



**STAFF THE
FRONT
LINES**

SOLUTIONS REPORT



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SOLVING THE PUBLIC STAFFING CRISIS

From July to September 2023, AFSCME's Staff the Front Lines campaign held 11 listening sessions in nine states around the U.S. so that AFSCME employers could hear directly from AFSCME members who staff the front lines and have personal experience with the ongoing staffing crisis in public service jobs. We heard from public service workers who do a wide range of jobs — librarians, corrections officers, social workers, 911 operators, registered nurses, certified nursing assistants (CNAs), highway workers, home care workers, child care providers, public benefits eligibility determination workers, park rangers, food service workers, electricians, school maintenance workers, public safety officers and more. Most work directly for states, local governments and other governmental employers, like K-12 schools and universities. Some work for private-sector employers, like hospitals and nursing homes, or in more complex arrangements, like home care workers who serve individual clients and are paid through state Medicaid programs.

AFSCME members who participated in these listening sessions shared their stories about the impact the hiring crisis is having on the public and public service workers, and offered their insights and ideas about how to solve it. Many of them did this while facing ongoing extra demands from their jobs. For example, one AFSCME member arranged to work a night shift, instead of her usual day shift at the nursing home where she is employed, so she could participate in the listening session. She came directly to the meeting after having worked from midnight to 8 a.m. Others joined despite already working long hours, with one participant typically working 80 or more hours each week as a 911 dispatcher and trainer for 911 new hires.



Listening Session Locations

- Albuquerque, N.M.
- Boston, Mass.
- Harrisburg, Penn.
- Hartford, Conn.
- Jersey City, N.J.
- Lansing, Mich.
- Los Angeles, Calif.
- Minneapolis, Minn.
- Philadelphia, Penn.
- Providence, R.I.
- San Diego, Calif.

The Staff the Front Lines listening sessions included a wide range of public service employers and community stakeholders who are committed to addressing the public service staffing crisis. Employers included states, counties, cities, municipalities, health care providers, K-12 schools, colleges and universities. Employers were represented by elected officials, such as governors, lieutenant governors, mayors, state legislative leaders, city council members and county officials. They were also represented by senior appointed and career officials, such as heads of state agencies, chief human resource officers and school chancellors. They shared their own experiences with the staffing crisis and their efforts to address it. Community stakeholders included faith institutions, training centers, workforce development organizations and others whose representatives shared their ideas for partnering with unions and public service employers to reach local communities with potential applicants for public service jobs.

This report summarizes key insights we gained from AFSCME members, their employers and community partners and organizes ideas for action within a solutions framework. The solutions framework lays out key areas for action in five different but interconnected categories of policies, practices and reforms we heard from members:

- Increasing compensation.
- Removing barriers and building pathways for hiring and retention.
- Addressing excessive workloads.
- Expanding workplace flexibility.
- Improving workplace safety.

KEY INSIGHTS

The listening sessions gave us valuable insights into the roots of the current crisis and its impact on workers and the public services they deliver, as well as how to chart a path forward. These cross-cutting ideas and themes, although not themselves solutions, provide critical context for what needs to be done.

