

# Integrating water infrastructure investment and workforce development in New Orleans

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## Introduction

Twenty years after Hurricane Katrina and the failure of the federal levees, New Orleans is still picking up the pieces in many ways from a disaster that thrust it into a historic environmental and economic predicament. That was and remains especially the case for its aging and vulnerable water infrastructure, which continues to demand proactive investment alongside committed leadership.

If grappling with the magnitude of these physical infrastructure needs is not enough, New Orleans also is confronting a sizable workforce challenge that limits its short- and long-term ability to carry out needed improvements. A wide range of public and private leaders—including government agencies, utilities, employers, workforce training providers, labor groups, and community-based organizations—share a collective challenge and opportunity to bolster New Orleans' resilience.

This report examines the ongoing nature of building greater resilience—the ability to survive and thrive amid different climate impacts—focusing on the continued need to integrate water infrastructure investment and workforce development, not just in New Orleans, but across the region too. It first lays out more context to understand the mounting infrastructure and workforce challenges before and after Hurricane Katrina, particularly the conditions of the federal levees before and after they failed in 2005, before describing steps that leaders have taken.

In particular, this report highlights efforts that have facilitated additional water infrastructure investment and workforce development, including:



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- The emergence of several proactive plans, such as the Sewerage and Water Board's Strategic Plan and the region's Urban Water Plan
- The formation of several collaborative partnerships, such as those focused on sector strategies and youth workforce development
- A sustained pipeline of projects, particularly those focused on green infrastructure and neighborhood-scale improvements

In exploring these efforts, the report shows that while much work has been done, more work remains, and there are several potential paths forward to drive action and innovation—offering precedent for many other regions nationally. More robust planning specifically around the workforce needs of infrastructure construction and maintenance, for instance, including a dedicated water workforce plan could help strengthen such efforts, in addition to durable collaborations and funding to support continued implementation.

## The consequences of Hurricane Katrina then and now

It has been 20 years since Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, and the ripple effects are still felt today—environmentally, economically, and otherwise. Beyond the immense human and personal toll the storm and the failure of the federal levees left in its wake, the region's water infrastructure is perhaps most emblematic of the long-standing impacts. From levees and water pumps to treatment plants and pipes, New Orleans depends on an extensive network of drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater systems to function every day; major hurricanes like Katrina have not only destroyed some of these systems, but also exposed their continued vulnerability.

Hurricane Katrina itself hit 1,200 drinking water systems and 200 wastewater treatment facilities across Louisiana,<sup>1</sup> Mississippi, and Alabama, causing more than \$2 billion in estimated damages.<sup>2</sup> Disruptions to electricity, power distribution lines, and other power

facilities were especially severe in New Orleans itself, with some customers going weeks (or months) without clean, reliable water due to the loss of power.

Hurricane Katrina and its immediate aftermath are emblematic of the escalating number of climate-related threats facing New Orleans today. Fueled by warming temperatures and exacerbated by rising sea levels, the hurricane brought an even greater force to the region than if it occurred decades earlier, with studies showing those earlier storm surges may have been 60 percent lower.<sup>3</sup> New Orleans' location on the Mississippi River Delta near the Gulf of Mexico means it is quite literally surrounded by water at all times—and squarely in the bullseye of flooding and other related climate risks.

Indeed, less than a month after Katrina, Hurricane Rita<sup>4</sup> pummeled the region, exposing anew the risks that floods and storms present for the region. Even normal rainfall, typically reaching 5 feet each year,<sup>5</sup> can lead to ongoing risks, given the region's low-lying landscape, shifting soil, and subsidence. Over the past 20 years, New Orleans has seen 42 flood events,<sup>6</sup> and estimates show that rainfall-induced flooding and subsidence will cost the region \$10.2 billion over the next 50 years.<sup>7</sup>

But as the region has recovered and rebuilt, an infrastructure and economic development opportunity has presented itself—investing in the region's water workforce. Supporting greater climate resilience—the ability to survive and thrive amid different climate impacts—has not simply been limited to improving New Orleans' water infrastructure (among other systems), but also to helping more workers construct, operate, and oversee these improvements, with an eye towards greater economic opportunity. Leaders in the region have designed intentional programs and launched targeted investments to hire, train, and retain a skilled workforce to manage the region's water infrastructure, making these investments a clear priority.

