



EXPLAINER

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Learning While Earning: The National Apprenticeship Act

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Introduction

Apprenticeships [serve](#) as a vital pathway to new careers and economic opportunities for working people. Congress may soon reauthorize the National Apprenticeship Act, which governs apprenticeships' standards and regulation. Through reauthorization, Congress can strengthen standards that protect workers in training, create pathways to high-quality jobs, and bolster efforts to develop a well-trained workforce that can meet employers' needs. This explainer breaks down the history and current Congressional landscape on apprenticeships.

What are Apprenticeships?

Apprenticeships are structured training programs that combine workplace learning with classroom instruction while providing a wage to trainees.

Apprenticeships are [common in industries](#) that require a high level of training and expertise, such as construction, manufacturing, healthcare, information technology, and more. Apprenticeships offer a valuable career pathway for individuals who prefer a mix of hands-on training and classroom instruction. Apprenticeships can also benefit employers facing workforce shortages in industries that require extensive training.

Apprenticeships across industries usually share a few [key characteristics](#), including:

- **On-the-Job Training:** Apprentices work alongside experienced professionals in a real workplace, such as the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) United We Heal Training Trust programs described in Apprenticeships in Action Sidebar 1.
- **Classroom Instruction:** Apprentices typically attend classes and training sessions.
- **Paid Work:** Apprentices are usually paid, although their wages may be lower than fully qualified workers'. As apprentices gain experience and skills, their pay should increase.
- **Certification:** Apprentices receive a recognized industry credential or certification after successfully completing their program. This demonstrates that

the apprentice has acquired the necessary skills and knowledge to work in the field.

- **Duration:** Apprenticeships' length can vary widely depending on the job and industry. Some apprenticeships may last a few months, while others can take several years.
- **Standards and Safety:** Apprenticeships include rigorous [standards](#) that protect trainees while they receive guidance and supervision to ensure their safety on the job.
- **Employment Opportunities:** Completing an apprenticeship program can offer job opportunities with wages that can support a family. [According to the Department of Labor \(DOL\)](#), "Ninety-three percent of apprentices who complete a Registered Apprenticeship retain employment, with an average annual salary of \$77,000."

Types of Apprenticeships

Registered vs. Non-Registered Apprenticeships

Registered apprenticeship programs (RAPs) must meet federal wage, training quality, and safety standards.

The DOL or a [State Apprenticeship Agency](#) approves RAPs. [Registered apprenticeships help workers](#) gain a lifetime earning advantage and help employers fill in-demand jobs. [In 2021](#), there were 600,000 active apprentices in nearly 27,000 RAPs.

Registered apprenticeships can be structured as [labor-management partnerships](#). These involve labor unions and employers acting jointly to improve the workplace beyond the framework of traditional collective bargaining. These partnerships are designed to benefit the employer and strengthen business output, while providing

APPRENTICESHIPS IN ACTION SIDEBAR 1 | UNITED WE HEAL BEHAVIORAL HEALTH APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAM

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 75 and the [United We Heal \(UWH\) Training Trust](#) brings together workers and behavioral health employers to collectively develop high-quality registered apprenticeships. Behavioral health employers struggle to hire and retain a well-trained and experienced workforce, and experience high turnover. The lack of advancement opportunities contributes to burnout and retention issues. The United We Heal Training Trust programs create training and development opportunities for workers and help employers address workforce shortages. In turn, clients experience continuity of care from trained staff.

The positions featured in the UWH Training Trust are a qualified mental health associate apprenticeship, a certified alcohol and drug counselor apprenticeship, and a certified medical assistant apprenticeship. The United We Heal Training Trust [received](#) \$900,000 in congressionally directed spending in the Fiscal Year 2023 Omnibus Appropriations bill for its ongoing work. These funds will be used to provide pre-apprenticeship education and training for 60 participants to enter the behavioral health field, and apprenticeship opportunities for 60 additional participants to become certified alcohol and drug counselors.

employees with a better experience in the workplace. Labor-management partnerships can administer RAPs.

Pre-Apprenticeship Programs

[Pre-apprenticeship programs](#) are training initiatives that equip individuals with foundational tools, knowledge, and practical experience in a specific trade or industry before a formal apprenticeship. These programs typically offer short-term training that covers essential concepts and includes hands-on learning, helping participants become competitive candidates for apprenticeship opportunities. Effective pre-apprenticeship programs include wraparound supportive services such as child care, transportation, physical and mental health care, equipment, and other basic needs, and create pathways to registered apprenticeship programs. When possible, pre-apprenticeship programs should matriculate into union-managed registered apprenticeship programs. An example of a pre-apprenticeship program can be found in Apprenticeships in Action Sidebar 2.

APPRENTICESHIPS IN ACTION SIDEBAR 2 | PRE-APPRENTICESHIPS IN BOSTON

In 2011, the Boston Building Trades Unions created the [Building Pathways](#) program to increase recruitment, retention, and advancement of under-represented groups in the union building trades, particularly women, people of color, and young adults. This six-week pre-apprenticeship training program [includes](#) “a basic understanding of construction math, tool recognition and use, measuring, and blueprint reading as well as hands-on experience at union apprenticeship programs and active construction sites.”

