



Wisconsin's apprenticeship surge

Earn-while-you-learn model gains momentum as a critical workforce solution

Sharieka Thomas joined the Milwaukee County Transit System in 2017 as a bus cleaner and fueler, working third shift to support her young family.

From across the garage, she watched mechanics diagnose engine issues and repair brakes, imagining herself in that role. But without a way to earn while learning, advancing into a mechanic role was out of reach.

Last April, MCTS launched Wisconsin's first coach/bus operator and mechanic apprenticeships. The 18-month mechanic apprenticeship changed things for Thomas, who is the only woman at MCTS on a team taking care of nearly 400 buses. Equipped with a professional-grade toolbox valued at roughly \$4,000, she will step into an A-level mechanic position upon completion of the apprenticeship.

MCTS's operator and mechanic apprenticeships are among several new state-registered standard apprenticeship programs that have launched in recent years, in sectors that include health care, education, child care, IT and services.

For many, these occupations may not come to mind when thinking of an apprentice. Instead, it's probably an image of someone training to be an electrician, plumber or carpenter. While

traditional construction and trades occupations still account for about half of apprenticeships in Wisconsin, the earn-while-you-learn model is increasingly being applied to additional occupations – those that have not historically offered apprenticeship opportunities – in an effort to fill wide-ranging workforce shortages and skills gaps.

State officials point to a shrinking labor pool, driven by retirements and slower population growth, as a key reason employers are turning to apprenticeship models that connect workers to jobs earlier and train them in-house.

As Wisconsin's long-standing apprenticeship system – which encapsulates registered apprenticeship, certified pre-apprenticeship and youth apprenticeship – expands across new industries, overall participation has hit record highs the past few consecutive years.

A total of 18,524 people participated in Wisconsin's registered apprenticeship program in 2025, an 8% jump over the prior year. That's 76% higher than a decade ago. The state's youth apprenticeship program for high school students has grown even more rapidly, from 3,035 in 2016 to a record 12,141 during the 2025-'26 school year, according to the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development.

The concept of apprenticeship is far from new. In fact, this centuries-old work-based training method was unregulated in the United States until 1911 when Wisconsin became the first state to pass an apprenticeship law, providing protections for both workers and employers. Today, the state has more than 200 apprenticeship occupations, sponsored by nearly 3,100 employers.

Given the recent surge in apprenticeship participation – and shifting workforce demographics – it's worth taking a closer look at what's driving the trend as well as how various employers in the region are leveraging what state officials are calling a long-term workforce strategy rather than just a short-term hiring tool.



Credit: MCTS MCTS apprentice Sharieka Thomas (left) signing her contract in April 2025.

Supply and demand issues

For many employers who are newer to the apprenticeship model, adopting the strategy is a response to immediate hiring challenges. At MCTS, that meant rethinking how to find and train

mechanics. Prior to rolling out its apprenticeship program, MCTS was having difficulties recruiting mechanics with the highly specific skill set required for diesel buses.

“You could be a very good mechanic, but you’ve never worked on a diesel bus,” said Ben Stark, MCTS chief human resource officer. “Those individuals are very, very hard to find. The best way to find these individuals is just to train ones that we already have here.”

Apprenticeship differs from other talent attraction and development models in that employers don’t need to wait for the job seeker to graduate from college or a training course to recruit them. Instead, they’re recruiting someone who is willing to work and learn at the same time, which in turn widens the pool of candidates, said David Polk, director of DWD’s Bureau of Apprenticeship Standards.

While MCTS had long offered internal training, Stark said the apprenticeship model adds “several more layers of structure,” and creates a more defined path to more advanced positions.

In the mechanic apprenticeship, workers earn between roughly \$30 and \$35 per hour, depending on how far along in the program they are, and each trainer will receive an additional \$4 per hour above their current wages for their time invested in the apprentices. In the 14-month MCTS bus operator apprenticeship, apprentices earn \$25.74 per hour, with trainers receiving an additional \$2 per hour.