As city, regional, and federal leaders look to further strengthen the region's water infrastructure and its water workforce, the 20th anniversary of the

devastating destruction dealt to New Orleans and the region by Hurricane Katrina and the failure of the federal levees offers a chance to both reflect and look forward. A wide range of public and private leaders—including government agencies, utilities, employers, workforce training providers, labor groups, and community-based organizations—share a collective challenge and opportunity to bolster New Orleans’ resilience.

This next sections of this report examine the ongoing nature of this process, focusing on the continued need to integrate water infrastructure investment and workforce development across the region. It first lays out more context to understand the mounting infrastructure and workforce challenges before and after Hurricane Katrina, before describing steps that leaders have taken. In particular, the report highlights the emergence of several proactive plans, the formation of several collaborative partnerships, and a sustained pipeline of projects that have facilitated additional water infrastructure investment and workforce development.

## Setting the water infrastructure and workforce context in and around New Orleans

New Orleans, similar to many other regions nationally,<sup>8</sup> relies on a vast assortment of human-made and natural systems to supply, treat, and conserve its water resources. These systems range from so called “gray infrastructure,”<sup>9</sup> such as pipes, pumps, and centralized treatment plants, to green infrastructure,<sup>10</sup> such as rain gardens and other related natural assets that tend to be more decentralized. Drainage is especially important in the region, including 120 drainage and constant-duty pumps as well as 180 miles of open and subsurface canals that help move stormwater to nearby water sources, notably Lake Pontchartrain directly north of the city.<sup>11</sup> An additional 350 miles of floodwalls and levees help further protect the region from flooding.<sup>12</sup>

Operating and maintaining these systems has become costlier and more cumbersome over many decades due to a variety of factors, not simply due to the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the failed levees. They also establish additional context for four broad and systemic workforce challenges facing New Orleans in the water sector.

- Aging infrastructure concerns
- Fragmented water governance
- Rising water investment needs
- Escalating climate pressures

Lets consider each of these challenges briefly in turn.

### Aging infrastructure concerns

Many of New Orleans’ existing pipes, pumps, and other water systems are aging and increasingly vulnerable to climate impacts alongside daily wear and tear. Half of the 1,530 miles of water mains were installed before World War II, with system failures and disruptions becoming more common.<sup>13</sup>

Other mounting needs include replacing lead service lines,<sup>14</sup> installing new technologies, such as smart meters,<sup>15</sup> and upgrading the region’s “power complex.”<sup>16</sup> a collection of turbines and other infrastructure that provide electricity to different pumping systems. Many of these upgrades and other projects are not only geared toward improving efficiency and reliability but are prompted by regulatory compliance.

### Fragmented water governance

The Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans or SWBNO, is the primary utility responsible for overseeing water, sewerage, and drainage needs—serving a population of 383,000 residents<sup>17</sup>—but it is not alone in managing water infrastructure improvements across a multi-basin region. The SWBNO leadership has partnered with Veolia North America, a Boston-based environmental engineering

firm, to help operate wastewater treatment plant upgrades, assist in hurricane recovery efforts, and carry out other capital upgrades.<sup>18</sup>

Several other city agencies, including the Office of Resilience & Sustainability and the Stormwater and Green Infrastructure Department, also play key roles in planning and overseeing different climate-related improvements. State and federal agencies, including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers,<sup>19</sup> are responsible for flood control, environmental stewardship, and other projects. And ultimately, individual households and businesses incorporate different property-level improvements. All this activity results in a fracturing of responsibilities and oversight, which can complicate comprehensive water planning and implementation.

## Rising water investment needs

The price tag for constructing and maintaining all this infrastructure is substantial. The New Orleans City Master Plan estimates that \$6 billion will be needed over the coming decades to carry out drinking water and wastewater improvements, especially those accounting for subsidence needs and promoting greater resilience<sup>20</sup>. The Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans, moreover, is largely responsible for covering any operational and capital needs, with annual budgets for each at \$420 million and \$390 million, respectively.<sup>21</sup>

Between rising compliance needs, debt obligations, and other project and staffing costs, the financial pressures are constant. This is in line with the experience of most other water utilities nationally, where they are responsible for more than three-quarters of water infrastructure spending each year amid declining federal support over the past few decades<sup>22</sup>. Still, New Orleans has benefited from several large federal investments in recent years, especially post-Katrina.

