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Building the Inland Waterways Workforce Starts with Awareness

FreightWeekSTL panel highlights innovative partnerships and real-world career pathways

[ST. LOUIS, MO/June 12, 2026] Expanding awareness of maritime careers, strengthening industry partnerships and increasing access to hands-on experiences are critical to building the next-generation workforce for America’s inland waterways, according to panelists at FreightWeekSTL 2026. The session explored how industry leaders, workforce initiatives and emerging professionals are working together to connect students and job seekers with meaningful career opportunities across the river system. The discussion featured Errin Howard, Executive Director of We Work the Waterways; Dawn Lopez, Vice President of Marketing and Public Relations for Associated Terminals and Turn Services; and Anthony Fleming, a diesel mechanic with Wepfer Marine. The panel was moderated by Mary Lamie, Executive Vice President of Multimodal Enterprises for Bi-State Development and head of the St. Louis Regional Freightway.

Howard discussed the industry’s primary workforce challenge. “One of the biggest challenges our industry faces isn’t opportunities, it’s the lack of awareness,” Howard said. She added that this lack of awareness is the reason We Work the Waterways was created. The organization’s mission is to help young people, along with educators, families, parents and career seekers understand the real career opportunities in the industry.

She highlighted the organization’s rapid growth as a standalone nonprofit and the increasing demand for programs that connect students with maritime careers through direct engagement and real-world experiences.

“We work with over 250 companies and organizations nationwide,” Howard said. “What they all know and realize is that this is bigger than just any one company. We are all working together for the future of our industry to keep our country moving.”

Howard explained that, as an industry, companies are not really going up against each other for that next workforce. “We are actually working against the other industries who are out there beating us to the classroom,” she said. That issue fuels her organization’s focus on working with a lot of community colleges and educators at higher levels who she said might be educating students for careers in welding or electrical or machinery, but they don’t understand that these career opportunities also exist in maritime. Howard also underscored the importance of helping students understand how inland waterways fit into the broader freight network.

“All of these modes of transportation actually work together and depend on one another,” she said. “It’s actually an intermodal system that all works together to keep our goods moving, supports manufacturing and agriculture and strengthens our economy.”

Lopez reinforced the need for collaboration across industry partners to build a stronger workforce pipeline, noting that a wide range of organizations – from barge companies and engineering firms to law firms and economic development agencies – are working together to address the challenge.

“It takes a village to make this all happen every day,” Lopez said. “We’re able to grow our numbers of partners because we all know the waterways are just so important to our national economy.”

She also pointed to awareness as the most pressing workforce issue facing the industry today. “So many young people, parents, counselors and educators do not know about the careers that we have available to them,” Lopez said. “We don’t realize that the inland waterways support careers in operations and engineering, logistics, diesel technology and so many more skilled trades.”

Lopez also emphasized the need to better communicate the nature of modern maritime careers and use language that resonates with younger generations. “These jobs involve sophisticated technology and diagnostics,” she said, noting they “are also resilient to the AI-driven future because they require hands-on expertise and critical thinking.”

She credited We Work the Waterways programs with helping students build confidence and discover new opportunities. Recalling feedback from a student who participated in a program, Lopez said the student noted it was the first time that an adult told him he mattered.

Providing a firsthand perspective, Fleming described how his introduction to the industry came through a We Work the Waterways job fair he attended in trade school. “We learned a lot about what the barges do, products they push and the connections the tug boat industry has,” Fleming said, adding that they push a lot more freight than other modes.

Now working as a diesel mechanic, he highlighted the wide range of responsibilities involved in his role and the skills he has developed on the job. He said day-to-day he does a lot of different things – from oil changes to checking for leaks - but essentially he is making sure the boat is safe, so the rest of the crew can do its job.

He discussed the impact of the programs offered by We Work the Waterways that connected him to Wepfer Marine. “I believe it’s very positive,” Fleming said. “A lot of things they have taught me here, I can take outside the job.” He added the skills he’s learned enable him to fix things at home since they taught him electrical, plumbing, HVAC and more.

Fleming also emphasized the long-term career potential available in the industry, highlighting the great benefits and how those in the industry are taken care of. He noted that, in 20 years, he sees himself moving up, still working in the industry and taking care of his family. And he encouraged others to explore career opportunities on the waterways. “If you are hands on and a knowledgeable person, this job is certainly for you,” Fleming said.

Closing the session, Lamie emphasized the importance of continued collaboration to strengthen the workforce pipeline and connect more individuals with opportunities across the inland waterways system. “There truly is no better time than now for individuals to consider a career in this exciting industry,” said Lamie.

FreightWeekSTL 2026 continues through June 12 and features a series of panels, interviews and tours exploring the infrastructure, innovation and workforce development initiatives shaping the future of freight movement. To learn more or view any of the session recordings, visit FreightWeekSTL.com.

About St. Louis Regional Freightway

Established as the St. Louis region’s authority for coordinating support for industrial businesses and the logistics infrastructure they depend on, the St. Louis Regional Freightway (the Freightway) provides site selection and business assistance to manufacturing, logistics and multimodal transportation companies and their service providers. As an enterprise of Bi-State Development, the Freightway partners with public sector and private industry businesses to advocate for infrastructure development that supports the movement of freight, leads initiatives to grow the region’s talent pool, and plays a critical role in marketing the region as a world-class manufacturing and distribution cluster within the City of St. Louis and seven adjacent counties in Missouri and Illinois. To learn more, visit TheFreightway.com.