnerships that can help recruit the next generation of workers and retain midcareer workers.⁶³

Creating career ladders to fill needed positions

In addition, government employers face challenges in providing training and professional development opportunities to existing employees that are sufficiently sustained and intensive, which will allow them to take on the higher-level positions being vacated by retiring Baby Boomers. These sorts of incumbent worker training programs may require employees to obtain specific technical skills or even more generalizable abilities such as management strategies and can help target limited professional development funding, as these workers already have interest in public sector employment.

Indeed, a 2010 qualitative study by researchers at Cornell University that examined employer motivations for entering into training partnerships in the health sector, found that employers were particularly interested in incumbent worker training programs since they did not fear that the incumbent workers would leave the field after investing in training.⁶⁴ For example, in 2016, in response to severe staffing shortages, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and SEIU Local 1000 launched an apprenticeship program to train the agency's existing licensed vocational nurses to move into registered nursing (RN) positions. By adopting the apprenticeship, the state was able to build an internal labor market to supply workers with more advanced skills.⁶⁵

Moreover, the apprenticeship has helped boost workplace morale and loyalty. While pay nearly doubles for graduates, traditional educational routes are out of reach for many participants due to costs and caregiving responsibilities. Coordinators report that morale also improved among existing RNs because the agency no longer relies as heavily on mandatory overtime to cover shifts.⁶⁶

The program started in 2016 in San Joaquin County with the support of \$1 million grant through the California Apprenticeship Initiative, a program that former Gov. Jerry Brown (D) established to fund apprenticeship and preapprenticeship programs in targeted industries.⁶⁷ SEIU Local 1000, California Correctional Health Care Services, and local community colleges have worked together to secure additional state funds to expand the program to Sacramento and Riverside.⁶⁸ Indeed, union

involvement can help support programmatic longevity by helping to secure additional funding for training partnerships such as government or philanthropic grants as well as including funding for training as a subject of bargaining. Academic studies confirm that not only are unionized workers more likely to receive training but also that employers see these partnerships as helpful in obtaining funding.⁶⁹

Boosting the quality of public services

Of course, training partnerships that can improve the quality of public services are of particular value to employers. Both research and anecdotal evidence demonstrates that labor-management partnerships have been structured in ways that do so. For example, the restructuring of the home care industry in Washington state has helped to supply workers in one of the nation's fastest-growing sectors while also improving the quality of care.⁷⁰ Among states, Washington ranks highest in quality of long-term health care services and supports, according to a 2017 report from the AARP Public Policy Institute.⁷¹

Looking specifically at public schools, a 2017 study found that while only 13 percent of schools allow teachers to play a moderate or large role in determining the content of professional development opportunities, doing so is correlated with significantly higher student achievement.⁷²

More generally, research finds that when local school districts and unions develop labor-management partnerships that empower educators in collaborative problem-solving processes of all types, educators become more engaged and as a result are more likely to stay longer in their jobs. Since high teacher turnover can negatively affect students across a school—even if their own teacher remains—and teachers tend to improve as they gain experience, any program that increases teacher retention is likely to also affect student learning.⁷³ Moreover, students in schools with high levels of collaboration between workers and local districts do better on math and language arts assessments than schools with lower levels of collaboration. This relationship holds even in high-poverty schools.⁷⁴

Similarly, the office of the California Professional Firefighters and the Office of the California State Fire Marshal partnered to create an apprenticeship that has ensured training consistency across nearly 170 separate participating fire departments by having employees train under the same umbrella organization and develop comprehensive training on fighting catastrophic wildfires.⁷⁵

In addition, cities have also adopted training partnerships with a peer mentorship component that are helping increase government efficiency. In Toledo, Ohio, city employees developed a program in which union members acted as peer trainers to promote safe work practices, leading to a decrease in employee injuries.⁷⁶

Academic research also demonstrates that on-the-job training can have a significant effect on worker productivity. For example, economists Daron Acemoglu and Jörn-Steffen Pischke found that on-the-job training may be equally if not more important as formal schooling in determining productivity.⁷⁷

Finally, research on employer-sponsored training programs in Belgium and Great Britain has found that training is a good investment for employers because it increases worker productivity faster than wage rates.⁷⁸ And a 2001 survey of 21 joint training programs found that the “majority of joint programs have resulted in improvements in work quality, labor-management relations, advancement opportunities, and employee retention.”⁷⁹