These include \$120.5 billion in federal funding,<sup>23</sup> as well as various hazard mitigation grants.<sup>24</sup> Also in the mix of federal funds is a \$275 million loan from the U.S.

Environmental Protection Agency's Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act program geared toward sewer system evaluation and rehabilitation,<sup>25</sup> and a to-be-determined amount of funding from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2022.<sup>26</sup>

## Escalating climate pressures

Hurricane Katrina and other acute climate events are not the only challenges hitting New Orleans' infrastructure. Chronic climate challenges, including more frequent rainfall and flooding, are a regular occurrence. Existing sewers and pumping stations are ill-equipped to handle these impacts, leading to overflows and other associated environmental and public health hazards.

Saltwater intrusion and other hazards are becoming more serious as well.<sup>27</sup> Since 50 percent of the region is below sea level,<sup>28</sup> the topography—and ongoing subsidence—is further exposing residents and businesses to danger. Of course, the uneven nature of these climate impacts also is readily apparent. Hurricane Katrina's most devastating costs often hit lower-income communities of color the hardest, including renters and the unemployed.<sup>29</sup> The need to invest in more distributed green infrastructure systems, in particular, offers potential environmental and economic benefits for the region, but these projects are still unfolding in real time<sup>30</sup>.

Collectively, these four water infrastructure challenges are broadly paired with related water workforce needs of the city. Improving New Orleans' water infrastructure depends on having a skilled workforce to carry out short- and long-term projects, and maximizing the return on these investments ideally connects to those residents and businesses who have long struggled to gain an economic foothold. That's especially true for those individuals who have weathered the brunt of different climate events. Infrastructure projects not only have the potential to provide cleaner and more reliable water, but also can directly uplift those living nearby via direct training, skills development, and job opportunities.

The need to hire more water workers has arguably never been more urgent. The Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans is among the single largest water employers in the region, relying on about 1,300 workers to construct, operate, and maintain different infrastructure systems.<sup>31</sup> This total has remained roughly flat over the past few years and even declined slightly from a pre-COVID-19 peak of 1,483 workers, despite continued project needs. Nearly 70 percent of these workers are involved in operations, while another 19 percent are in customer service. The remaining 11 percent of workers are in administrative, financial, managerial, and other support roles.

The concentration of SWBNO workers in operational skilled trades positions, such as water treatment operators, electricians, technicians, and related roles, puts ongoing pressure on the SWBNO leaders to ensure a steady flow of talent is in place to oversee mission-critical functions. At the same time, ensuring these workers have pathways to career growth, including managerial roles, is essential, especially given the retirement eligibility and turnover concerns across the utility. (See Figure 1.)

The Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans is emblematic of a broader set of workforce challenges facing the water sector in New Orleans and beyond. Previous research by Brookings Metro has highlighted that more than 8,100 water workers are employed in New Orleans across all of the city’s utility agencies, in addition to related city agencies, engineering firms, contractors, and other employers.<sup>32</sup> Among the most significant workforce challenges facing these employers and other leaders across the region is an aging workforce in need of fresh talent and the need for more flexible and accessible training pathways.

