



## **Policy Proposal: Jobs of National Priority**

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***At the same time that millions of Americans are searching for rewarding employment with a salary sufficient to care for a family, much of America faces a dire shortage of people able to work in critical roles. The government should do more to match talent with opportunity; specifically, we should establish Jobs of National Priority and incentivize people to pursue those careers. In the process, we'll uplift American workers, enhance the competitiveness of American businesses, and ensure key societal needs don't go unmet.***

### ***What's the problem?***

The United States has too few people filling critical roles across our economy.

Take electricians. We're already about 80,000 electricians short nationally and that number is expected to balloon to 300,000+ over the next decade. Almost 30% of union electricians are between the ages of 50 and 70, with ~20,000 retiring each year. Unlike in other industries, AI is actually creating a massive *additional* demand for human electricians. Major tech companies have cited lack of electrical talent as a threat to their work and to America's national infrastructure.

Electricians are far from the only profession in short supply. We need an estimated 550,000 new plumbers by as early as next year. We have tens of thousands fewer nurses than we need. The number of air traffic controllers has declined by 6% in the last decade even as the number of flights that rely on the air traffic control system has increased by 10%.

All these jobs are critical to our country; many also offer a path to financial well-being for practitioners. Going back to those electricians, salaries can reach \$200,000+ and have been increasing significantly faster than overall wages in the US.

### ***Why aren't people pursuing these professions?***

There is no one answer.



In the case of air traffic controllers, government shutdown-related hiring/training freezes, the pandemic, and low applicant success rates are all playing a factor. For nurses, a shortage of nursing programs and faculty have contributed to the shortage of nurses.

One key theme that has contributed to many of the shortages: high schools pushing students exclusively toward pursuing liberal arts college degrees. In 2012, a poll found that 94% of parents expected their child to attend college. While liberal arts universities and graduates are fantastic and serve an important role – I graduated from a liberal arts program – we’ve unfairly stigmatized and dissuaded young people from pursuing vocational programs.

### ***How do we fix the imbalance between what we have and what we need?***

First, we should acknowledge that “market forces” are already starting to play a role. Vocational programs have had significant upticks in enrollment, with trade-focused institutions seeing a 20% increase in students since the spring of 2020.

However, to close the remaining gaps, and keep them closed on an ongoing basis, the federal government should create a Jobs of National Priority program. These jobs, selected and updated by a bipartisan panel, would come with a specific set of benefits – for example, we might offer:

- Free education or at least expanded student loan forgiveness
- Tax incentives (e.g., people in these lines of work could be tax-exempt for a certain amount of time)
- Pension matching
- Better loan rates from the federal mortgage lenders (enabling people to buy homes close to where they work).

### ***What jobs would qualify today?***

Some for the panel to consider would include:

- First responders and law enforcement
- Teachers
- Primary care, rural, and ER physicians
- Nurses, community healthcare workers, and home health aides
- Electricians, plumbers, welders, and other construction/infrastructure workers

- Transit and infrastructure jobs like air traffic controllers and waste management personnel
- Sustainable economy jobs (solar, nuclear, energy efficiency, etc.).

***Anything else we should consider on this?***

Two last things to mention:

- We can and should consider these jobs when evaluating our immigration system – more talent-based visas could help bring people with these skills into the country and faster paths to citizenship/work permits could help incentivize them to come;
- Long-term we might look to other countries for examples of how to build national schools dedicated to these jobs – say a national nursing academy or national construction academy based on the French engineering school model.

***Every American deserves a good job – a job with a fair wage that can support a family, a job that is personally rewarding and contributes to the community, and a job that isn't at imminent risk of disappearing to either a foreign worker or AI. Meanwhile, America desperately needs to build more – more housing, more infrastructure, more renewable energy sources, and on and on. By steering people to where they are most needed, the government can ensure a better future for our workers, our communities, and our nation.***



Sources include:

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