- ***The long tail of the Great Recession:*** Although the Great Recession officially ended in June 2009, we are still paying the price for cuts made in response to it. The era of austerity it ushered in left many critical state and local government functions understaffed before the start of the COVID pandemic and meant governments were ill-prepared to respond to the pandemic and subsequently to compete in today's labor market.
- ***Public service at an inflection point:*** AFSCME members across the country described the impact of understaffing on themselves, their co-workers and the services they provide to the public. Multiple challenges have converged to create a staffing crisis, leaving AFSCME members overworked and the public underserved. Reforms and solutions that may have seemed impossible only a few years ago are necessary to resolve the staffing crisis.
- ***Vacancies don't tell the whole story:*** Efforts to normalize understaffing, after both the Great Recession and the pandemic, mean posted job vacancies are not the full measure of understaffing. Workers report that much of their work was understaffed before the pandemic, after deep cuts during and a glacially paced recovery from the Great Recession, as well as a failure to keep staffing levels up to meet the demands on government. Official government statistics bear this out. Today we have about 1.9 million fewer state and local government workers serving the public than if they had just kept up with overall population growth since the Great Recession.
- ***Workers are hurting:*** Prolonged understaffing is putting public service workers under stress and at risk, disrupting their personal lives. Workers in public safety and health care jobs often face mandated overtime. When they go to work, they don't know when they'll be allowed to go home, often facing 16-hour days and 60+ hour weeks over long stretches of time. That can make it difficult-to-impossible for parents to work in those jobs. Long stretches of overtime and overwork also put workers, like nurses, in professional jeopardy by increasing the risk of making a mistake that could affect a patient's wellbeing. Even if overtime isn't mandated, understaffing increases workloads, results in an unhappy public and increases stress levels.
- ***Unaddressed understaffing leads to more understaffing:*** The stress caused by understaffing and the disruption of workers' personal lives caused by excessive overtime has pushed many public service workers out the door, as they take other jobs with better, more predictable hours and competitive or better pay.
- ***Staffing crisis, not a worker shortage:*** "There aren't enough workers" and "Nobody wants to work" are tired phrases that certainly don't explain what's

going on with public service jobs. Take health care, where the stresses created by sometimes deliberate understaffing in hospitals drive new RNs, LPNs, CNAs and others to find more manageable ways to use their skills.

- ***Understaffing is a choice:*** Some point to the tight labor market to explain the difficulty public service employers are having keeping and hiring workers, but that ignores the role decision makers' prior choices have played in creating the current staffing crisis, like paying below-market rates and under-resourcing personnel departments. Employers focused on reducing vacancies, retaining workers and being more competitive in hiring are making real progress by improving pay, benefits and working conditions and rolling up their sleeves to improve how they go about bringing on new workers.
- ***A shared interest:*** Public service workers, their employers and the public have a shared interest in solving the public service staffing crisis. This shared interest is creating new opportunities to work together to find and implement win-win solutions. Workers can bring unique insight and actionable ideas to improve recruitment and retention. It's essential for employers to approach these challenges with a collaborative mindset prepared to utilize those valuable insights from workers.
- ***Jobs with purpose:*** Public service workers care a lot about serving the people in their communities. Whether it's taking care of patients, keeping a school clean, helping someone in need determine if they're eligible for food assistance, picking up the trash or maintaining state or local parks, the workers who do these jobs take pride in and derive purpose from serving their neighbors and communities. Many workers who go into public service want to make a career out of it.
- ***Yes, and:*** Many public service employers are focused on recruiting a new generation of public service workers from those who are early in their careers. That's important, especially as older generations phase out of their working careers, and many people in younger generations may not be familiar with many of the varied career opportunities and advantages of working in public service. Focusing just on early career workers, however, ignores the potential of other mid-career and even late-career workers, many of whom might be attracted to government employers' strong suits, including job stability and good benefits. For one state government, for example, more than two-in-five of its new hires were 40 years of age or older in Fiscal Year 2023.
- ***Nationwide problems. Local solutions:*** Governments and other public service employers are facing many of the same problems, but there may not be cookie cutter solutions. We heard again and again, for example, that it takes too long to hire a new government employee, making it difficult to compete with other employers. The causes of this shared problem, however, varied significantly from place to place. Understanding which solutions are needed requires an assessment of the facts on the ground and the local context and a committed partnership between workers and employers.



SOLUTIONS FRAMEWORK

The listening sessions allowed us to hear directly from AFSCME members, their employers and community stakeholders about solutions they have already implemented, what is and isn't working and what else needs to be done. In each place we visited, there was real energy and momentum around finding and trying solutions. They have already put in a lot of hard work, and much remains to be done.