### An aging workforce in need of fresh talent

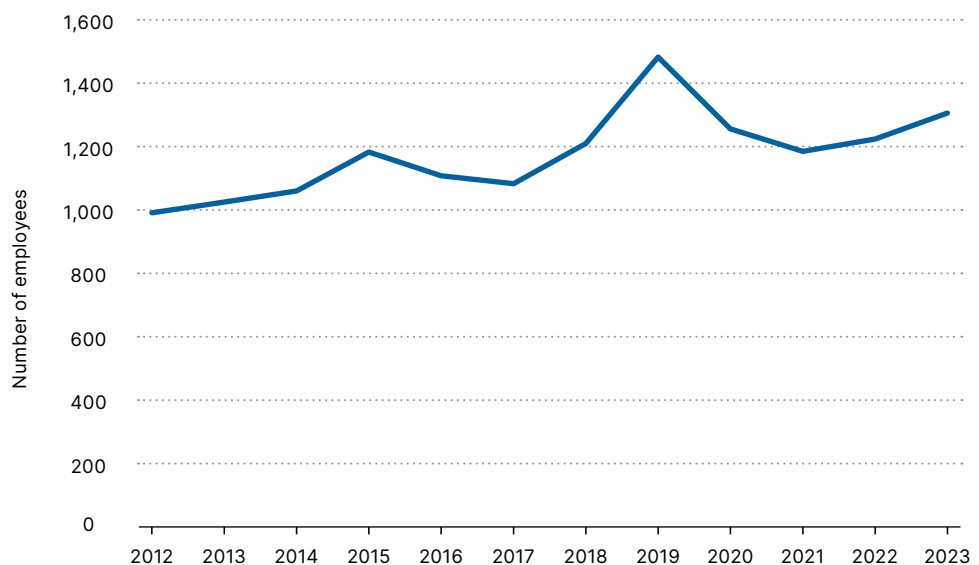
Nearly a third of the water workforce is nearing or eligible for retirement as part of a “silver tsunami” facing the entire water sector nationally.<sup>33</sup> New Orleans is no exception as it grapples with challenges planning for these knowledge gaps, including needed succession planning.

FIGURE 1

## The Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans faces employment challenges

Total employment for the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans, 2012–2023

Source: Reproduced from SWBNO Operations Committee Meeting, February 202, available at: [https://www2.swbno.org/documents/meetings/packets/packet\\_2149.pdf](https://www2.swbno.org/documents/meetings/packets/packet_2149.pdf).



Meanwhile, struggles to reach more and different types of workers, especially younger workers, women, and people of color, are disconcerting. Nearly 85 percent of water workers nationally are male,<sup>34</sup> for instance, highlighting some of the barriers that women face to fill positions.<sup>35</sup> Water jobs tend to lack visibility, and the historic lack of community engagement has been a struggle for many utilities nationally.

What's more, for those utilities that are trying to make inroads filling positions, collecting consistent data on recruitment and retention can be a frequent operational gap itself. This lack of accurate and timely data limits accountability among utility managers and human resources departments, hindering progress in new hiring and training.

### The need for more flexible and accessible training pathways

Water occupations are in need of talent despite offering pathways to greater economic opportunity, particularly by paying more competitive and equitable wages. For example, previous Brookings Metro research estimates that water occupations pay 50 percent higher wages to workers at lower ends of the income scale (at the 10th and 25th wage percentiles, compared to all occupations nationally).<sup>36</sup> These jobs also tend to require lower levels of formal education; 53 percent of water workers have a high school diploma or less, compared to about a third of all workers nationally.<sup>37</sup>

But despite the promise of this economic opportunity, many prospective workers struggle to enter and stay in these careers due to rigid hiring requirements, the need for more extensive work-based learning, and a lack of supportive service such as transportation and child care. Pre-apprenticeships, internships, mentorships, and other more nimble earn-and-learn experiences can open doors for a greater variety of workers, as can potential adjustments to civil service hiring requirements and traditional barriers to entry.<sup>38</sup> For its part, the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans has elevated such priorities in its

workforce development goals and planning, although implementation remains ongoing.

These two workforce challenges to meet the hiring and training needs in the water sector, of course, do not exist in a vacuum. Regional collaboration is vital to drive change, and New Orleans is beginning to pilot several efforts to bridge planning and implementation gaps among utilities, other employers, training providers, and a host of community-based organizations and labor groups.

## Addressing water infrastructure and workforce needs together

Boosting the financial, technical, and programmatic capacity of utilities<sup>39</sup> is a pressing need across the country to accelerate infrastructure improvements, unlock federal and state resources,<sup>40</sup> and support climate resilience and broader economic opportunity. New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina has demonstrated how utilities, civic leaders, workforce development leaders, and other stakeholders can more comprehensively devise strategies and act upon the needs of their water infrastructure and their workforce by working together.

Three key developments highlight how these city and regional leaders are integrating their infrastructure and workforce investments: the emergence of several proactive plans, the formation of several collaborative partnerships, and a sustained pipeline of projects. (See Figure 2.)

While each of these three steps has helped build momentum, New Orleans—similar to many other regions nationally—needs to continue accelerating action, including dedicated workforce development plans, coordination, and funding. So let's examine each of those steps in more detail.

