PUBLIC WORKS SAFETY EQUIPMENT FUNDING

UNH T2 regularly hears from DPW Safety Officers, DPW Directors, and Road Agents asking what funding is available to help purchase safety equipment for our public works crews—things like trench boxes, helmets, chainsaw chaps, hearing protection, fall protection, and high-visibility PPE. We've gathered detail below to help explore that question, including:

- Why public works safety equipment funding is challenging
- What funding pathways do exist (and their limitations)
- Where public works has the strongest, most defensible options
- How UNH T2, as a university-based LTAP program, might be a partner to municipalities

This is not a "grant list." Instead, this document provides context and a possible strategy for obtaining new safety equipment in your municipality.

The Reality: There is no single "Public Works PPE Grant" that we can find.

Fire and police agencies generally have clearer, more direct pathways for equipment funding. Public works largely does not. There is very little publicly documented evidence that corporate foundation–funded tools or PPE are directly donated to, owned by, and routinely used by municipal DPW crews.

Fire and police	**Public works**
Abundant documentation	Sparse documentation
Dedicated funding streams	Indirect pathways
Clear eligibility	Benefits are often implied rather than explicit

The proof trail for DPW-specific benefit is weak in publicly available sources. This is not because the model is invalid. It is because public works is structurally invisible in most philanthropic reporting, which focuses on nonprofits, first responders, housing, or disaster recovery, and not routine infrastructure maintenance.

Despite these challenges, public works safety equipment may be funded through a mix of

- Municipal insurers and risk pools
- Utilities and damage-prevention partners
- Workforce and training partnerships
- Corporate and foundation programs (indirectly)
- Community and civic grants

These sources vary significantly in reliability, documentation, and ease of access. The key is understanding how these systems actually work and avoiding assumptions that equipment will be donated directly to DPW ownership.

How Most Corporate & Foundation Programs Actually Work

Most corporate and foundation programs that provide tools, PPE, and safety equipment are legally restricted to funding:

- 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations
- Schools, colleges, and CTE programs
- Workforce development organizations

They cannot award funds or equipment directly to municipal departments, and as a result, there are very few documented cases where equipment is donated outright to a DPW. In practice, when public works benefits from these programs, it is usually through partnerships, where:

- An eligible organization applies for and receives the funding
- Equipment is acquired for training, emergency response, or community use
- Public works crews participate as:
  - training hosts
  - operational partners
  - equipment users
  - or regional stewards

This approach does exist in practice, particularly in workforce training and emergency-response contexts, but it is under-documented and requires intentional agreements. Equipment does not automatically become DPW property.

1. Corporate & Tool Manufacturer Programs

Usually managed through nonprofits, schools, or workforce partners, these programs are often mentioned because they are visible and well-known, but they require careful framing.

Workforce Training Partnerships
This is where corporate programs may best intersect with public works. A structure could include:

- A college, university, or training center owns the equipment
- Equipment is purchased with grant or donated funds
- DPW serves as:
  - a training site
  - an operational partner
  - a real-world application environment

This is not “free PPE” specifically for DPW; it is shared safety infrastructure tied to education and workforce development. In this model, equipment *may,* depending on the partnership agreement, be used for training and for limited municipal work tied directly to that training.

Examples of Relevant Programs

Home Depot Foundation

https://corporate.homedepot.com/page/home-depot-foundation

- Funds skilled trades training, disaster recovery, and community resilience
- Tools and materials are often included through nonprofit partners
- Works through organizations such as Habitat for Humanity and Convoy of Hope

Home Depot – Path to Pro

https://corporate.homedepot.com/page/path-pro-our-commitment-skilled-trades

- Supports skilled trades training programs
- Tools, PPE, and equipment are commonly funded when tied to workforce pipelines

Lowe's Hometowns

https://corporate.lowes.com/our-responsibilities/lowes-hometowns

- Funds large community improvement projects
- Safety equipment may be included when part of a facility or readiness upgrade

Stanley Black & Decker – Empower Makers Global Impact Challenge

https://ir.stanleyblackanddecker.com/news-events/press-releases

- Grants to nonprofits and schools for construction/manufacturing workforce training
- Often includes donated tools and safety equipment

Milwaukee Tool – Skilled Trades Support

https://www.milwaukeetool.com/news

- Ongoing support for trade schools and apprenticeship programs
- Best accessed through education partners, not municipalities

Grainger Community Grants

https://www.grainger.com/content/community

- Community grants via nonprofits
- Eligible items often include PPE and safety equipment

ToolBank USA

ToolBank USA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit created and expanded with support from corporate donors such as Home Depot and Stanley Black & Decker. ToolBank USA maintains inventories of tools and equipment that have been funded by corporate and foundation partners, and in turn are loaned to nonprofits and community groups.

