From the Frontlines

Insights from state and local leaders on the government staffing crisis.

JUNE 2024

About Work for America

Work for America aims to make public service a desirable and stable career path that uplifts families, communities and our country. Our strategy improves critical local services and restores trust in government by building a network of practitioners, developing recruitment and hiring solutions, and driving a national movement to mobilize Americans into government jobs.

Acknowledgments

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Local Government's Dilemma: A Disappearing Workforce

Today, **1 in 8 U.S. jobs are in state and local government**, representing **20.3 million Americans** delivering critical services that ensure our communities are safe, healthy and working for all[1].

These are the services Americans interact with everyday - when we drink a clean glass of tap water, drive down a well-paved road and send our kids off to school in the morning.

But a recent wave of retirements, coupled with a lack of young people entering the public sector, has created an unprecedented challenge – a disappearing workforce:

- 52% of public workers report considering leaving their jobs[2];
- 31% of government workers are eligible to retire by 2025[3];
- The number of applicants per public sector job has decreased 55% since 2019[4]; and
- Less than 7% of full-time civil service workers are under the age of 30, compared to 20% of the overall workforce[5].

1. U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics
2. Mission Square Research Institute
3. Partnership for Public Service
4. NEOGOV
5. Partnership for Public Service

As state and local workers leave, vital services we all depend on vanish. The impacts are felt nationwide, driving a self-perpetuating narrative of an inefficient government, a failing democracy and thousands of communities left behind:

- In Kansas City, MO, a shortage of 9-1-1 operators doubled the average hold times for emergencies, with life-threatening consequences[6].
- In Hanover, NH, the police department is operating at 50% capacity—and the city's water system is now managed by one single employee[7].
- In Phoenix, AZ, a shortage of city surveyors brought citywide construction to a halt[8].

These patterns create a vicious cycle where high vacancy rates lead to existing staff who are overworked and overburdened, thereby worsening service delivery and deteriorating trust in local government. This trend not only makes it difficult to recruit new employees into public sector roles, but it erodes public faith in government's ability to provide for every American.

With the country's 250th anniversary fast approaching, state and local staffing shortages have emerged as an unprecedented threat to the resilience of our country and our communities.

6. NPR
7. TIME
8. Anecdotal

Research Methodology

19

state & local leaders
representing:

780K

public sector workers

$533B

total budget

53.9M

constituents

Throughout Q2 2024, Work for America conducted 19 semi-structured, off-the-record stakeholder interviews with state and local government leaders working to address recruitment, hiring and retention challenges in communities nationwide.

Interviews covered a wide range of geographies, including cities, counties and states across the Northeast, South, Midwest, Southwest, and West Coast of the United States. We gathered urban, suburban and rural perspectives, including those from multiple densely populated states and counties, several mid-sized cities, and two smaller communities. Subjects included Mayors, City Managers, Chiefs of Staff, Chief People/Administrative Officers, Deputy Secretaries and Talent Acquisition Managers. They also held a range of political perspectives.

Collectively, these leaders represent jurisdictions with approximately **780,000 state and local employees**, **53.9 million constituents** and a combined annual budget of **$533 billion**.

All reported that they are facing a staffing crisis, but many did not have access to specific metrics like time-to-hire or citywide vacancy rates, making it difficult to quantify the problem in a consistent manner. Therefore, we employed a qualitative approach, with each interview following a consistent set of open-ended questions, allowing for narrative inquiry into participants' insights and experiences.

To maintain anonymity and foster candid discussions, the interviews were not recorded. Instead, detailed field notes were taken, which were later synthesized to inform this report. This purposive sampling method ensured that the data collected was both relevant and rich in detail, providing a grounded theory to inform Work for America's early program strategy.

From the Field:

What State and Local Leaders are Grappling With

Our interviews revealed several recurring challenges that impede effective recruitment, hiring, and retention of public sector talent. This section highlights the specific hurdles that are top of mind for leaders managing these issues day-to-day.