FIGURE 2

## Major ways in which New Orleans has integrated water infrastructure investment and workforce development

Plans, partnerships, and projects underway to boost the city's resiliency



Source: Brookings analysis of the SWBNO Strategic Plan and Greater New Orleans Urban Water Plan

### The emergence of several proactive plans

Hurricane Katrina—among other pressing climate, infrastructure, and economic concerns—prompted an array of city, regional, and federal leaders to develop and implement several different plans over the past couple decades. The most direct plan affecting utility operational and capital goals is Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans's Strategic Plan, which lays out a vision and a number of key focus areas for action from 2022 to 2027, including infrastructure investment and workforce development.<sup>41</sup> Taking into account SWBNO's progress since Hurricane Katrina first slammed ashore,<sup>42</sup> this plan represents a first-of-its-kind, proactive plan shaped and informed by

community and staffing engagement to build greater trust and strive for better performance.

The SWBNO strategic plan aims to do so by articulating how it can fulfill its mission of providing reliable, affordable, and safe water—through financial stability, technology modernization, infrastructure resilience, and more. Workforce development is a key pillar in the plan, where it is building off ongoing efforts to promote skills development, heighten accountability, and motivate workers. Specific actions include working with civil service leaders from the city to update minimum qualifications for certain positions to broaden the applicant pool, implementing improved knowledge transfer and succession planning, and

conducting organizational assessments to gauge future staffing demands.

Beyond the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans, a more extensive guiding document for New Orleans' water concerns overall is the Urban Water Plan.<sup>43</sup> Initiated in 2010 with federal disaster recovery funding via the Louisiana Office of Community Development, the plan represents one of the country's first comprehensive and integrated water management plans for a whole region. Greater New Orleans, Inc., the leading economic development organization for New Orleans, led the effort alongside the local firm Waggonner & Ball Architects to develop a long-term 21st century vision—and roadmap—for how leaders can both improve “management of flood and subsidence threats, while creating economic value and enhancing quality of life.”

By creating “multiple lines of defense,” the plan identifies different gaps, strategies, and projects to execute on this vision, additionally informed by an international team of water experts and designed to complement other planning efforts, including Louisiana's Coastal Master Plan.<sup>44</sup>

Since its finalization in 2012, the Urban Water Plan has continued to serve as a guiding and unifying document for leaders across the region, as demonstrated by the “Urban Water @ 10” planning process marking a decade of implementation—jumpstarted by the Greater New Orleans Foundation, Greater New Orleans, Inc., and Tulane University's ByWater Institute.<sup>45</sup>

The plan's foundation rests upon a collection of regional solutions across multiple water basins, with the aim to strengthen interdepartmental governance, coordinate capital investments, and guide project decisionmaking among multiple jurisdictions. An emphasis on green infrastructure is apparent throughout the plan, including ways to better redirect and infiltrate stormwater runoff across new and retrofitted canals, connected community infrastructure, and several specific priority demonstration projects.<sup>46</sup>

The plan's actions are estimated to lead to \$8 billion reduction in flood damages, \$2.2 billion reduction in subsidence damage, and \$11.3 billion in economic benefits by the end of the plan's implementation in 2027, although the ultimate results are still ongoing.<sup>47</sup> The cross-agency, multi-stakeholder approach holds considerable promise, including the potential to create 100,000 direct and indirect “green” and “blue” jobs across the region, according to its implementation documents.<sup>48</sup> Still, the specific ways in which leaders will work with businesses, training providers, and other actors is unfolding in real time.<sup>49</sup>

A third overarching document that informs water infrastructure and economic development priorities includes the New Orleans City Master Plan, which was amended in 2018 and designed to guide planning efforts through 2030.<sup>50</sup> While this plan covers a variety of strategies and actions well beyond water infrastructure specifically—from housing to historic preservation to health care and human services—it does pinpoint specific ways in which the SWBNO and other leaders can pursue different infrastructure improvements, alongside other workforce development needs.

For instance, the continued rebuilding of water, sewer, and drainage facilities remains a top priority, with the aim to improve resilience, operational efficiency, and public health, in addition to focusing capital spending on projects identified in the Urban Water Plan. In the “alignment of job training and jobs for all skills,” the plan also identifies several complementary workforce development actions, including a business-school partnership to help expedite “community-based career preparation programs” spearheaded by the Business Council of New Orleans and the River Region and the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce. Additional goals include improved coordination with employers and workforce training programs as well as expanded adult education and workforce training.