This report summarizes keys areas for action that we learned about. Keeping in mind one of the insights we gained in these sessions — *nationwide problems, local solutions* — we have organized this as a solutions framework that can be used at the state and local level to identify ideas that are most relevant and adapt solutions to local needs and context. Based on what we've learned, we have organized these ideas into five areas:

- Increasing pay and benefits.
- Removing barriers and building pathways for hiring and retention.
- Addressing excessive workloads.
- Expanding workplace flexibility.
- Improving workplace safety.

These five areas are interconnected and overlapping in meaningful ways and all ultimately affect hiring and retention. For example, hiring processes that take too long contribute to understaffing and therefore can result in heavy workloads that push some incumbent workers to leave for less stressful work with a better work-life balance. Further, improved leave policies are a way to increase compensation but can also be seen as a form of workplace flexibility.



Increasing Pay & Benefits

WHY IT MATTERS

Compensation is the single most impactful factor in recruiting and retaining workers. Participants in every session identified low wages, or wages that have not kept up with market rates or even inflation, as a key challenge. While it isn't news that increasing compensation would help with staffing, AFSCME members and their employers also identified specific issues beyond across-the-board increases that would make their jobs more attractive. This included four broad areas for improvement including overall pay structure, short-term pay strategies, repairing some of the long-term deterioration in health and retirement benefits and identifying new benefits that will help with recruiting and retaining workers.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Getting Back to Market Pay Rates, or Better: Pay in many public service jobs has gotten out of sync with pay in the rest of the economy. In hard times, public service workers were asked for “shared sacrifice,” especially in response to the Great Recession. When the economic recovery came, however, it didn't always come with “shared prosperity” for public service workers. In one major city, for example, public service workers went nine years without a pay raise and are only now catching up through significant across-the-board collectively bargained raises and special adjustments in targeted occupations after the city struggled with a 21% vacancy rate. The kinds of tools that could be considered, in combination, include:

- **Structural Reset of All Pay Scales** — Listening session participants identified wage scales that have not kept pace with inflation as a key obstacle to recruitment. Where pay levels across the board have fallen below competitor employers, whether in the public or private sectors, employers can reset all pay scales. This could include across-the-board increases in all pay bands and at all steps. This could be based on in-depth, position-by-position pay studies, or a more general assessment of the extent to which an employer is paying below-

market rates. It could include an assessment of local labor market conditions that considers competition from other public and private employers, and the rising costs associated with housing and health care.

- **Targeted Pay Adjustments** — Some pay adjustments may be needed for targeted positions, especially those facing the highest levels of understaffing. Certain occupations, such as corrections, face significant recruitment and retention challenges that will require substantial increases in compensation. These, too, could be based on in-depth analyses to determine appropriate labor market rates, and could involve moving positions from one pay band to another and creating new pay bands.
- **Other Pay Adjustments** — More tailored changes could include eliminating lower steps that are no longer competitive while adding higher-paying steps to provide more growth opportunities, as well as moving incumbent employees up one or more pay steps. It also could include reducing the number of steps to provide for more rapid pay growth. Doing that could be especially appropriate if pay steps were added to pay bands as austerity measures, as some public service employers did in the wake of the great recession.

Bonuses & Other Short-Term Strategies for Competing: In addition to dealing with overall pay scales that don't pay market wages, some public service employers are challenged with competing in what Gov. Ned Lamont (D-Conn.) called a "wicked hot labor market." Tools that employers are using or considering include:

- **Recruitment and Retention Bonuses** — Lump sum cash payments can be an effective way to attract new workers or retain experienced employees in a hot labor market. These bonuses have been used by many public service employers for targeted jobs. For example, some employers are paying bonuses of thousands of dollars for correctional officers. In 2023, one hospital system offered nurses sign-on bonuses of almost \$100,000 in return for three-year commitments.
- **Referral Bonuses** — The best recruiters are often the public service workers already doing the job. Paying a bonus to workers for referring someone who is hired incentivizes and rewards workers for playing this important role and can be a cost-effective way to recruit. In 2022, Massachusetts started paying \$2,500 referral bonuses to executive branch employees for referred new hires who stayed at least nine months.
- **Flexibility to Offer Competitive Pay While Maintaining Internal Equity** — To compete in a hot labor market, some employers are giving hiring managers the flexibility to hire workers at higher pay levels on the pay scale. When doing this, it is important that existing employees doing the same jobs are not disadvantaged. One way to address this is to give incumbent public service workers with equal or greater experience equivalent pay raises when a new employee is hired in at a higher pay level to match market rates.
- **Longevity Pay** — COVID-19 pushed some senior and experienced public service workers to retire earlier than planned. The staffing crisis and hot labor