Case study: Phoenix Solid Waste Equipment Operator Apprenticeship

In 2017, the city of Phoenix's Public Works Department and LIUNA Local 777 introduced a new Solid Waste Equipment Operator apprenticeship pilot program that is helping to ensure that the city is able to fill vacant positions with highly skilled workers; recruit women, veterans, and youth to good-paying, high-quality city employment; and create a new tangible benefit that demonstrates to workers the value of the union.⁸⁰

Local 777 advocated for the creation of the program as the city was dealing with a high turnover and vacancy rate among sanitation engineers that was harming the city's ability to meet growing customer demand. The union was concerned that staffing shortfalls could lead to the city contracting with a private, nonunion company with lower pay and benefit requirements to fill vacant positions.

As a solution, the city's Public Works Department and the union worked collaboratively to develop a public sector apprenticeship model that would help provide good value to the city by ensuring that workforce training was of high quality and allow the city to pay an apprenticeship wage to workers as they trained.

In the end, all parties involved had little difficulty reaching an agreement to move forward. The program helped the city's elected leadership show that they were working to expand opportunity for city residents. Moreover, the union had a strong relationship with municipal agencies. Previously, it had worked with the city's Parks and Recreation Department to establish an apprenticeship program for municipal gardeners. Both the union and city managers had a deep investment in programmatic success. The labor-management committee formed to run the apprenticeship worked together closely on curriculum development, apprentice selection, and resolution of any problems that may occur.

While the city understood technical training needs, it relied on union guidance on how to structure the apprenticeship in order to support learning and earn state certification, according to Felipe Moreno, deputy public works director at the city of Phoenix.⁸¹

Through the apprenticeship program workers obtain their commercial driver's license as well as specialized instruction on operating garbage trucks through narrow city streets, along with customer

service and support skills.⁸² Previously, the city required all applicants to have obtained a commercial driver's license before being hired, which was a significant barrier to employment for many residents because tuition for commercial trucking schools costs thousands of dollars. Another benefit of the program is that sanitation apprentices regularly interact with union members. Union representatives attend recruitment open houses and meet with apprentices to train them on the collective bargaining agreement as well as municipal pay and benefits. Former apprentices also have begun to informally mentor new classes of apprentices.

During the apprenticeship workers are paid an apprenticeship wage of at least \$15.75 per hour and are eligible for city benefits. After graduation, workers move into Solid Waste Equipment Operator positions that pay the equivalent of more than \$17 per hour and, upon completion of probation, reach about \$22 per hour.⁸³ While the first class of apprentices were all selected from incumbent municipal workers, the partnership now targets women, youth, and veterans for participation.

The program is in its early stages. The city is currently training its third class of apprentices. In order to maintain program quality, each cohort is capped at four apprentices. The city and union local are already very satisfied with program results. For apprentices—often transitioning from near minimum-wage jobs—city employment offers a significant earnings boost and a career with opportunities for advancement.

The union and city both report that the workers who come out of the program have higher levels of loyalty and motivation on the job. Every apprentice but one successfully completed the program, and thus far every graduate of the program has chosen to join the union. Despite their more junior status, these workers are among the most successful new hires according to Moreno and at times outshine some of their veteran employees.

While the program remains small, Local 777 and other city departments are creating similarly structured programs. Moreover, the city agency is contributing additional funds outside of the training fund to support the program and reports that a number of cities are interested in replicating the model. Similarly, LIUNA 777 is exploring how to replicate this model in other cities and job categories.

Case study: Pinellas County Springboard to Success

While most district-led new teacher training programs may last for a few days or perhaps a full week, the Pinellas County Schools and the Pinellas Classroom Teachers Association in Pinellas County, Florida, have negotiated a labor-management partnership that provides a four-week boot camp for early-career teachers.⁸⁴

Each summer, 50 teachers with zero to three years of classroom experience have the option to participate in the district's Springboard to Success program. The teachers—some of whose only previous classroom experience took place through internships—receive a stipend to teach during the district's summer school session.

