



TESTIMONY

STRENGTHENING PENNSYLVANIA'S WORKFORCE IN THE SKILLED TRADES

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TESTIMONY BEFORE

**PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
HOUSE REPUBLICAN POLICY COMMITTEE**

Built in Pennsylvania: Workforce Development in the Trades

TESTIMONY BY

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It is a privilege to provide testimony to this policy committee. Thank you, Representative Brown, Policy Chair David Rowe, and members of the Committee.

The America First Policy Institute (AFPI) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, nonpartisan research institute. Our guiding principles are liberty, free enterprise, foreign-policy engagement in the American interest, freedom of conscience, and the primacy of American workers, families, and communities. To this end, AFPI affirms and celebrates the American experiment and works to promulgate American values in our educational institutions, public policy, and culture. We are committed to policies that prioritize American workers, foster economic independence, and promote practical training pathways to high paying jobs.

As director of the Higher Education Reform Initiative, I oversee AFPI's post-secondary research portfolio, which includes workforce development. Prior to joining AFPI, I worked as a research analyst for the Defense Health Board, a Department of Defense Federal Advisory Board. Prior to that, I co-authored the book *Black Eye for America: How Critical Race Theory is Burning Down the House* (2020).

I am writing to register AFPI's support for the policies outlined in the "Built in Pennsylvania" initiative focusing on workforce development in the skilled trades.¹ The skilled trades encompass construction, manufacturing, electrical work, plumbing, HVAC, and related industries.² They are critical for infrastructure development, innovation, and self-reliance. Skilled trades build our nation's communities and support economic growth. In 2024, for example, Pennsylvania exports reached a record \$53.2 billion. In 2022, the state's exports sustained an estimated 157,000 jobs.³

¹ Pennsylvania House Republican Caucus. (2026, May 13). *Reichard, Policy Committee Host Hearing on Strengthening Industrial Competitiveness in Pennsylvania*. <https://www.pahousegop.com/News/37679/Media-Advisories/Reichard-Policy-Committee-Host-Hearing-on-Strengthening-Industrial-Competitiveness-in-Pennsylvania>.

² U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2025). *Construction and extraction occupations*. Occupational Outlook Handbook. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/construction-and-extraction/home.htm>; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2025). *Installation, maintenance, and repair occupations*. Occupational Outlook Handbook. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/installation-maintenance-and-repair/home.htm>.

³ U.S. Trade Representative. (n.d.). *Pennsylvania: Exports and jobs supported by trade*. <https://ustr.gov/map/state-benefits/pa>.



Despite this, persistent challenges threaten the foundation of this important sector. Targeted reforms are needed to equip Pennsylvania's workers with the skills to promote economic prosperity for Pennsylvania industries and families.

Challenges and Opportunities in Pennsylvania's Skilled Trades

Pennsylvania's economy relies heavily on skilled trades and on related industries like manufacturing and construction. For instance, since 2023, investments in manufacturing training programs have helped train over 3,300 Pennsylvanians, creating pathways to rewarding careers.⁴ However, Pennsylvania faces a projected shortfall of more than 300,000 skilled trade workers by 2030, jeopardizing the state's infrastructure, healthcare, and manufacturing sectors.⁵

Nationally, open construction sector jobs recently averaged 300,000–400,000 monthly, with high demand for roles like carpenters, plumbers, and electricians.⁶ Annual wages for these positions are around \$60,000.⁷ In Pennsylvania, this demand aligns with broader trends, where skilled trades offer competitive compensation and opportunities for self-employment. For example, about one in three carpenters are self-employed.⁸

Critically, these jobs are also broadly resilient to automation. Recent projections indicate over 7.3 million “hands-on” positions in transportation, healthcare, and skilled trades will be available nationwide by 2034.⁹ This includes projected open positions for:

⁴ Pennsylvania's Governor's Press Office. (2026, January 22). *In Allegheny County, Governor Shapiro and Shapiro Administration Leaders Highlight \$3.3 Million Investment to Train Future Manufacturing Workers, Expand Skilled Workforce Across Pennsylvania*. <https://www.pa.gov/governor/newsroom/2026-press-releases/gov-shapiro-highlights--3-3-million-investment-in-skilled-trades>

⁵ <https://lvb.com/pennsylvania-skilled-trades-workforce/> Torres, R. (2025, June 11). *Why skilled trades are vital to Pennsylvania's future*. LVB.com. https://lvb.com/pennsylvania-skilled-trades-workforce/?utm_source=chatgpt.com <https://lvb.com/pennsylvania-skilled-trades-workforce/>.