> "My wife works in healthcare, and when she needs to hire, she calls their internal recruiters, who give her candidates and schedule the interviews for her. An internal recruiter?! Government doesn't have that."

> "We balance on our pinky what the private sector has massive teams to do."

> "Recruitment is always ad hoc - in general, it's a real gap and a real need. We need templates or resources on where to post, how to post, how to push your hiring, and how to make these jobs more desirable."

Top 5 Recruitment Challenges

1. Lack of Recruitment Infrastructure

- Many government agencies lack a centralized and standardized approach to recruitment. Unlike the private sector, where dedicated in-house recruiters and HR teams often manage the hiring process, government agencies have limited (and sometimes no) recruitment resources.

- More than one interviewee noted that when hiring for a new role, they have to write every job description from scratch and decide where to post it and how to promote it - without any centralized guidance.

- Several noted a need for clear templates and guidelines on how, when, and where to post jobs to reach qualified candidates and streamline the process, especially because hiring managers are often responsible for many (and sometimes all) of those functions.

> **"People don't know what government does - particularly the younger generation. We don't have a strong employment brand."**

> **"We need to change the narrative on a nationwide level. People look at government and see some form of evil - too big, wasteful, slow, inequitable. Those things can all be true, but there is a core piece of government which is a net good thing and can make you feel really good about contributing to your community."**

2. Limited Marketing and Brand Identity

- Many interviewees note that government agencies often do not have a strong employer brand, making it difficult to attract candidates in a competitive job market. While most felt this was a top need for recruitment and hiring purposes, few felt that they had the tools - or more importantly, the bandwidth - to properly address this issue.

- While some cities have tested local marketing campaigns that highlight the benefits of government work, many cities and states have struggled to find effective channels for communicating to qualified jobseekers the rewards of working in the public sector.

- Crafting effective job narratives consistently came up as a challenge and point of focus. There is a stated need to create compelling job descriptions with messaging that explains why candidates should choose public sector roles, highlighting aspects such as job stability, benefits, and meaningful work. There is also a need to more succinctly (and with plain language) relay some of the basic job information that candidates are seeking (e.g. information on shift bidding).

- Implementing more effective job narratives requires bringing a significant number of stakeholders to the table, including union representatives in many cities and states.

"We have barely scratched the surface of being able to crosswalk how benefits work and explain the value of these jobs. We need to help people better understand what it means to be in government. We say MM17 and offer you a Step 1 - we don't tell them what that means."

3. Struggle to Convey the Full Value Proposition

- Compensation for technical and specialized jobs in the public sector (e.g. engineers, IT, lawyers, municipal finance) often lags behind the private sector, making it challenging to attract and retain talent. Low base salaries also came up frequently as a top issue for public sector unions.

- Several people we spoke with noted that some candidate concerns could be alleviated with better messaging about the wraparound benefits and more intangible rewards of government work. Government jobs often include a range of competitive advantages, such as retirement plans, job stability, work-life balance, access to childcare, and mission-driven work. Yet these benefits are not being consistently communicated throughout the recruitment and hiring process.

"There has been a massive surge in the way people value themselves and their time and how they want to work, and that's making it hard to hire."

4. Inflexibility

- Post-Covid, there is a growing demand across sectors for remote work and flexible job arrangements, especially among younger workers who tend to prioritize work-life balance over traditional retirement benefits.

- However, many government agencies struggle to accommodate these demands, especially when so many public sector roles require employees to be in person (e.g. sanitation workers, first responders). Several interviewees cited these challenges as an issue of workforce fairness and equity.

- Some cited a need for better data to demonstrate the feasibility and benefits of remote work in certain contexts and for specific job types so that they could make the case for increased flexibility.

> "Turnaround time for tests can be unbelievably long - with many on the list for 8 months. People want employment now, not in the future."