For the district, ensuring success for early-career educators is a critical retention strategy. As is the case with school districts throughout the country, Pinellas County Schools—and particularly its Title 1 Schools—struggle with high turnover rates. By focusing on preparing teachers with critical classroom management skills before the beginning of the school year, the program is helping raise standards for students and reducing burnout among early-career educators.

Springboard teachers spend their mornings in the classroom with students, teaching the Summer Bridge curriculum—which provides reading, math, and science instruction for county students, particularly those performing below grade level or who need extra support in order to be successful—and being observed by Springboard coaches. The coaches review their performance and advise them on how to sharpen their classroom routines and management. During the after-

noon, program participants meet to receive additional instruction on classroom management as well as other topics such as understanding the effects of implicit bias and methods of culturally relevant and trauma-informed teaching.

Moreover, the partnership spends significant time focusing on new teachers' individual reasons for becoming educators, the union's longstanding focus on social justice, and the district's broader mission of serving low-income families. Through the training, participants typically form a close network and rely on each other for informal assistance on an ongoing basis.

In addition, beginning this year, program participants with less than one year of classroom experience will continue to receive coaching from an experienced educator throughout the academic year. This type of job-embedded, personalized professional learning is considered a best practice.⁸⁵

Program organizers believe that this focus on equity and justice issues and the collaborative nature of the partnership between the district and the union not only helps to improve teacher quality but also strengthens their identity as a teacher—therefore encouraging participants to stay in the field and with the district as well as boosting loyalty to the union. Moreover, program organizers report that workers specifically appreciate that the union and district are able to work collaboratively on this project.

Partnerships can increase diversity and help residents overcome barriers to employment

Public sector work has long been a pathway to the middle class for African Americans and other people of color, and the government continues to be a major employer of women and people of color.⁸⁶ This is due in part to long-standing commitments by many state and local governments to provide equal opportunities for all workers and centralized wage-setting structures that often help to mitigate wage discrimination.⁸⁷

In addition, public sector unions have long-standing commitments to advancing workplace equity across gender and racial lines. Today's largest unions representing government workers rose to prominence in the second half of the past century by organizing an increasingly diverse group of workers and working with civil rights leaders to challenge the economic and racial power structures of the United States.⁸⁸

Today, public sector unions and employers voice significant interest in using training and apprenticeship to boost workplace diversity at all levels and helping provide access to workers who face multiple barriers to employment.

Increasing workplace diversity

Looking across the country, today's public sector does a better job than the private sector of attracting and retaining women and African American workers. For example, the EPI found that in 2011, nearly 60 percent of state and local government employees were women, compared with approximately 47 percent of private sector workers.⁸⁹ The study also found that African American workers accounted for nearly 13 percent of state and local government employees—compared with 10 percent of private sector workers.⁹⁰

Yet, public sector employers still fall short when it comes to providing access to Latinx workers and being fully representative of women and workers of color across higher-paying job categories. While Hispanic workers accounted for nearly 16 percent of private sector workers, according to the EPI study, they accounted for just 11 percent of state and local government employees.⁹¹ And the International City/County

Management Association (ICMA) found that the portion of chief administrative officers who are women, 13 percent, has not changed since 1981—even though women today earn a larger percentage of master’s degrees in public administration than men.⁹²

Similarly, evaluations of individual governments show that women and people of color are less likely to work in senior leadership positions or to fill STEM positions. For example, while nearly half of city of Boston employees are Black, Asian, Hispanic, or American Indian or Pacific Islander, these groups make up less than one-third of those earning more than \$100,000 per year and just 30 percent of workers in the city’s Department of Innovation and Technology.⁹³ Similarly, Florida’s 2017-2018 Annual Workforce Report found that African Americans accounted for 29 percent of employees in the state’s personnel system but made up only 6 percent of those in the Senior Management Service category.⁹⁴ And nearly identical statistics apply to women of color in the state, while women of color account for approximately 29 percent of state employees, they comprised just 6 percent of all workers in senior management.⁹⁵

Several public sector union locals are partnering with state and local governments to institute training programs to help ensure that women and people of color are more equally represented across government, particularly in growing fields. For example, as discussed in the case studies below, both California and New York City have created apprenticeships for information technology (IT) positions that help ensure that workers from diverse backgrounds have access to IT positions across the government.