Apprentices split their time between classroom instruction and hands-on work, often spending most of their shifts alongside a mentor. Mentors, often through informal settings, help apprentices navigate both technical challenges and the realities of the job, which – particularly for operators – often means navigating an unpredictable schedule and dealing with passengers having mental health crises.

“Creating an environment of trust is most important,” said Mike Butler, Thomas’s mentor. “Once you have trust, we can both move forward and not worry about making mistakes. Not every question has an answer, and we go through a process together to try to find the answer.”

“If you don’t have anyone to talk to about it (with), you’re more than likely not going to stick around too long,” Stark said.

As the health care industry has grappled with a consistent supply-demand gap of qualified workers compared to critical positions, health care systems across Wisconsin are increasingly turning to apprenticeships to fill labor gaps.

UW Health began building its apprenticeship pipeline in 2018, becoming one of the first in the state to apply the model at scale in a health care setting. Since then, the Madison-based system has graduated more than 1,000 apprentices and steadily expanded programs across a wide range of clinical and technical roles.

“At the root of all of our decisions is a supply versus demand problem,” said Bridgett Willey, founder and director of Allied Health Education and Career Pathways at UW Health.

Before launching its first medical assistant apprenticeship, the region's technical colleges were graduating only 25 to 30 candidates annually, while Madison's major health systems like UW Health and SSM Health collectively needed around 200.

Today, UW Health alone trains more than 100 medical assistants each year through its apprenticeship program, while still hiring from traditional education channels. The system reports retention rates 22% higher than those of workers hired with prior training, along with stronger employee engagement.

Twelve of UW Health's 17 apprenticeship programs are state registered, including registered nurse, pharmacy technician, dental assistant, caregiver and surgical technologist. Its latest addition is an MRI technologist pathway, launched in late 2025.

Across all industries, occupations considered "apprentice-able" are those that are typically learned on the job but require complementary instruction. The structure of health care work makes it a natural fit for this model, industry leaders say.

UW Health's medical assistant program, for example, spans about 10 months and pays participants for a full 40-hour workweek while preparing them for national certification. Shorter pathways, like its four- to six-week nursing assistant tracks, address immediate needs, while longer programs – such as a four-year registered nurse apprenticeship – create career mobility for incumbent workers.

The minimum standard for a state registered apprenticeship is at least one year or 2,000 hours of paid on-the-job training and a minimum of 144 hours of contextual related instruction. If the rudimentary training for an occupation is much shorter than that training requirement, the state isn't going to stretch out the process just for the sake of creating a new program, said Polk, "We also want the occupation to lead to gainful employment."

Milwaukee-based Froedtert & the Medical College of Wisconsin has seen similar results as it expanded its own apprenticeship and earn-while-you-learn programs following the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I think anytime you're growing your own, there's a benefit," said Tami Martin, director of workforce development for Froedtert ThedaCare. "Individuals who understand the culture and feel invested in it will stay with you longer."

Froedtert's programs range from youth apprenticeships for high school students to accelerated clinical pathways and post-graduate fellowships. Its Medical Assistant Accelerated Pathway to Employment Training program compresses training into just 14 weeks, combining intensive classroom instruction with supervised clinical rotations while paying participants and covering tuition. The system also offers specialized training in radiology, nuclear medicine and administrative leadership, along with non-clinical apprenticeships in areas like maintenance.

For Froedtert, the model has also expanded access.

“Having the ability to earn while you learn has opened the door to new applicants and helped us reach more diverse communities,” Martin said. “The combination of classroom and real-world experience can also accelerate skill development. Being able to learn and apply and learn and apply helps some people pick up the skills quicker.”