market have further led to others departing for more attractive opportunities, leaving public service employers confronted with both the immediate need for additional staffing and a loss of institutional knowledge and expertise. When experienced workers leave, there can be a big cost to public service employers and the public they serve because they take with them deep knowledge of the work they do and how to do it effectively in what can be complex organizations. Some employers pay regular longevity bonuses as a percentage of base pay or a flat amount based on length of service. Special bonuses or other rewards for hitting service milestones can help keep experienced public service workers.

Repairing and Improving Health & Retirement Benefits: State and local governments have long had a reputation for having superior benefits compared to other employers. They're vastly more likely than other employers to provide guaranteed defined benefit pensions that pay a guaranteed, monthly benefit for life and health benefits in retirement: Three-in-four state and local government worker participate in a traditional pension plan; just one-in-10 private-sector workers do. For health care, state and local government workers are significantly more likely than private-sector workers to be offered and take up coverage from their employer, and the premiums they pay for single and family coverage are likely to be lower. Ideologically driven cuts that began in the early years of this century and prolonged austerity drives, however, have eroded the health and retirement benefit advantages that some of these employers have held. These health and retirement benefits may be especially attractive to mid-career workers, who may comprise a disproportionate share of new hires in the public sector. For example, in 2022 the average age of new hires in New York state government was thirty-four. Many listening session participants reported that these cuts were hurting their employers' ability to compete for workers, particularly mid-to-late career applicants that may prioritize health and retirement benefits.

- **Restoring Pensions** — Employers that eliminated defined benefit pensions, such as Michigan, are now having trouble retaining experienced workers and competing with other government employers that still have them. Reopening pension plans that were closed or creating new ones to meet current needs can have a significant impact on both retaining and recruiting workers. The

city of San Diego recently reopened its pension plan for non-police employees following the resolution of litigation over its 2012 closure of the plan. The states of Michigan and Alaska are actively considering reopening pensions for some or all their employees.

- **Undoing Pensions Cuts** — Government employers that made significant cuts to benefits in the wake of the Great Recession (many of them did) are having similar problems competing for workers. Undoing some or all those changes can have significant positive impact on recruiting and retaining public service workers. One straightforward change that can help is eliminating lower benefit tiers that were created for new hires and giving those workers the same benefits as longer-tenured workers.
- **Making Health Care More Affordable** — Changes in health plan design that have increased workers' out-of-pocket costs, and requiring workers to pay more towards premiums have made public service employer plans look more like other employer plans. Public service employers can increase the appeal of their health benefits by focusing on improving affordability of premiums and out-of-pocket expenses. Small changes to health plans can also help with recruiting. For example, Massachusetts and Delaware are in the process of eliminating a 90-day waiting period during which new hires are required to pay the entire premium for health coverage. While outside the scope of the listening session discussions, health care prices — which have been the main driver of unaffordability — are uniquely within the influence of many public service worker's employers, especially state governments, and represent an opportunity for cooperation between public service workers and their employers in pursuing policy reforms.