> "You hear about the civil service exam because you know someone who has done it, and they whisper you the tips and tricks to go through the process. Cops tend to have parents who were cops. We need to place a big focus on reaching more people."

5. Civil Service Constraints

- While designed to ensure merit-based hiring processes, the civil service system can be restrictive and slow, with long turnaround times for civil service exams and a complex hiring process.

- Oftentimes candidates will need to wait as long as a year to get off of a civil service list. This results in delays and frustration among potential candidates who seek immediate employment opportunities.

- Many governments also struggle to widely distribute information about exam dates and locations, making it difficult for candidates to discover or become aware of job opportunities.

- Any reforms to the civil service system require close coordination with public sector unions in most cities and states, where these are often union jobs.

"We lose top candidates all the time because the candidate assumes we didn't want them - by the time we reach back out they've found another job."

"Process is our biggest barrier - something horrible happened 17 years ago, so we put this step in the process, and now it's 35 steps long."

"The city has not always been data-driven, and now we're making a huge shift towards doing so. But helping employees understand how to use the data once they receive it is a big challenge."

Top 3 Hiring Process Challenges

1. Burdensome Processes

- Every single interviewee - from Alabama and Texas to Missouri, Massachusetts and Maryland - touched on the lengthy and complex hiring processes that often lead to candidate churn, with one citing the need for better "decision hygiene" to help streamline hiring functions.

- Many government hiring processes are not data-driven, and often involve lengthy procedural steps that lack a clear purpose and connection to desired outcomes. While some governments have begun tracking metrics like time-to-hire in an effort to speed up hiring processes, many lack the tools or systems needed to set and track key performance indicators.

- Background checks and other procedural delays further lengthen the hiring process, causing candidates to assume they have been overlooked and exit the process.

- Some cities have developed hiring playbooks to outline best practices and help managers navigate the process, but there is a clear need for comprehensive training for hiring managers to ensure they understand their roles and responsibilities. This includes knowing critical moments to push candidates through the pipeline (e.g. when about to make an offer) and addressing unnecessary procedural bottlenecks.

"We need the space to tell the younger generation what government does. We need to help applicants understand the hiring process and why it takes a little longer - but also why it's better."

2. Inefficient Technology

- Outdated and ineffective technology systems hinder the hiring process in many government agencies, a challenge that was raised in nearly every interview.

- The systems in place are burdensome for candidates (e.g. needing to manually input every individual job experience), leading to loss of potential candidates.

- Most of these technology systems are run by private companies (most commonly Neogov and iCims) that have large contracts with the cities and require a lot of time and resources to onboard/implement.

3. Insufficient Education & Communication

- Several interviewees stressed the importance of educating candidates on the hiring process and explaining why it takes longer in the public sector, with the goal of making them less likely to drop out of the process.

- There was also an emphasis placed on developing best practices for communicating with candidates throughout the process and making sure they understand what will be required of them at each point.

> "We have so many different age groups working for the city. We have people who grew up in a truly different time working with 18-year-olds. How can we help them communicate? How are other cities doing it? Let's not reinvent the wheel."

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> "We have burnt out employees - especially social work teams and health and human services. And it keeps getting worse the worse that it is."

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> "I cannot underscore the point enough - we have politicized everything."

Top 5 Retention Challenges

While the interviews focused primarily on recruitment and hiring, several critical retention issues arose:

1. Learning & Development
Opportunities for talent development and skills training are crucial, as many employees leave due to a lack of clear advancement paths or unmet training needs.

2. Generational Gaps
Addressing generational differences within the workforce is also important, as younger employees often have different expectations and work habits compared to older generations.

3. Retirements & Burnout
High turnover and an increase in retirements are significant concerns, with some places projecting up to a 50% turnover rate in the next five years, particularly in management positions. This issue is exacerbated by burnout, especially post-Covid.

4. Agency-Specific Issues
Retention challenges were often specific to particular agencies or departments, with prisons/corrections, first responders, nurses and 24-hour care roles coming up the most often.

