

S T A T E O F T H E C I T I E S



Municipal workforce

The foundation of city services





From AWC's Statement of Policy on cities as public employers:

AWC recognizes the vital role of public sector employees in serving our communities. AWC supports cities' efforts to be responsible employers that provide a quality work environment, and that can attract and maintain a robust, highly qualified, and fairly compensated workforce throughout all economic cycles. Given that human resource-related expenses account for a substantial portion of municipal budgets, AWC supports cities having broad discretion to manage their workforces and establish sustainable approaches to managing related costs.



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Washington’s cities provide vital services for communities across the state. From public safety to economic development to infrastructure and beyond, residents in all our cities rely on the work of dedicated public employees.

Cities also play important roles as public employers committed to fair compensation and safety for all employees. In some communities, municipal governments are among the largest employers, and their employees play an outsized role in the community, providing crucial services, participating in the local economy, and caring for the basic infrastructure residents rely on.

Cities are a great place to work. They provide excellent benefits, stability, and a respectful work environment throughout a variety of disciplines. They also offer people the opportunity to serve their communities in meaningful ways.

The city workforce took a hit during the COVID-19 pandemic, and although it is rebounding, data shows that the pandemic exacerbated existing long-term workforce trends already facing cities, including:

- Rising costs
- Plateauing revenue
- Retiring workers
- Recruitment challenges

This report gives Washington cities an overview of their workforce now, where it might be heading, and information on cost drivers and other factors impacting our city workforces.

Combined, Washington’s 281 cities are the **6th largest employer** in the state with over 46,000 employees statewide.

Washington’s 10 largest employers

Rank	Organization	Number of WA employees
1	Amazon	90,000
2	Boeing	60,244
3	Microsoft	58,400
4	Joint Base Lewis-McChord	55,000
5	Univ. of Washington – Seattle	51,849
6	WA Cities (combined)	46,536
7	U.S. Navy Region NW	33,800
8	Albertsons/Safeway/Haggen	24,500
9	Walmart	23,000
10	Providence Swedish	22,771

Sources: Puget Sound Business Journal (2023)

1 City workforce needs and challenges

The changing demands for city services

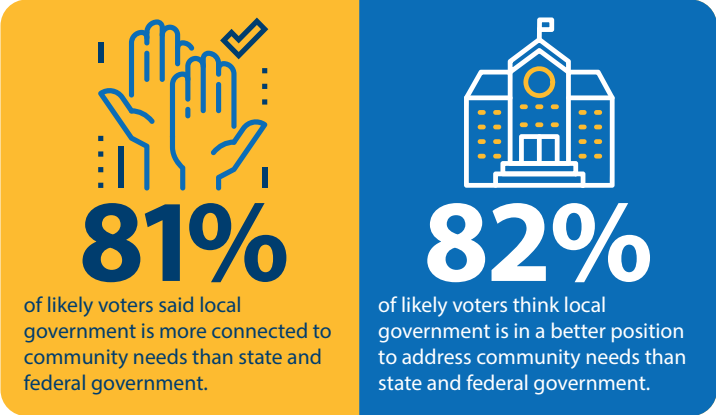
City governments are charged with a wide variety of important responsibilities to maintain and enhance their communities, and that role is continually evolving to meet the changing needs of residents. Voters trust local governments to be responsive to their needs.

In the past, cities put a lot of focus on providing their residents with traditional services like police, fire and emergency services, local transportation, parks and recreation, planning and growth management, and basic utilities. While those are still primary duties, the role of cities is ever-expanding to include more responsibilities for a broadening range of services.

City residents want their cities to take a more active role in areas like:

- Affordable housing, low-income housing, and homelessness response
- Behavioral health and addiction services
- Environmental and climate-related impacts
- Access to high-speed internet and affordable childcare
- Incorporating diversity, equity, inclusion (DEI), and belonging into city services and workforce

All of these demands on cities—both old and new—put more pressure on city staff. On top of the expansion of the role of cities, city populations continue to grow, with around 66% of Washington’s nearly 8 million people living in incorporated cities and towns in 2023. In fact, the vast majority of the state’s recent population growth has occurred in cities and towns.