While there is no dedicated water workforce plan in itself—a common shortcoming in many regions across the country, especially as they look toward investing in different green jobs<sup>51</sup>—an assortment of



other plans are advancing more resilient and equitable infrastructure investment. In 2015, for example, city leaders adopted the Resilient New Orleans Strategy,<sup>52</sup> which lays out several adaptation strategies and improvements, including more comprehensive urban water management and coastal protection and restoration, as well as “lowering barriers to workforce participation.”

Then, in 2019, city leaders alongside a variety of philanthropic organizations and other community groups released a Climate Equity Plan, which includes 21 different recommendations to advance greater equity in ongoing projects and planning efforts, including supporting jobs in or adjacent to the water sector.<sup>53</sup> And in 2022, city leaders created an updated Climate Action Plan, which aims to reduce emissions across the city’s built environment over the coming decades and highlights several ways to support more sustainable businesses and jobs<sup>54</sup>.

Together, these various plans are sending an important signal to leaders across New Orleans around proactive infrastructure investment and workforce development, including specific programs and projects that can advance both simultaneously.

## The formation of several collaborative partnerships

Executing on these plans requires extensive community buy-in. No single government agency, utility, or other organization can mobilize the financial, technical, and programmatic resources to accelerate needed infrastructure improvements and workforce development opportunities in and around New Orleans. In the years following Hurricane Katrina—and in the decades looking ahead—a wide variety of actors have established partnerships to ground action and innovation. At the center of these collaborations is a focus on reaching many marginalized and disadvantaged populations while supporting careers in the service of greater climate resilience.

No partnerships are too big or small, given the wide scope of actors and activities involved in New Orleans’ water sector and its workforce development ecosystem. Major actors include water infrastructure employers, of course, such as the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans, other city departments such as the Office of Resilience & Sustainability and the Stormwater and Green Infrastructure Department, and the various contractors and other businesses tasked with carrying out projects. Greater New Orleans, Inc. and the Business Council of New Orleans, as described above, are among the major economic development and business leaders that have been central to many planning efforts and community dialogues.

Then there are the wide array of workforce development agencies and groups actively engaged in this work. Among them are the Louisiana Workforce Commission, the New Orleans Office of Workforce Development, the New Orleans Workforce Development Board, Job 1 New Orleans, and the New Orleans Office of Supplier Diversity.

Educational institutions also are essential to student engagement, instruction, and curriculum development, whether at the K-12 (Orleans Parish School Board) or the post-secondary level (Tulane University, Delgado Community College, and Louisiana Technical College, among others). And there are a vast number of other philanthropic organizations, such as the Greater New Orleans Foundation, labor groups, among them the United Association of Journeymen and Apprentices of the Plumbing and Pipefitting Industry, and community groups including the Water Collaborative, United Way, Thrive New Orleans, Groundwork New Orleans, Limitless Vistas, and many more.

The individualized and collective efforts among these actors are far-reaching and demonstrate the enormous extent of the region’s water infrastructure and workforce needs in recent years. But some of the exemplary training efforts—in service of short-term job placement and longer-term career pathways—focus on sector partnerships, green workforce development, and youth workforce development.

## SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS

Bringing together employers, educational institutions, workforce agencies, labor groups, community-based organizations, and other actors in support of worker training and skills development in a particular industry—in this case, the water sector—has emerged as a priority in New Orleans over the past couple decades.<sup>55</sup> The Greater New Orleans Foundation has been a particular leader, organizing several collaborations centered around green infrastructure development and training as part of a next generation sector partnership approach.<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, the Urban Water Plan describes how Greater New Orleans, Inc. is serving as a convener for such partnerships to take place, especially to “nurture and grow a vibrant emerging environmental industry sector” across the region. The City Master Plan proposes the creation of “centers for excellence” to foster additional training and certification programs with Delgado Community College. Such proposals build off other existing models, including the Network for Economic Opportunity (since dissolved), which connected disadvantaged workers to water careers via collaboration between Delgado Community College’s water and wastewater treatment program and the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans, including offering case management and supportive services.<sup>57</sup>