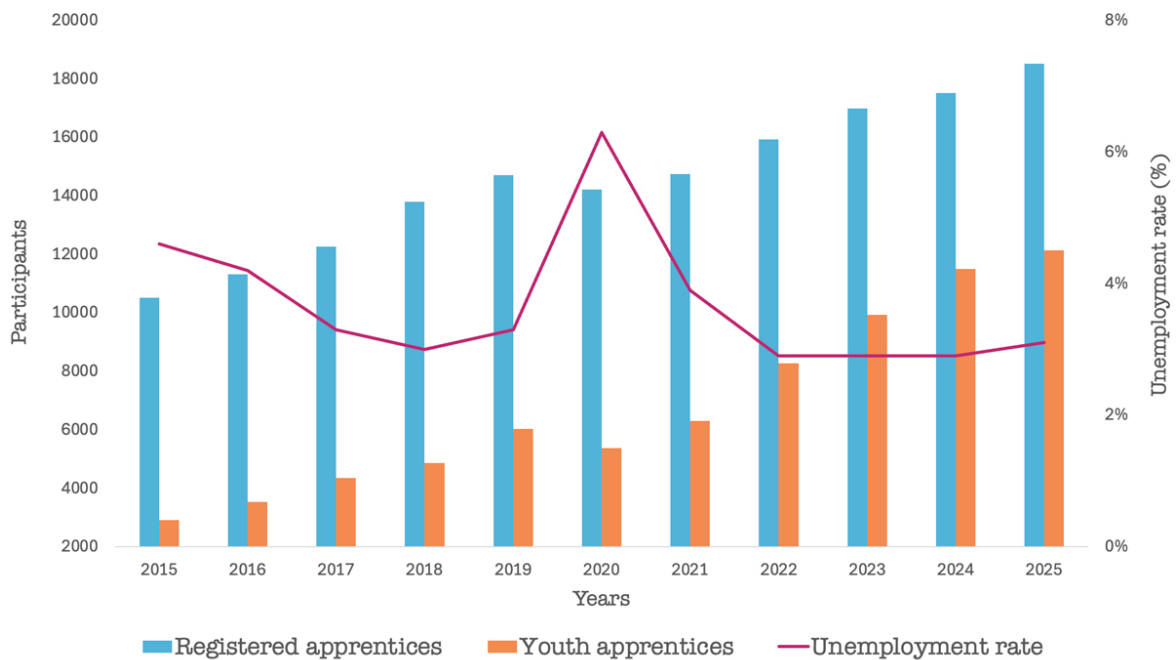
Still, building apprenticeship programs at scale requires coordination across education partners, internal departments and regulatory frameworks. Froedtert operates a mix of state-registered, federally registered and internal programs.

“Each one of them has different criteria and regulations,” Martin said.

While health care apprenticeship opportunities have gradually expanded since the state launched its first registered apprenticeship pathway in 2018, the industry still accounts for the smallest share of active registered apprentices. Meanwhile, health care is the most popular sector among youth apprentices.

There are currently no health care certified pre-apprenticeship training programs in Wisconsin, which, as pointed out by a Wisconsin Policy Forum report last year, highlights an opportunity for stronger connections between the three occupational pathways as demand for health care workers persists. Pre-apprenticeship programs offer training and connections to employers, but work is unpaid.

Statewide registered and youth apprenticeship participation versus unemployment



Source: DWD, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Retention a key benefit

While upskilling the workforce remains a key component of apprenticeship programming, retaining skilled workers is equally essential in closing the talent gap.

For Plymouth-based cheesemaker Sargento Foods, retention is sometimes defined as both keeping employees in the company as well as in the industry post-apprenticeship.

Sargento has a long history with apprenticeships, supporting a registered apprenticeship program for nearly 40 years and a youth apprenticeship program for the past 11. Its program offers employees technical maintenance and engineering training, and more recently, commercial driver's license training and certification.

Sargento currently has 20 maintenance apprentices completing a standard five-year program, four youth apprentices completing a nine-month program, and one CDL apprentice completing a one-year program. Thus far, the company has graduated more than 75 apprentices and 40 youth apprentices, many of which have remained with Sargento for some time after completing the program, according to Doug Pelletiere, executive vice president of human resources.

The company's ultimate goal is to upskill workers in the region – regardless if they remain with the company after completion. Almost all Sargento apprentices who complete the standard or youth apprenticeship programs are offered full-time jobs after completion, and the few who do not accept those positions often remain in the industry and in the region, Pelletiere said.