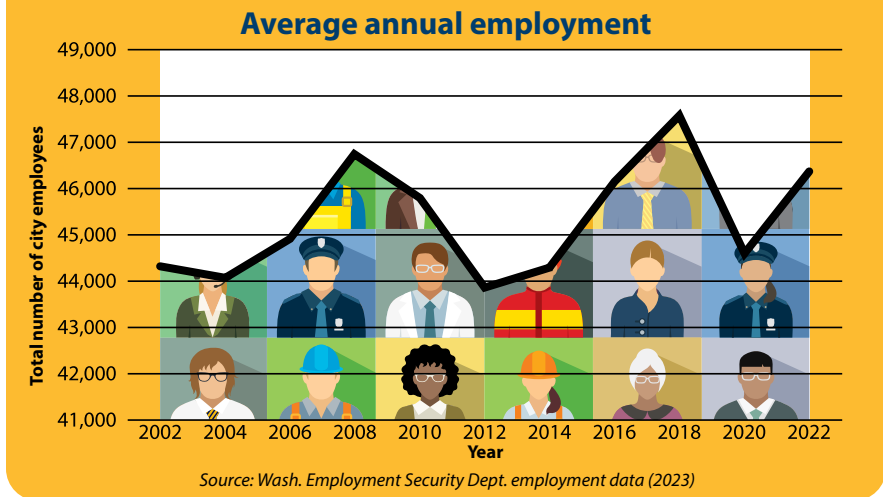
General city workforce trends
 In the last 20 years, hiring in Washington cities has largely reflected overall economic trends.

Source: WA Employment Security Dept. employment data (2023)

Each time employment drops, it takes cities years to recover.

City employment largely reflects overall economic trends

City employment reached peaks in 2009 and 2019, and each peak was followed by steep drop-offs during the Great Recession and COVID-19 pandemic.



Cities have only recovered about half of the workforce they lost during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the end of 2022, each city employee served 30 more residents than they did two decades earlier. Even if cities were to return to 2019 levels of staffing (the peak in the last 20 years), there would still only be one worker for every 107 residents.

Cities are doing more with less
For every one city staff:

In 2001:



80
residents served

In 2022:



110
residents served

Hardworking city employees keep cities running to serve the expanding needs of an ever-increasing number of residents. Given cities' expanding role and growing populations, over time, Washington's city staff are stretched more thinly, doing more work, and relying on fewer workers.

However, the recovery of city workforces after the pandemic has been rapid, as restrictions were lifted and federal support through the CARES Act and American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) helped local governments avoid the worst long-

term effects of the downturn. Other recent major federal investments, such as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act, could also lead to more hiring as funded projects get underway.

When these federal resources expire, however, and as cities run into arbitrary revenue limits built into state law (such as the 1% property tax cap)—along with the pressures of increased retirements, recruitment and retention difficulties, and working-age people remaining outside the workforce—there is a strong risk that city hiring could plateau.

2 City workforce cost drivers

Cities are responsible employers that work hard to do right by both the employees they depend on and the residents they serve. Even with a budget-conscious approach to human resources, workforce costs can result in huge expenses that cities have little control over.

Salaries are the largest and most obvious cost related to city workforces. Benefits are another major cost driver, including health care benefits, pensions, workers' compensation insurance, and other state-mandated benefits.

While cities have little to no control over the costs of health plans and state-mandated benefits like pensions, workers' compensation, unemployment insurance, and other benefits, they nevertheless bear those costs. For this reason, we offer a more detailed examination.

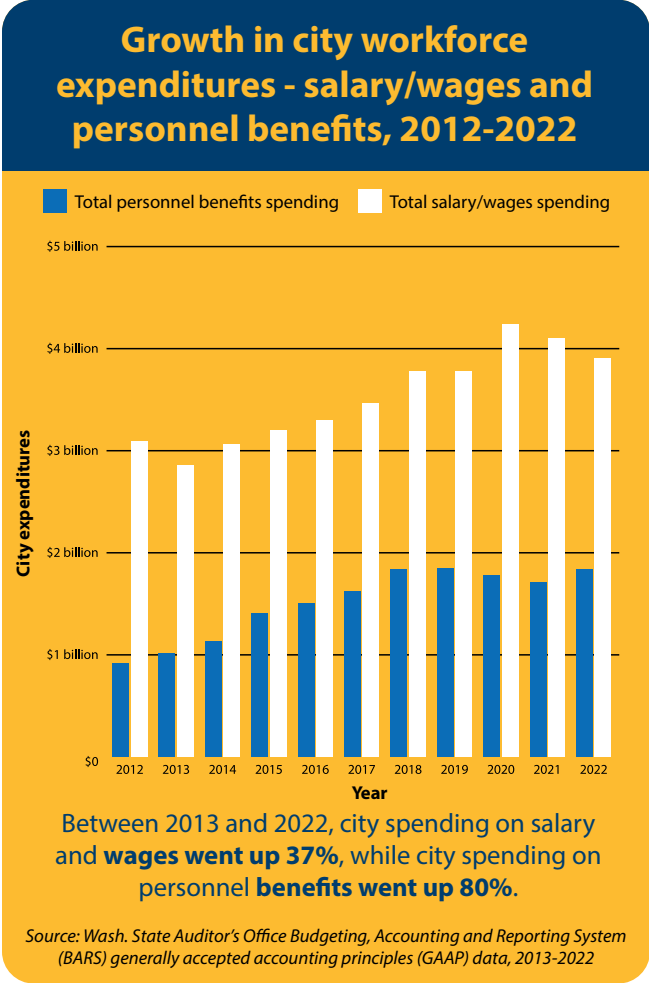
Health care benefits

Cities have made a commitment to their employees and have a strong history of providing high-quality health care benefits for their workers. When the federal Affordable Care Act (ACA) was passed into law in 2009, it effectively required employer-sponsored health care benefits for certain large employers. While the ACA impacted cities in terms of reporting requirements, it did not have a significant impact on the benefits required by many Washington cities, since most cities were already providing employer-sponsored benefits.