New and Improved Benefits:

- **Child Care** — Lack of access to and the high cost of child care create high barriers for working people. This is especially true for frontline public service workers who do shift work in jobs that must be done 24 hours a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year, as well as for those who face mandatory overtime. Creating effective child care benefits could expand the pool of job candidates by drawing into the labor market people who don't currently have paid work or limit their paid employment because they cannot find affordable child care. Innovative thinking and a commitment to designing new solutions, such as on-the-job facilities or partnerships with home-based childcare providers, could benefit workers that have not historically had access to childcare benefits. Public service employers are in a unique position to tackle these issues as employers and policymakers. It must include a focus on growing the child care workforce, which is still below pre-pandemic levels nationally. Child care workers themselves face big challenges with fair and adequate pay and benefits, though promising new gains bargained by family child care providers in California for health and retirement benefits show real change is possible.

- **Other Supports for Caregivers** — Child care isn't the only caregiving demand on workers. Many public service workers have significant caregiving responsibilities for adults in their lives, including disabled adult children, spouses and parents. Providing additional benefits and support for these workers would put public service employers at the forefront of employers in meeting an emerging need and help keep and attract workers. In addition to providing paid leave to meet some of these needs, employers could add real value by giving their workers access to professional guidance and networks of providers to help them take care of their loved ones.
- **Student Loans** — Student loans incurred to get college degrees, certifications and other training have become bigger and bigger barriers to public service. Governmental public service employers are well positioned to take advantage of the federal Public Service Loan Forgiveness program to attract and retain workers, but they need to consider ways to increase awareness of it, especially when recruiting new hires. Employers should also consider more direct forms of student loan support, taking advantage of recent federal changes to either make direct loan payments for the employee or matching employee loan payments with retirement plan contributions.
- **Targeted Housing Assistance** – The cost of housing in expensive metropolitan areas is a significant hurdle to attracting workers at all income levels, but especially those in entry-level or low-wage occupations. Public service workers who can't afford to buy a home or rent housing within a reasonable commuting distance of their workplace will seek alternative work, regardless of other incentives. Listening session participants shared stories of co-workers facing three-hour daily commutes due to a lack of affordable housing options near their workplace. Some municipalities have experimented with housing assistance such as no-interest loans, grants for down-payments and housing subsidies.



AFSCME FRONT LINES



Removing Barriers and Building Pathways for Hiring and Retention

WHY IT MATTERS

After pay and benefits, the issue raised the most by AFSCME members and their employers was the unnecessary barriers to bringing people into public service quickly. As one city council member put it, the best job is the one that makes you an offer, after noting that the time it takes his city to hire workers was so long that most candidates had taken jobs *months* before the city got around to making an offer. Many also highlighted the role that existing training programs play in developing workers to do in-demand, skilled jobs for which public service employers are otherwise challenged to find qualified candidates. Some pointed to the need to provide on-the-job training, both for new hires and to keep skills up to date, as well as to help workers build and plan careers in public service.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Speeding up the Hiring Process: Public service workers are, understandably, held to higher standards. It is especially important to ensure they are being hired because they can do the job (and not because of politics) and their backgrounds qualify them to be public service workers, especially when working with vulnerable people and in sensitive positions. Too often, however, the processes built up around those essential standards get in the way of efficient hiring. Further, personnel departments in many cases are using outdated systems and approaches and themselves are understaffed, as they are also the victims of post-Great Recession cuts and austerity.

- **End-to-End Hiring Process Improvements** — While the higher standards public service employers are required to meet (and to which they *should* be

held) probably mean they will not be able to hire as fast as other employers, that doesn't mean they cannot substantially reduce the time it takes to hire new employees. More than any other issue discussed, needed changes depend on the unique details of each employer's hiring process and systems. Ideally, tackling this starts with a full understanding of an employer's hiring process and identifying all the points at which unneeded delays occur, but it can also be a series of steps that build on each other to shrink the time to hire. There is a wide range of potential improvements, including more frequent administration of civil service exams, faster grading and notification of results, shortened periods during which positions have to be posted, continuous posting of positions with frequent vacancies, faster processes for positions with especially high vacancy rates and much more.