In addition, teachers’ unions and school districts are responding to research demonstrating the need for a more diverse teacher workforce by expanding opportunities for workers of color to enter the profession and allow early-career educators of color to have opportunities to move into teacher leadership roles and school administration.

More than half of all children in public schools were a racial or ethnic minority during the 2015-16 school year, but just 20 percent of their teachers were nonwhite, according to the Pew Research Center.⁹⁶ A growing body of research shows that correcting this imbalance leads to positive academic outcomes for students of color.⁹⁷ For example, for Black and Latinx students, having teachers that match their identities translates to psychological and academic benefits, including higher graduation rates.⁹⁸

In order to ensure that the state’s teacher workforce better matches the student population, Oregon’s Salem Keizer Education Association is partnering with the local district and public higher education system to move existing paraprofessionals into teacher preparation programs.⁹⁹ As a result, not only has the district added more bilingual

teachers and teachers of color, but para-educators have had an opportunity to move into higher-level positions.

Other districts are targeting training to recent graduates of diverse backgrounds. For example, New York's Success Via Apprenticeship program—a long-standing partnership between New York City Department of Education, the United Federation of Teachers, and the City University of New York (CUNY)—allows graduates of city schools to return as career and technical education teachers after receiving industry work experience along with pedagogical instruction. Apprentices gain two years of mentored teaching experience and three years of industry experience. Along with salary, benefits, and union membership, the program helps ensure access by providing tuition assistance so that students may complete the necessary coursework to become a licensed teacher in the state.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, the Pittsburgh Public Schools and Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers use a teaching magnet program at a local high school to encourage local students, and particularly students of color, to consider a career as an educator.¹⁰¹ The partnership announced in June 2019 that going forward, magnet graduates who complete a college-level state-approved teacher preparation program and receive their teaching certificates will be guaranteed employment in the school district.¹⁰²

These grow-our-own efforts are complemented by an increasing focus of teachers' unions across the country on collectively bargaining for additional professional learning focused on diversity and restorative justice practices as replacement to strictly punitive measures that have been linked to the creation of the school-to-prison pipeline.¹⁰³

Helping residents overcome barriers to employment

Additionally, some communities are going even further by targeting training and hiring opportunities to local residents who face significant barriers to employment. For example, Los Angeles County has contracted with the Worker Education and Resource Center (WERC), a nonprofit supported in part by SEIU Local 721 to provide training for the women and LBGTQ+ residents; youth transitioning out of foster care; residents from low-income communities with high unemployment rates; homeless residents and residents transitioning out of homelessness; and residents currently or formerly involved with the criminal justice system to access entry-level government employment.¹⁰⁴

Despite economic growth and low unemployment rates, many workers still face considerable barriers to finding employment.¹⁰⁵ High-road government jobs are often out of reach for workers facing these sorts of challenges. While the county government is the largest employer in Los Angeles County, employing more than 100,000 workers, far more workers apply for jobs than are hired. County agencies can sometimes receive thousands of applications for an open position, according to Caroline Torosis, director of economic and business development at the county's Workforce Development, Aging and Community Services.¹⁰⁶

In order to expand access, WERC identified jobs across the government that were in high demand, including those where there were opportunities for in-sourcing as well as job categories in which the current workforce was not representative of the diversity of the broader Los Angeles community.¹⁰⁷ The four-week Preparing Los Angeles for County Employment (PLACE) program was designed to focus not only on skills acquisition but also to help workers navigate the county hiring process and provide wraparound services. These services continue after workers have been placed in employment in order to ensure the county retains the workers.

While a primary aim of the PLACE program is to ensure that at-risk residents can access the sorts of jobs needed to sustain a decent living and opportunities to advance, officials also noted that by ensuring workers could access these good jobs, the county could lower reliance on county services.

Training partnership representatives reported that the PLACE Program is one of several joint training initiatives with Los Angeles County to expand access to good jobs and support career pathways. A long-term, positive relationship and strong communication between the county and the union helps ensure that skilled workers coming out of the training are placed in family-sustaining jobs with the ability to advance. Indeed, employers must trust that the workers who come through the program will have the skills they need to be successful at work. This can be particularly important for programs that are not just focused on a single agency or are working to place workers who face significant barriers to employment.