“We know that ultimately, it's a benefit to the community too,” he added. “It's good for all of Wisconsin if we as manufacturers can help each other out by training skilled labor in the Wisconsin market.”

Sussex-based marketing experience company Quad retains roughly 75% of its apprentices, said Nathan Butt, corp leader, continuous improvement, adult and youth apprenticeship at Quad.

The company currently has 60 apprentices participating in its four-year program which primarily trains employees to become industrial electricians, industrial mechanics, maintenance technicians, machinists, metal fabricators and welders.

A majority remain with the company thanks to the monetary and experience-based benefits during and after the program. Apprentices at Quad are offered wages 75%-80% of what a full-time employee would make in that position.

“(The pay incentive) is really encouraging and helps push you through the program,” said Sean Krivitz, an industrial electrician apprentice at Quad. “You can start to see the light towards the end as your wages increase 33% to 40% in a very short period of time.”

Krivitz will complete the program in August this year.

After operating its apprenticeship program for 25 years, Butt said most of Quad’s applicable departments are almost fully filled with graduates of the program.



Credit: Kenny YooApprentice Jenna Collins (right) with Scottfree Salons co-owner Emily Yance.

Building a program

The process of creating a new apprenticeship program starts with buy-in from the employer, which serves as the sole sponsor of the apprentice. DWD works with the employer to build out the on-the-job learning competencies and parse out the required classroom education, said Polk.

Some companies like Sargento and Quad are decades into their apprenticeship programming, though others are just beginning, bringing only one or two candidates on as the program evolves.

Milwaukee-based Scottfree Salons recently hired its first ever-registered apprentice, Jenna Collins, who is now roughly five months into her two-year cosmetology program.

Collins approached Scottfree co-owners Emily and Scott Yance with the idea after working at the salon for a year. The couple jumped at the opportunity after recognizing the return on investment once Collins completes the program.

“When you put so much money and time and energy into one person for that long, the expectation is that we’re in this together,” said Emily Yance.

Collins spends 32 hours a week at the salon and attends weekly classes at Moraine Park Technical College, where she learns practical techniques, safety and hygiene, and cosmetology-focused anatomy such as layers of the skin and hair, and facial structure.

In her remaining hours at the salon, Collins gets hands-on training from Yance and builds her clientele. Scottfree pays for Collins’ schooling as well as an hourly wage of \$15.87.

“From a financial and career perspective, it’s definitely more beneficial in the apprenticeship space (than it is in cosmetology school) because you’re learning while you’re building a clientele,” said Collins, who previously completed 700 hours of work at Paul Mitchell cosmetology school before joining Scottfree.

Though the Yances intend to grow the apprenticeship program, they are keeping in mind the financial and hourly limitations of their existing assistants and staffed stylists.

Employer recruitment is among the potential barriers DWD Secretary Amy Pechacek sees to continued growth and evolution of the state’s apprenticeship programs.

“We need more employer partners,” said Pechacek. “I would definitely tell employers who aren’t currently doing apprenticeship that they are falling behind their peers because their peers are curating their future workforce directly by bringing them on, by training them at their business in their policies and their procedures.”

DWD has made a concerted effort over the past few years to get the word out about apprenticeships through advertising campaigns, partnering with Milwaukee-based workforce development nonprofit WRTP | Big Step as the state’s largest pre-apprenticeship program provider, as well as hiring five “apprenticeship navigators,” to recruit employers and help prospective apprentices explore programs, meet requirements and connect with apprenticeship opportunities.

Another challenge that lies ahead is making sure current and new apprenticeship programs continue to keep up with rapid advancements in technology, including the widespread adoption of artificial intelligence.

“Every apprenticeship has an element now of where we are incorporating the AI technology skills through ongoing classroom (instruction) and reviews of the credentials, because it’s now coming in and assisting and augmenting every occupation basically that we have in industry,” said Pechacek.