- **Resourcing Hiring** — Personnel departments themselves may be understaffed and under-resourced. One employer noted that its personnel department had been “gutted” after the Great Recession and have never recovered. Short-term efforts to staff up personnel operations can be critical to solving the broader staffing crisis. Modernizing the systems used by state and local government personnel operations may also be an essential but intermediate step to improve hiring. Hiring managers may also need additional support from personnel departments to evaluate, interview and process candidates. Faced with high vacancy rates and overwhelmed by a need to get the work done, hiring managers can be a source of significant delays in the hiring process. As one state chief human resource officer noted, some hiring managers say they don't have time to interview job candidates.
- **Outreach, Outreach and More Outreach** — Lack of awareness of public service jobs — what those jobs are, how to find and apply for them, the benefits and opportunities they offer — could be one of the greatest barriers to solving the public service staffing crisis. Public service employers, unions and workers can



work together to overcome it through multifaceted, consistent and persistent efforts to reach potential candidates. Efforts could range from a nationwide campaign to promote public service jobs with the purpose to target local work to promote specific public service job opportunities. The Staff the Front Lines campaign included an AFSCME bus tour and co-branded hiring halls jointly hosted by public employers and AFSCME affiliates. The hiring events generated thousands of applications and significant press coverage for public service jobs, illustrating the benefits that more consistent outreach and promotion can have.

Training Opportunities and Creating Career Pathways: Providing training opportunities and building career pathways can be an essential way to bring in and keep workers.

- **Adequate Training & Support for New Hires** — One of the biggest challenges in keeping new hires is that they often are thrown into their new jobs without adequate preparation or training and left to fend for themselves or to be trained informally at the side of an experienced worker. In some jobs, especially those that are understaffed, too many new hires leave in a matter of weeks or months because they are not getting the support they need. Investing in structured training and support programs for new hires is critical to keeping them after an employer has invested substantial resources into bringing them in the door.
- **Ongoing Training to Keep up With Changes** — Public service workers can become frustrated with their work if they are not given the chance to improve their skills and keep them current with changes in technologies, laws and practices. Investing in workers by providing continuous learning and training opportunities can keep them engaged and committed to public service.
- **Strategies for In-Demand Certifications and Qualifications** — Many public service employers are struggling to recruit workers with the formal certifications needed to do the job. Commercial driver's license (CDL) holders are especially in demand and hard to hire all over the country and desperately needed for many different jobs, including driving school buses, snowplows and sanitation trucks. Public service employers are looking to expand or develop programs to help workers get these kinds of certifications, including as ways to advance current employees into jobs with higher pay and responsibility. They can work with unions to develop and manage these programs.
- **Retaining Highly Qualified Workers** – Those employers that offer in-demand certifications, tuition assistance for license exams and on-the-job training can often face a “brain drain” once workers complete their training. Workers early in their career may enter public service to obtain a license or credential in a given field, only to seek more highly compensated or more-flexible employment in the private sector once the credential is in hand. Employers should evaluate incentives to retain those workers in the public sector.
- **Apprenticeships** — While not as prevalent as in some private-sector trades,

existing public service employer apprenticeship programs that provide a combination of formal classroom and on-the-job training to paid apprentices offer examples of how public service employers can develop workers for jobs that require skills that take substantial time to acquire. Expanding existing programs and creating new ones, including for jobs that traditionally have not used apprenticeships, offer long-term approaches to finding and keeping skilled workers.

- **Career Planning** — Public service offers a wide array of opportunities to serve and advance, whether it is moving up a career ladder in a single agency or moving to new agencies and governments in completely different jobs. Helping workers identify and chart their personal pathways is an important way to keep them engaged in public service.