## GREEN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

A clear focus on green workforce development—not just broader water workforce needs—also is a hallmark of New Orleans’ efforts, in line with prevailing investments in more distributed natural infrastructure systems. In addition to the plans described above, the Greater New Orleans Foundation commissioned research and guidance on green careers in 2020, offering more details on occupational pathways, promising best practices, and the role of different training providers and other organizations in the region.<sup>58</sup> Continued public education and community outreach have helped further demonstrate what these opportunities mean for prospective workers.<sup>59</sup>

Many community and non-profit partners, in turn, have also served as intermediaries, training providers, and direct implementers of these green improvements. Notable examples include:

- WaterWise Gulf South, which has led public outreach on green infrastructure<sup>60</sup>
- Groundwork NOLA, which has led reforestation and training projects<sup>61</sup>
- S.O.U.L. NOLA, which has led extensive urban forestry and maintenance activities<sup>62</sup>
- Thrive NOLA, which offers workshops, training, and credentialing assistance, such as green landscaping certification and digital skills acquisition<sup>63</sup>

## YOUTH WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

While prospective water workers can come from all ages and at different points of the career ladder, New Orleans has concentrated many training and outreach efforts on younger workers, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The New Orleans Career Center, for example, provides targeted high school and adult training for the building trades. City leaders have also proposed more coordinated pre-apprenticeship programs in the construction trades, including employment preparation and retention services led by groups such as Job 1 New Orleans.<sup>64</sup> And the Louisiana Green Corps provides certifications, training, and job placement for disconnected individuals ages 18 to 35.<sup>65</sup>

In the water sector more specifically, the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans offers internship programs, helping expose students to potential water careers while working directly with staff.<sup>66</sup> Dillard University, an HBCU in New Orleans, offers students the chance to enroll in an urban water management certification program.<sup>67</sup> Among non-profits, Limitless Vistas provides workforce development and job placement in the environmental conservation space for disconnected youth,<sup>68</sup> while Ripple Effect provides curriculum design and field-based learning to prepare

the next generation of water talent.<sup>69</sup> Even more informal educational opportunities, including green demonstration projects and community workshops, can broaden the appeal of water careers.<sup>70</sup>

## A sustained pipeline of projects

The plans and partnerships that have gained momentum in New Orleans ultimately need to go hand-in-hand with continued water infrastructure investment and projects. And while implementation of the full range of projects overseen by the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans and laid out in the Urban Water Plan remains ongoing, there are still several promising examples that have emerged—specifically geared toward building climate resilience and workforce development opportunities. The key takeaway: the specific size, location, and purpose of these projects varies considerably, yet they are still individually and collectively supporting environmental and economic improvements across the region over time.

The SWBNO is a driver for many water projects as part of its capital budgeting process. Whether replacing lead service lines, fixing sewers, or upgrading water pumps, the utility continues to serve as a durable economic anchor for New Orleans.<sup>71</sup> Its projects, despite being highly fragmented and localized, are place-based and people-based, offering ongoing demonstrations of how infrastructure improvements can drive community engagement and expose residents to potential water careers.

In conjunction with other city agencies, including the Office of Supplier Diversity, the water utility also has the potential to conduct even more targeted outreach and inclusion strategies toward small and disadvantaged businesses as part of its contracting process.<sup>72</sup> Local hire provisions, similarly, have helped support qualified local workers as part of a broader range of city projects.<sup>73</sup>

Among the larger ongoing projects that have supported green infrastructure and workforce development is the Gentilly Resilience District, a

neighborhood-scale collection of improvements designed to absorb stormwater, slow subsidence, and promote community revitalization in this community which is along the shores of Lake Pontchartrain north of downtown New Orleans.<sup>74</sup> Initially awarded \$141 million through the U.S. Housing and Urban Development’s National Disaster Resilience Competition, the project also received support from other federal and local sources to execute on different upgrades, despite delays in funding.<sup>75</sup>

Some of individual pieces to this larger project include:

- The Mirabeau Water Garden, a 25-acre site designed to store up to 10 million gallons of stormwater while providing environmental learning opportunities
- The Pontilly Neighborhood Stormwater Network, which includes enhancements to the Dwyer Canal and nearby vacant lots
- An assortment of other roadway, building, and wetland improvements