Since the initiative’s launch, 40 percent of participants have been women and 90 percent have been people of color. Nearly 80 percent of graduates have entered RAPs or industry-related employment, and the number of women apprentices in Massachusetts has increased by 200 percent, three times higher than the national average.

Youth Apprenticeship Programs

[Youth apprenticeships](#) often target high school students or recent high school graduates, typically ages 16–24. They offer young people a combination of classroom education and on-the-job training in a specific industry or trade, often resulting in industry-recognized certifications. Youth apprenticeships aim to help trainees transition directly into a career. Examples of youth apprenticeship programs can be found in [this report](#) from the Urban Institute, and in Apprenticeships in Action Sidebar 3.

APPRENTICESHIPS IN ACTION SIDEBAR 3 | NEW JERSEY HEALTH CARE EMPLOYERS DISTRICT 1199J – AFSCME TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT FUND

The New Jersey Health Care Employers District 1199J, AFSCME's Training and Development Fund, runs both youth apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs to recruit, teach, train, mentor, and place high school students into the healthcare field. Their programs include:

- **Youth Transitions to Work (YTTW) Program:** YTTW targets high school seniors with a passion for science and healthcare, and offers on-the-job training, classroom instruction, and work-readiness preparation. The program requires four to five months of intensive training and places the student in a part-time, full-time, or per-diem job within a hospital or medical care center. YTTW apprentices train to be certified nursing assistants (CNAs) or physical therapy aides.
- **Pre-Apprenticeship in Career Education (PACE) Certified Nursing Assistants (CNA):** The State of New Jersey awarded \$247,000 to the fund in March 2023 to support 40 pre-apprentices in its PACE CNA program. The PACE CNA pre-apprenticeship program provides industry-based training and classroom instruction. It is aimed at people who are disconnected from employment, training, and education. PACE-funded pre-apprenticeship programs prepare participants for placement into a registered apprenticeship program, a post-secondary college, an occupation-specific career training program, or to directly enter the workforce.
- **Newark Opportunity Youth Network (NOYN) Certified Nursing Assistants:** NOYN offers underserved young adults home health aide, certified medical assistant, EKG, and phlebotomy training. After the student completes the NOYN program, they come to 1199J to participate in the CNA training and be placed in an apprenticeship.

The Federal Government's Role in Promoting Apprenticeships

The federal government promotes apprenticeships by providing oversight, funding, policy support, and more. Below are key elements of the federal government's work in this area:

- **Establishing Standards and Guidelines:** The DOL sets [national](#) wage, health and safety, and training hours [standards and guidelines](#) for RAPs. These standards ensure consistency and quality in apprenticeships across industries and regions.
- **Funding and Grants:** DOL's Office of Apprenticeship (OA) provides funding and grants that help cover training costs, apprentices' wages, and administrative expenses for employers and instructors. For example, the [DOL's State Apprenticeship Expansion Formula grant](#) will provide \$85,000,000 over five years to states and territories "to increase their ability to serve, improve, and strategically expand the National Apprenticeship system."

- **Registration and Oversight:** Registered apprenticeships with the DOL help protect both apprentices and benefit employers. Research finds registered apprenticeships have [lower turnover and increase productivity](#). Employers earn back [\\$1.44 for every \\$1.00 dollar invested](#) in RAPs.
- **Promotion and Awareness:** Federal agencies actively promote apprenticeships through marketing campaigns, outreach efforts, and partnerships with industry associations, educational institutions, and employers.
- **Policy Development:** The OA develops and implements policies that support apprenticeship growth and effectiveness. This may involve [initiatives to expand apprenticeships](#) into new industries, streamline regulatory processes, and encourage employer participation.
- **Workforce Development Programs:** The [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act \(WIOA\)](#) is the primary federal legislation governing the public workforce system. WIOA funding can support the development of registered apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs. It can also fund support services like child care and transportation assistance that make apprenticeships more accessible.
- **Industry Partnerships:** Federal agencies, such as the DOL, can help facilitate partnerships between industry stakeholders, unions, educational institutions, and employers. These partnerships help identify education and training opportunities and develop apprenticeship programs that address industries' specific needs.
- **Data Collection and Research:** The federal government collects data and conducts research to assess apprenticeships' impact on workforce development, economic growth, and employment outcomes. The [DOL provides statistics](#) regarding apprenticeship demographics, including race, gender, veteran status, age, disability, industry, union status, and more.
- **Increasing access for women and people of color:** The federal government has sought to expand access to apprenticeships for under-represented populations, including women, people of color, and individuals with disabilities. [Equal Employment Opportunity in Apprenticeship](#) regulations prohibit discrimination and require RAPs to take proactive steps on affirmative action plans to provide equal opportunities to apprenticeships. These regulations must be properly implemented and enforced.