Improving Flexibility and Work-Life Balance

WHY IT MATTERS

It is widely acknowledged that the pandemic meaningfully changed workers' expectations about workplace flexibility and the balance between work and their personal lives. Some workers who for the first time were permitted to work remotely saw immediate benefits to their well-being by eliminating substantial commute times (especially where the high cost of housing means public service workers are likely to live far from their jobs) and saving on transportation costs. Session participants also identified other quality-of-life improvements such as increased time with their families and reduced stress associated with commutes. Not all occupations, however, are suitable for telework, and session participants shared stories of front-line workers feeling resentment towards remote workers, particularly during the height of the pandemic. Beyond the pandemic effects, AFSCME members noted that many early career workers are no longer willing to put up with waiting years to have meaningful vacation leave, especially when some



private-sector employers offer unlimited leave from the start. In addition, we heard repeatedly that many early career workers are less willing than older generations to accept the impact that working in around-the-clock jobs, such as corrections, health care and other public safety roles, has on their personal lives. Trade-offs that may have been attractive to previous generations, such as the opportunity to earn substantial overtime pay in exchange for long shifts, may be less valuable to younger workers than a meaningful work-life balance.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Telework: The pandemic fast forwarded the development of telework and quickly proved it was feasible for many jobs that don't require in-person interactions every day. While many public service employers are still permitting telework for at least part of the work week, some have not adopted permanent telework policies and therefore do not offer them as a term of employment when hiring new workers. Other employers that can guarantee telework options in job offers enjoy a major advantage in hiring. Formalizing and making telework arrangements permanent would make public service employers more competitive in hiring. Session participants shared that managers are often reluctant to formalize telework arrangements due to personal biases and unfounded assumptions about in-person productivity compared to remote work. Public service employers may consider conducting a comprehensive assessment of in-person work requirements across occupations to identify those jobs that could be either partially or fully remote.

Shortened Work Week: A more transformational approach to addressing work-life balance is shortening the workweek without lowering weekly pay, for example, by reducing work hours from 40 to 32. Also known as a four-day workweek, this innovative approach could be an effective way to provide flexibility to workers in jobs that cannot be done remotely, as well as a counterintuitive solution to understaffing, especially in high-stress workplaces like correctional facilities, by attracting more workers with a benefit that is not widely available through other employers. In addition to international experiments with a four-day workweek, AFSCME members who work for San Juan County, Washington, recently negotiated what is believed to be a first-of-its kind 32-hour workweek in state and local government.

Updating Leave Policies: Many public service employer leave policies require workers to put in substantial years of service before they get significant vacation leave, though long-tenured workers earn meaningful annual leave. Some employers provide no paid leave in the first six months or year of work. Updating leave policies to give workers more leave early in their careers would make jobs more attractive and help compete with private-sector employers.

Expanding Paid Parental Leave: While public service employers generally were early movers in providing paid leave for parents of newborns and adopted children, expectations are changing as more employers—public and private—provide more extensive paid parental leave benefits. Expanding paid parental leave policies can make public service employers more competitive in hiring earlier career workers.

Addressing Workloads

WHY IT MATTERS

Excessive workloads have been a major driver of the staffing crisis in some workplaces, pushing long-time workers to leave and making it difficult to recruit and then retain new workers. In some jobs, workers have faced extensive mandatory overtime over long periods of time. In others, understaffing creates enormous stress and puts workers in professional jeopardy, making mistakes for which they will be blamed more likely. In some jobs, significant understaffing existed before the pandemic, the result of public service employers cutting back on jobs to save money. In many places, understaffing has become normalized, with employers still reducing staffing levels even when an adequate number of workers is available to work. In others, employers have not adapted their staffing levels to account for increased duties and responsibilities resulting from changes in laws or standards.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Safe Staffing Ratios: In direct care occupations, requiring employers to maintain minimum numbers of staff relative to the number of people being cared for can make workloads more manageable and incentivize employers to hire more workers. Importantly, meaningful, enforced staffing ratios could attract more workers to these jobs. This is especially relevant in settings like hospitals and nursing homes, where for example, certified nursing assistants can find themselves caring for 15, 20 or more resident on their own. Unless these standards are enforced, they are merely suggestions.

Caseload Standards: For some public service workers who do casework, setting limits on the number of cases per worker can similarly make the work more manageable and create concrete incentives for appropriate staffing. This is especially important for public service workers in child and adult protective services and those determining eligibility for public benefits like Unemployment Insurance, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid.