Other dedicated funding along the way has also supported training on these sites, including \$3 million to support local residents in obtaining knowledge and credentials around green infrastructure and water management as part of a growing “water economy.”<sup>76</sup>

Other notable projects—large, medium, and small—are being led by a variety of partners. For instance, the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority oversees a “Green Program,” which has helped complete dozens of stormwater management and forestry projects on individual properties.<sup>77</sup> Groundwork NOLA has likewise led an ambitious collection of green infrastructure investments across multiple neighborhoods,<sup>78</sup> including 36 tree projects and 36 bioswales to capture storm runoffs in the Touro Street Project,<sup>79</sup> alongside an ambitious “Vision to Reality Stormwater Park”<sup>80</sup> that will become a “resilience hub” in a historically disadvantaged part of New Orleans’ Seventh Ward.

In much the same way, the Sankofa Community Development Corporation has pursued several transformative green infrastructure projects, including the creation of a wetland park and nature trail on 40 acres in New Orleans' Ninth Ward, while simultaneously working with partners such as Louisiana Green Corps to emphasize education and workforce development opportunities.<sup>81</sup> Additional community and philanthropic efforts are jumpstarting collections of other related green infrastructure projects<sup>82</sup> alongside other envisioned demonstration projects.<sup>83</sup>

## Conclusion

Twenty years after Hurricane Katrina and the failure of the federal levees, New Orleans is still picking up the pieces in many ways from a disaster that thrust it into a historic environmental and economic predicament. That's especially the case for its aging and vulnerable water infrastructure, which continues to demand proactive investment and leadership, not just from utilities such as the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans but also numerous other public and private partners. And if grappling with the magnitude of these physical infrastructure needs was not enough, New Orleans is also confronting a sizable workforce challenge that limits its short- and long-term ability to carry out needed improvements.

An array of city leaders have responded to ongoing climate and economic risks with a series of plans, partnerships, and projects that are building greater resilience and opportunity. Strategic plans from the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans, a comprehensive Urban Water Plan, and other

supporting city-led climate strategies have established a new vision and laid the groundwork for infrastructure and workforce investments for decades to come. Newly emerging and strengthening partnerships among infrastructure, workforce, and community leaders are targeting specific industries and workers of need. And the execution of different projects, especially green infrastructure improvements, is driving change in real time.

All these actions and collaborations do not mean New Orleans still doesn't have its work cut out for it, but these steps show continued promise and implementation toward a more resilient and equitable future. Just as many other regions are doing, New Orleans needs to continue strengthening its infrastructure and workforce development efforts. Dedicated workforce plans for its infrastructure and climate needs, particularly its water sector, could represent one such step moving forward.

With a regional water workforce plan serving as a north star, different public and private partners, including the SWBNO and other groups, could further solidify existing collaborations and explore new opportunities. And these plans and partnerships could feed into different projects, ideally supported by ongoing funding. Translating vision into reality is easier said than done, but New Orleans' leaders have shown an appetite for infrastructure and workforce innovation, where the actions taken since Hurricane Katrina hit the city have translated into tangible environmental and economic gains for the region. These actions also demonstrate a willingness and capacity to build off this momentum over time.

## Endnotes

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## About The Data Center

The Data Center, a project of Nonprofit Knowledge Works, is the most trusted resource for data about Southeast Louisiana. Founded in 1997, we provide fully independent research and analysis to offer a comprehensive look at issues that matter most to our region. With a mission of democratizing data, The Data Center has, and continues to be, an objective partner in bringing reliable, thoroughly researched data to conversations about building a more prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable region.

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*The New Orleans Index at Twenty* collection includes contributions from The Data Center, the Brookings Institution, and a dozen local scholars. The aim of this collection is to advance discussion and action among residents and leaders in greater New Orleans and maximize opportunities provided by the 20-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina.

*The New Orleans Index at Twenty: Measuring Progress toward Resilience* analyzes more than 20 indicators to track the region's progress toward metropolitan resiliency, organized by housing and infrastructure, economy and workforce, wealth and people. Essays contributed by leading local scholars and Brookings scholars systematically document major post-Katrina reforms, and hold up new policy opportunities. Together these reports provide New Orleanians with facts to form a common understanding of our progress and future possibilities.

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