Options for Congress to Improve Apprenticeship Quality

High-quality apprenticeship programs are an opportunity to address equity in our workforce, especially for individuals with low incomes; Black, Indigenous, and Latinx workers; immigrants; youth; and those impacted by the criminal legal system. The National Apprenticeship Act (NAA) helps increase access to registered apprenticeships, pre-apprenticeships, and youth apprenticeships, particularly for individuals who face obstacles in accessing high-quality employment pathways.

However, inequities, discrimination, and barriers to entry prevent many people with low incomes, especially workers of color and women workers, from accessing and succeeding in registered apprenticeship programs.

Congress should invest in high-quality pre-apprenticeship and registered apprenticeship programs that target women and people of color. In Fiscal Year 2023, women were under-represented in registered apprenticeship programs, comprising only [14 percent of active apprentices](#). Additionally, just [20 percent of active apprentices](#) were people of color, while [13 percent were Black](#).¹ Furthermore, Black apprentices have lower hourly wages [compared](#) to their white, Latinx, and Asian counterparts.² Women apprentices also [earn](#) about 25 percent less than their male counterparts. Apprentices of color and women should earn as much as their white male counterparts in comparable jobs.

Below are policy recommendations centered around recruiting and retaining more women and people of color in registered apprenticeships and ensuring wage parity. Congress should consider these recommendations for developing legislation on high-quality apprenticeship programs to reduce barriers to entry for underserved populations.

- **Increase enrollment for women and people of color into registered apprenticeship programs by establishing pre-apprenticeship programs.** Pre-apprenticeship programs can serve as bridges into registered apprenticeship programs for individuals who do not meet eligibility requirements. Whenever possible, pre-apprenticeship programs should matriculate into union-managed registered apprenticeship programs.
- **Provide wraparound support for people with low incomes, women, and people of color.** Some apprenticeships may impose barriers to entry for people with low incomes due to high costs of tools, books, and uniforms, and scheduling inflexibility, which can be especially challenging for parenting or commuting individuals. Scheduling barriers are particularly problematic for individuals on probation and parole or community supervision. High-quality apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs should provide wraparound support to cover the costs of supplies, child care, transportation, and related costs that pose barriers to entry, as well as flexible scheduling options.
- **Ensure that registered apprenticeship programs result in success.** Registered apprenticeship programs should lead to jobs with family-sustaining wages and benefits and provide career pathways, especially for individuals facing barriers to employment. This includes earning a portable, industry-recognized credential for an in-demand job. For example, [SEIU's Healthcare Career Advancement Program](#)

¹ Percentages noted are based on available data. However, apprenticeship participation data by race is more difficult to assess given inconsistent and incomplete reporting by apprenticeship programs and apprentices themselves.

² At the beginning and end of their registered apprenticeship program.

provides apprentices with an industry-recognized credential that they can utilize to obtain a job across similar occupations in the healthcare industry.

- **Partner with labor unions and worker organizations.** Apprenticeship programs should include joint labor-management partnerships. If not, programs should include partnerships with organizations representing workers and community-based organizations.
- **Incorporate worker voices in pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs.** Provide opportunities for apprentices to share feedback and concerns on safety, training, program expectations, curricula, etc. High-quality programs should be responsive to apprentices' needs to ensure they successfully complete their programs and are placed in high-quality jobs.
- **Establish robust data collection systems to measure training outcomes.** Collecting and reporting on training outcomes—including wages, benefits, job placements, and advancement opportunities with a focus on race, ethnicity, gender, and geography—can help determine the effectiveness of recruitment and apprenticeship training. Data reporting can also determine where inequities may occur and suggest where to strengthen it.

Status in Congress

In 1937, Congress passed the [National Apprenticeship Act \(NAA\)](#), establishing the Registered Apprenticeship Program. The law allows the DOL to issue regulations protecting apprentices' health, safety, and general welfare ([29 CFR Part 29](#)). It also prevents racial, ethnic, religious, age, and gender discrimination in apprenticeship programs ([29 CFR Part 30](#)).

Both the House of Representatives and the Senate have introduced legislation to reauthorize the NAA. House Education and the Workforce Committee Ranking Member Bobby Scott (D-VA-03) and Congressman Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA-01) introduced [H.R.2851, the National Apprenticeship Act of 2023](#). The committee has not considered the bill. In the Senate, Senators Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) have introduced [S.2122, the National Apprenticeship Act of 2023](#). The Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee [scheduled S.2122 for a markup](#) in July, but it was postponed and has yet to be rescheduled.

While it is not currently clear whether the House or Senate will consider legislation concerning the NAA this Congress, either of these bills or new legislation could serve as a vehicle to advance the policy recommendations described above.

Conclusion

Apprenticeships are a time-tested and proven method of workforce training and career advancement. They hold the potential to reshape the nation's workforce landscape. Congress now has the opportunity to update and strengthen apprenticeship programs to ensure they are accessible, equitable, and valuable for

apprentices and employers alike. By investing in quality apprenticeship programs, Congress can demonstrate its commitment to workforce development, economic growth, and equitable access to quality job opportunities.

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