Overtime Limits: Federal, state and local labor laws generally do not limit the amount of time adults can work in any period of time, even though fatigue from long hours puts workers at risk for accidents and there is substantial research to show jobs that require lots of overtime over a long period of time have a negative impact on workers' health. Limiting the amount of overtime an individual worker can put in could help protect workers against these negative effects and indirectly incentivize employers to hire more workers.

Disincentives for Understaffing: Federal and state overtime laws create disincentive for understaffing in that they require extra pay — time and a half — for overtime work, but that has not been enough, with extreme overtime hurting many workers. Requiring by law or negotiating even higher overtime pay rates would create an added financial incentive and maybe greater urgency to fix understaffing. It also would better compensate affected workers for the disruptions to their personal lives and impact on their health. In Oregon, AFSCME members working in certain

state specialized residential units for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities negotiated supplemental pay of \$18 per hour (on top of what was already owed) for workers covering shifts identified as extreme overtime shifts.

Getting to Adequate Staffing, Not Just Filling Vacancies: The normalization of understaffing over a decade or more means that simply filling today’s vacancies in budgeted positions does not mean staffing is adequate and workloads have been addressed. It requires a deliberate, concerted effort to assess how many workers it reasonably requires to safely deliver the services that have been promised to the public. For example, a 2023 analysis by AFSCME Council 3 (Maryland) of safe staffing levels for corrections officers within the Maryland Department of Corrections found that to staff the state’s correctional facilities safely, the Department needed to hire 2,731 officers on top of filling 686 vacancies.

Making Public Service Jobs Safer

WHY IT MATTERS

Many public service workers do jobs that can put them at personal risk. For example, in the week before we held our listening session in Hartford, five Connecticut state corrections officers were assaulted by inmates. In Albuquerque, session participants shared stories about sanitation workers working in extreme heat without regular access to cooling facilities. Left unaddressed, greater risks in these jobs make it harder to keep experienced workers and recruit new ones.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Adequate Staffing: Inadequate staffing is itself a safety issue. For example, in correctional facilities, insufficient staffing puts staff and inmates at greater risk of assault and worse. In hospitals and nursing homes, not having enough staff can put workers at greater risk of physical injury if not enough staff are available to lift a patient who is unable to move on their own.



Addressing Workplace Violence and Other Threats: Public service workers face specific threats to their safety and health in the workplace that make it harder to keep and recruit workers. It's not just workers in correctional facilities who face the threat of workplace violence. So do health care workers in hospitals, on ambulances and in public facing roles, such as those doing intake and eligibility work for public assistance benefits. State and local government highway workers have to deal with cars and trucks traveling unsafely in their workplaces. Requiring new protections against these hazards, whether through federal or state laws or in collective bargaining agreements, can help address these concerns and improve retention and recruitment. For example, the state of New York is conducting a pilot program that utilizes automated ticket enforcement at construction sites on state highways. Other states and municipalities are experimenting with targeted educational campaigns to motorists with unsafe driving records.

Confronting New Environmental Challenges In The Workplace: Climate change is re-shaping our world. Rising temperatures directly impact those that work outdoors; many public servants that work in sanitation, road maintenance, construction and other occupations face new risks and challenges associated with exposure to excessive heat. Session participants that work outdoors identified heat as a major retention challenge for new workers. Public employers must evaluate these new risks and take measures to mitigate them, such as guaranteeing regular access to climate-controlled environments, providing equipment and tools to alleviate symptoms of excessive heat exposure and a comprehensive update of policies and practices to account for the impact of climate change in outdoor workplaces.

OSHA State Plans Where They Don't Exist Now: State and local government workers in 22 states are not covered by federal Occupational Safety and Health Act protections. Instead, they are left with whatever is provided through state and local laws. Extending OSH Act coverage to these states would go a long way toward improving the safety of state and local public service jobs.





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1625 L Street, NW • Washington, DC 20036

Lee Saunders
President

Elissa McBride
Secretary-Treasurer



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