5. Polarization
The politicization of key community serving roles (e.g. police, corrections, elections workers, teachers) and related harassment of public sector employees also came up as a key retention issue.

Some cities and states have tried interventions like retention bonuses, with limited success. Others have been able to move the needle with efforts to remove certain hiring requirements (e.g. lowering the hiring age and removing residency requirements), increasing compensation, and providing better training and support.

Ten Solutions Cities and States are Testing

Many of the practitioners we spoke to have already implemented creative solutions that could inform a broader framework for public sector recruitment and hiring. These solutions focus on improving processes, enhancing employer branding, leveraging technology, and creating supportive work environments. The below list provides a sense of the many interventions jurisdictions are testing and implementing; however, this list is not necessarily a set of policy priorities or recommendations from Work for America, but rather a menu of solutions that merit further study.

1. Centralizing the People Function

- The cities and states with the clearest vision and agenda around recruitment and hiring have centralized their efforts and appointed senior-level officials focused specifically on these challenges (e.g. a Chief People Officer).

- Those officials generally have a clear mandate from the highest levels of their administration and the support to move that agenda forward. By operating at a high-level, they are also able to navigate process and systems changes that are difficult to implement when focused solely on execution of HR tasks and functions.

- Centralization also allows those officials to track data holistically and then monitor and allocate resources to specific agencies based on relative need. It also allows them to connect with and learn from proven practices in the private sector.

2. Developing an "Employer of Choice" Brand

- Many governments have a stated goal and have taken steps to become the "employer of choice" in their region, by working to effectively relay the value proposition of government work when compared to the private sector.

- This work included commissioning compensation studies to better express the rewards of government work, including benefits, telework options, and the overall work experience.

"We've made a concerted effort from a communications and marketing perspective to help people better understand the value proposition of public service. Public service is not just lobbying for policy -- it's service delivery for the continuity of a consistent, safe, healthy life. It's water and wastewater, roads, economic development -- it's jobs."

3. Recruitment Infrastructure and Campaigns

- Local recruitment campaigns and the strategic use of platforms like LinkedIn, Indeed and Circa for lead generation have increased application numbers in some areas.

- In one state, hiring and deploying dedicated recruiters in each region has significantly improved local engagement and candidate attraction.

4. Revising Job Narratives

- Several cities and counties, including one in Arizona, have reworked job descriptions to include salary, hiring range, take-home pay and benefits contributions in order to help candidates understand the full value of public sector employment.

- One city engaged a user research firm to run focus groups where eligible jobseekers provided feedback on government job narratives. This provided a range of insights on the need for clear, compelling narratives without jargon or "codes," but also on the need for specific industry knowledge for specialized roles (e.g. certain roles wanted to see information about shift bidding on the job application before applying).

5. Expanding the Total Compensation Package

- While many expressed a need to better relay the full value proposition of government work in order to address concerns around low base compensation, several places have also found ways to expand total compensation packages in a competitive job market.

- This included actions like front-loading vacation and time off (rather than relying on an hourly accrual model), offering select signing bonuses, increasing parental leave and offering free counseling sessions.

- Several places were also in the process of conducting comprehensive compensation studies to be able to identify which roles face the biggest gap in compensation compared to the private sector.

- Two states have worked closely with public sector unions to implement pay increases, with the largest increases occurring in the immediate. One state also worked with the unions to allow certain employees to enter the workforce at a higher numerical level (which determines compensation package and seniority) based on their skills and experience.

- Some smaller cities and towns that struggle to hire senior talent have also begun exploring collaborations with neighboring towns to hire for shared regional positions, thus allowing those employees to make a slightly higher salary while providing services to multiple communities.