Credit: QuadApprentice Sean Krivitz (right) with Nathan Butt, apprenticeship leader, at Quad’s West Allis plant.

Momentum in youth apprenticeships

Maintaining a long-term workforce strategy means starting early, with high school and even middle school, said Polk. To that end, Wisconsin was the first state in the nation to launch a youth apprenticeship program in 1991.

Like the registered apprenticeship program, youth apprenticeship enrollment has seen five consecutive years of record participation. Of the state’s 421 public school districts that have high schools, nearly all offered youth apprenticeships for the 2025-26 school year. What’s more, the

number of youth apprenticeship program participants who go on to become registered apprentices has grown in recent years, from 8.7% in 2021 to 15% in 2026, according to DWD.

Employers increasingly view youth apprenticeship as a way to connect with prospective workers before they leave high school and potentially leave the region or industry altogether. Manufacturers like Sargento and Quad are both leaning into their youth apprenticeship programs as an early pipeline-building strategy.

“Youth apprenticeships are the fastest growing type of apprenticeship, certainly in the state of Wisconsin and maybe nationally,” said Pelletiere of Sargento. “From a manufacturing standpoint, it’s a really important connection point for us with our communities.”

“I think the high schools have caught up and they’re bolstering their programs quite a bit,” said Butt of Quad. “There’s a lot more students available and a lot more career pathways.”

For Pewaukee-based VJS Construction Services, its youth apprenticeship program is experiencing little growth, which is more a reflection of union directive than it is a lack of interest from high school-aged apprentices, said Ryan Niegocki, manager of field operations at VJS.

Construction trade apprenticeships are sponsored by local trade committees of skilled workers and employers who are advisory to the Bureau of Apprenticeship Standards.

“The majority of (the union’s) energy is dedicated to post-graduate apprentices,” Niegocki said.

VJS’s youth apprenticeship program contributes only a small portion of the company’s total apprenticeship population. The remaining majority come from the company’s union partnerships, which sometimes provide workers on an as-needed basis to support individual projects.

If the company hires a youth apprentice, VJS will oversee the individual through the program until they are eligible to join the standard union program, at which point they will join with VJS as a program sponsor. The company currently sponsors 14 standard apprentices.



Credit: DWD/A youth apprentice at Luxemburg-Casco High School.

Expanding access to careers

Not all apprenticeship pathways in Wisconsin run through large institutions. Local nonprofit Milwaukee Community Crossroads uses the model as an entry point for young people who might otherwise be disconnected from traditional education or career tracks.

Known as YouthBuild, the program operates as a 10-month pre-apprenticeship that blends construction training with neighborhood development. Participants learn hands-on trade skills while building new single-family homes on vacant lots in Milwaukee neighborhoods such as Harambee, Lindsay Heights and Metcalfe Park.

“Everything we do is about opportunity, upward mobility,” said Jake Weiler, director of housing for Milwaukee Community Crossroads. “The idea is to get youth that are interested in trades chances to learn hands-on skills, while also building an affordable housing unit in the community at the same time.”

Homes constructed through the program are ultimately sold as affordable housing with two recently completed homes in Metcalfe Park slated for early childhood educators.

Participants gain experience in framing, insulation, finish carpentry and fixture installation, among other general carpentry skills.

Pre-apprentices work around 28 hours a week with an \$80 daily stipend, according to MCC.

The program is designed as a bridge into more formal apprenticeships in fields like carpentry, plumbing or electrical work. Along the way, participants are supported with stipends, case management and practical guidance that extends beyond the job site.

“It’s really mentorship with a hammer in our hand,” Weiler said. “We meet the members where they’re at. If they have needs around transportation, we can help. If they have needs around food, we can help. We can work with them to set them in a sustainable path forward.”

YouthBuild participant Johnathan Nicholson, 22, said that kind of support opened the door to a career he didn’t previously plan on.

“Before YouthBuild, I really didn’t have much planned, nothing ahead of myself,” Nicholson said. “(Now,) I’ll always have construction under my belt.”