This model demonstrates corporate funding being directed through a non-profit down to the local level, positively impacting communities. Although the ToolBank USA model does not focus on DPW ownership or routine DPW use, it provides a structural precedent for shared equipment libraries that might benefit both DPW and citizens.

2. Municipal Insurers & Risk Pools

This is one of the strongest and perhaps most defensible pathways for public works safety equipment but may be the most overlooked source of PPE and safety gear. Municipal insurers and workers' compensation carriers are highly motivated to reduce injuries and claims and, in many states, support items including:

- Trench boxes and shoring systems
- Confined space entry equipment
- Fall protection harnesses and anchor systems
- High-visibility PPE
- Gas monitors and excavation safety tools
- Field communications equipment

This support may come in the form of:

- Safety grants
- Matching purchase programs
- Premium credits
- Pilot safety initiatives

DPW leaders should contact their insurer or risk pool and explicitly ask about any available safety equipment funding, matching or reimbursement programs, or public works-specific pilot opportunities.

3. Utilities & Damage-Prevention Partners

Utilities agencies may be a partner for accessing trench & excavation safety support, as they have a close focus on preventing trench collapses, utility strikes, and service outages, as well as general worker injury prevention.

Utility companies and utility associations in the United States have supported safety efforts in several documented ways, including funding or hosting safety training and outreach programs, participating in shared emergency or resilience equipment hubs for municipal utilities, and providing community safety grants that help agencies purchase critical equipment. For example, the Illinois Municipal Utilities Association received a federal resilience grant to establish a shared emergency equipment program for municipal utilities, and utilities such as Chesapeake Utilities operate hands-on safety training facilities focused on excavation, confined space, and emergency response practices. Utilities also routinely engage in safety education and damage-prevention outreach related to excavation and underground infrastructure. Collectively, these efforts demonstrate established pathways through which utilities support safety training, shared resources, and coordinated preparedness efforts that may be relevant to public works agencies.

Possible entry points include:

- National Utility Contractors Association – Trench Safety Stand Down
  https://nuca.com/trench-safety-stand-down/
- United Rentals – Trench Safety Stand Down
  https://www.unitedrentals.com/trench-safety-stand-down-week
- National Trench Safety
  https://www.ntsafety.com

Public works leadership may work through local Dig Safe councils, damage-prevention committees, or utility coordination meetings to pursue joint safety investments.

4. Community & Corporate Grants

Many corporate and civic funders support local safety and injury-prevention projects, typically through nonprofits or community foundations. These are often smaller but more flexible awards. Although these grants are rarely sufficient for large equipment, they may fill critical gaps,

For instance, the State Farm – Community Grants program provides $2,000–$10,000 grants to community foundations, rotary clubs, hospital foundations, and civic nonprofits for PPE kits, radios, or targeted safety upgrades.
https://www.statefarm.com/about-us/corporate-responsibility/community-grants

5. Emergency Management & Communications

Homeland security and emergency preparedness programs often fund equipment critical to field safety and emergency operations infrastructure, including radios and communication systems and interoperable equipment. In most cases, public works must be explicitly identified as a core emergency response partner to benefit. Public works leaders should coordinate with the local Emergency Management Director to ensure public works needs are included in regional planning and funding requests.

Where UNH T2 Might Help

As a university-based LTAP center, UNH T2 occupies a unique position that municipalities alone do not. UNH T2 could potentially act as a partner agency for grant applications, such as to serve as a grant applicant or co-applicant, partner with workforce programs or colleges, or host training-based safety initiatives. This can open doors that may otherwise be closed to municipalities.

UNH T2 could also explore acting as a “shared resource model” by growing our safety equipment library to loan out safety equipment (e.g., trench safety training props, fall protection kits, confined space equipment) to be used for equipment training as well as making it available regionally for demonstration or limited use.

This mirrors existing models such as our Bridge-in-a-Bag kits and other specialized equipment.

Key Takeaways for DPW Leaders

Although we've been unable to identify a "public works PPE grant," worker safety equipment funding does exist when approached strategically and with realistic expectations. Municipal insurers and risk pools are often the most reliable and efficient sources, with utilities sometimes playing a supporting role depending on local conditions and project alignment. Corporate and tool manufacturers typically do not fund municipalities directly; instead, their support is most commonly provided through nonprofits, schools, or workforce development organizations.

As a result, framing safety needs through training, workforce development, and real-world application is often the most defensible and successful approach. Public works is frequently underrepresented in these funding conversations not because the need is absent, but because departments are not included early in planning or partnership discussions. University-based partners such as UNH T2 can help bridge these eligibility, coordination, and framing gaps by serving as conveners, partners, or hosts for training-based safety initiatives.

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