> **"I want to stop us from trying to wave magic wands when often what we need are little fixes - in our case, hiring managers and recruitment teams didn't know their roles and responsibilities."**

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> **"I had the team map out the entire hiring process and average time to hire. The goal was just getting to the point where they are able to articulate time to post the job and time to fill the job posting."**

6. Improving Hiring Processes

- Technocratic approaches to mapping out and improving hiring processes have been successful in several places, with the caveat that it takes significant time and human capital to do so. This includes efforts to decrease time-to-hire through better coordination and support for hiring managers.

- Many places have taken a look at the various requirements placed on individual roles to remove and amend unnecessary or burdensome requirements (e.g. changing residency requirements and lowering the minimum eligible age).

- Using the emergency state of hiring and staffing as its rationale, the State of New York has temporarily suspended civil service exams for everything but public safety roles. This has significantly increased the accessibility of state jobs, and they are coupling it with a marketing campaign to encourage New Yorkers to apply. The state is simultaneously implementing several process improvements for civil service applications that will be in effect when the civil service exam begins again.

> **"Jobs don't require certain experience, they require certain skills - if you can demonstrate that you should be able to enter the workforce."**

> **"It requires meeting with the people who actually do the work and getting input from frontline supervisors on how much it really matters to have a degree to operate this machinery."**

> **"Job fairs are bad, hiring days are great."**

7. Skills-Based Hiring

- Several states, including New York, Maryland, Pennsylvania and Colorado, have issued executive orders to lower barriers to entry for public sector roles by emphasizing skills required rather than formal education.

- However, the implementation process for these EOs is extremely labor intensive and has been slow moving in many places. The process involves evaluating individual positions to identify skills-based equivalents for academic requirements. It also requires partnership with unions in many instances where the jobs are union jobs.

8. Same-Day Hiring Initiatives

- Same-day hiring events have shown great success, particularly in roles like 9-1-1 call takers. These events streamline the hiring process by making contingent offers on the spot, significantly reducing the time-to-hire.

- Several cities have implemented different variations of same-day hiring programs, where applicants can apply, interview and accept an offer on the same day. While many efforts are too early to measure in terms of employee retention, there were several key learnings.

- Those cities that required "pre-work" (e.g. submitting an application, preparing forms, doing a phone screen) had much higher rates of success with same day hiring events than those who required no pre-application process (e.g. they simply hosted a "hiring hall" and advertised to all jobseekers with no pre-qualification process).

"We were struggling getting people into IT jobs, so we started an IT help desk apprenticeship. We take kids straight from high school - we piloted it with 5 students. They are enthusiastic, energetic students. They will get 4 promotions in 4 years, and it puts them on a career path."

9. Apprenticeships

- Programs that offer on-the-job training and clear career advancement paths are proving successful. Apprenticeship programs in IT and other fields provide structured growth opportunities, ensuring that participants can advance and earn higher wages over time.

- Some noted that these programs require close coordination with public sector unions, as apprenticeships often feed into union jobs.

10. Community College & University Partnerships

- Collaborations with educational institutions are providing pathways for students to transition into public sector roles in places across the country, including in several towns in Texas.

- Programs that offer high school diplomas, GEDs, and specialized training for fields like water and wastewater management are creating pipelines for future talent in places such as Arizona.

- Partnerships with universities for leadership programs and certifications have also proven effective.

These solutions represent a concerted effort by government agencies to modernize their recruitment and retention strategies, with the impacts and outcomes from many of these interventions still to be determined (and likely a place where many places would benefit from frameworks for monitoring and evaluation).

Gaps We Hope to Fill

Many critical needs and creative solutions were raised throughout our conversations with state and local practitioners. There were ample places where an outside organization could play a critical role in developing and implementing those solutions.

Several cities and states we spoke with have already accessed external resources like fellowship programs, grant-funded positions, and educational partnerships to address staffing challenges - to varying degrees of success. Two cities noted that while state and federal grants are often available, they come with significant administrative burden, particularly amidst staffing shortages. In general, cities found out about these opportunities by word-of-mouth, and no two cities were accessing the same set of resources, underscoring the need for a cohesive strategy to streamline and enhance support efforts.