⁶ Home Builders Institute. (2023). *The Home Builders Institute (HBI) Construction Labor Market Report*. https://hbi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Spring-2023-construction-labor-market-report_final-PDF.pdf

⁷ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2025). *Construction and extraction occupations*. Occupational Outlook Handbook. <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/construction-and-extraction/home.htm>

⁸ CPWR—The Center for Construction Research and Training. (2025). *Self-employed Workers* [dashboard]. <https://www.cpwrr.com/research/data-center/the-construction-chart-book/interactive-7th/employment-income/self-employed-workers/>. Nationally, around one-in-three carpenters are self-employed.

⁹ Watkins, S. (2026, January 30). *News Release: Demand for Transportation, Skilled Trade and Healthcare Professionals Projected to Continue in 2026*. Lincoln Tech. <https://investors.lincolneducationalservices.com/news-releases/news-release-details/demand-transportation-skilled-trade-and-healthcare-professionals>.



- 800,000 electricians,
- 400,000 HVAC technicians
- 456,000 welders.

Despite the promise of the trades, unemployment systems have struggled with persistent backlogs, originating from pandemic-era disruptions, but persisting despite claims of progress.¹⁰ These delays leave workers without timely support and hinder their reentry into the trades. Recent modernization attempts have been marred by errors, delays, and inefficiencies, wasting resources, and failing to deliver reliable assistance.¹¹

Broader policy missteps, including overreliance on fragmented programs and insufficient focus on practical training, render skilled trades positions vulnerable to labor shortages in the face of the coming “baby boomer” retirement wave.¹² The coming shortages threaten Pennsylvania’s ability to meet industry demands and sustain growth. Without reform, businesses face reduced competitiveness, and communities endure stalled infrastructure and understaffed essential services.¹³

Practical Solutions to Empower Pennsylvania Workers

To address these gaps, AFPI advocates streamlining fragmented workforce programs to align with reindustrialization needs and optimizing federal and state investments for high-demand trades like those in manufacturing and energy. This includes expanding registered apprenticeships to reach 1 million active apprentices annually—emphasizing on-the-job training

¹⁰ Kristofic, C. (2024, December 30). *Special Report: Pennsylvania failing the unemployed in not meeting standards with claims*. Philadelphia Tribune. https://www.phillytrib.com/news/local_news/special-report-pennsylvania-failing-the-unemployed-in-not-meeting-standards-with-claims/article_f52bf104-d334-505b-bdfb-3671203ea612.html

¹¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2022, September 21). *Unemployment insurance: Opportunities to address long-standing challenges and risks* (GAO-22-106159). <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-106159>

¹² CPWR—The Center for Construction Research and Training. (2025). *Age of Construction Workers - 2024 [dashboard]*. <https://www.cpw.com/research/data-center/the-construction-chart-book/interactive-7th/employment-income/worker-age/>. In 2024, over 2.5 million construction workers were at least 55 years old.

¹³ Associated Builders and Contractors. (2024, January 31). *ABC: 2024 Construction Workforce Shortage Tops Half a Million*. <https://www.abc.org/News-Media/News-Releases/abc-2024-construction-workforce-shortage-tops-half-a-million>. In 2024, there was an estimated shortage of 454,000 workers in construction related jobs nationwide.



over traditional pathways to quickly build skills and fill shortages.¹⁴ We additionally recommend:

- Implementing skills-based hiring in public sector jobs (i.e., eliminate college degree barriers).
- Providing training resources, partnering with employers to prioritize practical abilities.
- Reducing unnecessary barriers for workers entering the trades wherever possible.
- Destigmatize vocational education through career and technical programs.
- Protecting apprenticeships from burdensome regulations that inflate costs and limit competition.
- Encouraging local hiring on public projects.
- Requiring at least half of the workers on major contracts to be Pennsylvania residents, with contributions to training funds if waivers are needed, to keep jobs in Pennsylvania and bolster community economies.

These measures will enhance worker mobility, increase wages, and ensure Pennsylvania leads in building a resilient, American made future.

Conclusion

By prioritizing American workers, or more specifically, Pennsylvania’s workers, through targeted, efficient workforce development, Pennsylvania can overcome current hurdles and harness the full potential of its skilled trades sector. AFPI urges the Committee to advance policies that empower individuals, reduce government overreach, and drive economic strength from within the Commonwealth. We stand ready to collaborate on these efforts to build a prosperous Pennsylvania for generations to come.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Labor, U.S. Department of Commerce, & U.S. Department of Education. (2025). *America’s talent strategy: Building the workforce for the golden age*. <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OPA/newsreleases/2025/08/Americas-Talent-Strategy-Building-the-Workforce-for-the-Golden-Age.pdf>. The Trump Administration seeks to scale Registered Apprenticeship Programs with goal of “surpassing 1 million active apprentices.”