Case study: Apprenticeships to move workers into technology careers

A number of cities and states are adopting apprenticeships to move new and incumbent workers into technology careers. These programs are being used to help fill positions with high vacancy rates with well-qualified workers and boost the quality of government services.

For example, AFSCME District Council 37 is partnering with the city of New York and CUNY to offer the DoITT Tech Fellowships for recent graduates with at least an associate degree in computer-related disciplines.¹⁰⁸ While most entry-level IT applicants must demonstrate at least two years of relevant experience to obtain municipal employment, DoITT fellows obtain this experience after hire. The fellows become full-time city employees, receiving paid training for three years as well as assistance preparing for the civil service exam.

The fellowship is part of a larger effort to fill hundreds of IT positions that were previously contracted out to the private sector. The effort came after it was exposed that city contractor, Science Applications International Corporation, defrauded the city government of hundreds of millions of dollars on an agreement to develop a payroll timekeeping system.¹⁰⁹ While the company agreed to pay New York City more than \$500 million, the city also moved forward with an agreement with District Council 37 to create more than 700 full-time, noncompetitive IT positions at city agencies.¹¹⁰

The partnership's ability to attract workers to long-term municipal employment is particularly valuable for the city given that a significant portion of municipal employees are nearing retirement. The city also faces significant talent recruitment and retention obstacles, including competition with private sector employers.

Union representatives are particularly focused on the programs' ability to help diversify the city's IT workforce. Henry Garrido, District Council 37 executive director, also believes that the partnership will help foster loyalty to the union, particularly among younger workers, by demonstrating that it plays an essential role in expanding access to good jobs and career pathways and is able to work collaboratively with the city on these sorts of important partnerships.¹¹¹

Similarly, a California-based labor-management partnership is piloting an IT apprenticeship to provide incumbent workers with relevant work experience and access to career pathways with the state government. This can be particularly helpful in increasing the diversity of workers in the field.

The state of California, SEIU Local 1000, and two community colleges have launched a two-year IT apprenticeship program in the Sacramento area that trains incumbent workers to move into IT help desk positions.¹¹² Applicants are required to have taken one related college-level course prior to being accepted into the program. By allowing these workers to qualify for employment without having to compete directly with external job candidates, the program removes structural barriers in agency selection processes that could unduly advantage workers with external work experience or credentials from a more elite school.¹¹³

Selected through a competitive internal recruitment process by a committee comprised of labor and management, apprentices continue to be paid their existing salary during an IT training and development assignment for up to two years and attend specific community college classes that are paid for with grant funding.¹¹⁴ Program graduates will be qualified for promotion into an IT job category by the end of the apprenticeship.

According to Joint Apprenticeship Committee member Lisa Fossi, the state believes that the program, now enrolling its fourth cohort comprised of 15 apprentices, will help retain well-qualified IT workers because participants have a demonstrated interest in state employment.¹¹⁵ After apprentices graduate, they may apply to vacancies in their own department or other state agencies that have vacancies.

Union representatives report that while union membership is not required in order to participate, workers see the apprenticeship partnership as an attractive benefit offered due to the union's advocacy. All advertising for the apprenticeship brands the program as a labor-management partnership, and the union participates in all aspects of the recruitment process.

Indeed, there are far more applicants than apprenticeship positions available, and the partnership hopes to scale up by increasing the number of apprentices trained in each class, expanding the types of IT apprenticeships available, and offering opportunities outside of Sacramento.

Conclusion

From apprenticeship and professional learning opportunities to mentorship and benefits navigation, public sector training programs can provide workers with a tangible example of the benefits of union membership. Indeed, public sector unions have long been a critical player in ensuring that training opportunities are available to government workers; linked to good jobs; and accessible to women and workers of color.

In order to effectively expand the reach of these programs, partnerships must feature worker-leaders centrally in the training, and partner unions must ensure that trainees understand that union involvement is essential to ensuring that workers receive high-quality training. In addition, unions and policymakers at all levels of government should focus on developing partnerships that meet key needs of all parties; leverage existing centers of power and trust between unions and public employers; and provide opportunities to scale up successful models.

By fostering these sorts of partnerships, policymakers and worker organizations can raise standards for workers; support the needs of public sector employers; and help ensure that workers in the public sector are able to exercise their right to come together in strong unions.

About the author

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