The following pages highlight some of the potential ways an organization like Work for America could address staffing challenges. This is not a comprehensive list – these are simply ideas that merit and require further exploration.

"This is THE thing - the true pressing problem and one that feels like there aren't enough players in the space solving. It's a space where I feel like I don't have peers and there isn't an ecosystem."

"We need to be able to point to someone else. If Work for America says this is the model - then government will do it."

1. Ecosystem Building & a Field-Level Agenda

- Every city, county and state government is grappling with acute staffing challenges, but they are without a robust ecosystem dedicated to sharing resources and scaling solutions that work. Unlike the well-established civic tech community, there is no cohesive network or support system for those focused on local government staffing.

- Establishing a defined network of practitioners, in partnership with trade associations and organizations doing aligned work, would allow for the sharing of best practices and collaboration across different jurisdictions. It would also create the needed infrastructure to identify critical gaps and the tools needed to address them.

- Many interviews cited the need for a strong third-party voice around key interventions to help them make the case internally for recruitment and hiring resources. An organization focused on these issues could establish a framework for excellence in recruitment and hiring that could serve as a benchmark that other governments could follow.

- While some cities and states regularly track metrics such as vacancy rates and time-to-hire, many do not, and there was agreement that a field-level research agenda is needed.

- Asset mapping of existing programs preparing people for municipal jobs, such as those in municipal finance, police academies, and fire academies, would also help identify and fill gaps.

2. Specialized Marketing, Communications & Messaging Support

- Better articulation of the full value proposition of government work, including benefits and unique perks, career growth opportunities, and job stability, is essential. This could involve developing marketing campaigns, plain language job description templates, and programs to highlight the benefits and mission-driven work of the public sector.

- Developing or partnering with a tech platform to highlight job opportunities across state and local governments (e.g. "front door for government jobs") would significantly increase access to these roles. In the immediate, enhancing the search engine optimization (SEO) of state and local job boards to ensure they appear higher in search results would increase their accessibility and attractiveness to job seekers.

- Establishing an advertising campaign dedicated to recruitment for local government positions that could be adapted for individual cities, counties and states could help present the benefits of public sector jobs and increase applicants. By focusing on high-impact roles and measuring success based on conversions, this campaign could improve the marketing tools and systems available to governments.

- Ultimately this work could roll into a national campaign designed to change the narrative around government jobs and mobilize Americans into careers in the public sector.

> **"We want help, but what sometimes happens is that people come in wanting to help, and they provide white papers to the two people doing all this work. What we need are brass–tacks practical resources."**

3. Outside Recruitment & Hiring Resources

- A nonprofit recruiter specifically oriented around the hiring needs of local government could drive performance and fill critical roles. This entity could leverage outside funds to bolster recruitment efforts and develop some economies of scale.

- A hiring authority built as model legislation that works in any state could streamline the hiring process and make it more efficient across the country. This would involve creating standardized procedures that simplify recruitment while maintaining merit-based principles.

Finally, there was universal agreement that the staffing crisis makes it harder to solve the staffing crisis, and that any solutions should therefore prioritize practical, brass-tacks interventions rather than abstract innovations or impossible-to-reach goals.

By addressing these gaps, an outside organization could significantly enhance the ability of government agencies to recruit, hire, and retain top talent, thereby improving the effectiveness and efficiency of public service delivery.

Next Steps

This report highlights the critical staffing challenges faced by state and local governments and outlines the need for an independent third party to provide field-level organization.

Work For America will build on this work to partner with research organizations and a wide range of stakeholders to explore these challenges further and convene stakeholders to refine potential solutions. By developing pilot programs, building a community of practice, and engaging in continuous research and assessment, WFA can create effective, data-driven strategies to address the staffing crisis and enhance public service delivery nationwide.

WORK FOR AMERICA