Cities have nonetheless been significantly impacted by the high cost of health care insurance, experiencing double-digit cost increases several times in recent years. Although those cost increases have recently stabilized, cities typically cover 100% of health insurance premiums for employees and a large portion of the cost for any dependents. Actual cost-sharing is often a subject of collective bargaining.

Pensions

Washington state has a strong pension system for public employees—known for professional management and a tradition of adequate funding, with limited exceptions. Most cities participate in the state's pension systems. A few, including the largest cities or those that opted out at incorporation, may participate in a different system, but still contribute to their employees' retirement.



Summary of state pension system plans impacting cities

Plan	Who participates	Effective plan dates	Vesting (years of service)	Normal retirement eligibility
Public Employees' Retirement System Plan 1 (PERS 1)	Most public employees eligible for plan participation, except those positions that qualify for LEOFF or PSERS	1947 to 1977 (Closed to new entrants)	5 years	Age 60 / 5 yrs service Age 55 / 25 yrs service Any age / 30 yrs service
Public Employees' Retirement System Plan 2 (PERS 2)		1977 to present	5 years	Age 65 / 5 yrs service
Public Employees' Retirement System Plan 3 (PERS 3)		2002 to present	10 years (5 under certain circumstances)	Age 65 / 10 yrs service Age 65 / 5 yrs service w/ at least 1 yr service after age 44
Law Enforcement Officers' and Firefighters' Plan 1 (LEOFF 1)	Firefighters, law enforcement officers, and public safety communicators (e.g., 911 operators)	1970 to 1977 (Closed to new entrants)	5 years	Age 50 / 5 yrs service
Law Enforcement Officers' and Firefighters' Plan 2 (LEOFF 2)		1977 to present	5 years	Age 53 / 5 yrs service
Public Safety Employees' Retirement System (PSERS)	Public safety employees not covered by LEOFF, corrections staff, limited authority peace officers, mental health staff	2006 to present	5 years	Age 65 / 5 yrs total service Age 60 / 10 yrs PSERS service

Source: Wash. Dept. of Retirement Systems (DRS) (2022)

The contribution rates for these pension plans are set by the Select Committee on Pension Policy and the Pension Funding Council, or the LEOFF 2 Board in the case of the LEOFF 2 plan, with final approval by the Legislature.

While cities have seats on these boards and committees that oversee rates, so do employees, the Legislature, and administrative agencies—meaning that the local government voice is one of many. Decisions about rates can have dramatic impacts on costs for cities in terms of the employer contribution.

An overview of the LEOFF 1 & 2 systems

In the 1960s, the state assembled various individual law enforcement and firefighter pension programs and took over responsibility for ensuring that they were fully funded, creating the LEOFF system. As part of this deal, the state took on the pension system and local employers took on the obligation to fully fund retiree medical benefits. In 1977, the state created the LEOFF 2 system and closed the LEOFF 1 system to new employees. Unlike the other pension systems, the state pays a portion of the employer rate in the LEOFF 2 system. Local employers pay 30% and the state pays 20% of the rate.

In 2002, the LEOFF Plan 2 Board was created by voter initiative to oversee the plan and set rates and benefits. Employers have three seats on the 11-member board.

LEOFF 2 Rate History			
Effective Date	Member Rate	Employer Rate	State Rate
7/1/2021	8.53%	5.12%	3.41%
7/1/2019	8.59%	5.15%	3.44%
9/1/2009	8.46%	5.08%	3.38%
9/1/1999	5.87%	3.52%	2.35%

Source: LEOFF 2 Retirement Board, Contribution Rate History - LEOFF 2 Adopted Rates

Workers' compensation

In Washington, employers are required to participate in the state workers' compensation system and to provide workers' compensation coverage for injuries suffered on the job. Alternately, they can opt to be self-insured while still being governed by state requirements overseen by the Department of Labor & Industries (L&I).

PERS 1 Unfunded Actuarial Accrued Liability (UAAL)

The PERS 1 pension plan has long had an unfunded liability (insufficient funds to cover all obligations). Unlike PERS 2 and 3, PERS 1 was not designed for regular cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs), so when a new COLA is adopted, it adds to the unfunded liability for local governments. To address the unfunded liability, the 2009 Legislature established a "temporary" surcharge on PERS 2/3 employer contribution rates. By 2027 the surcharge is expected to drop to 0.50% (from 3.50%) and eventually to be phased out, though that will depend on how the Legislature funds future PERS 1 COLAs.

LEOFF 1 Retiree health benefits

An interesting bit of history that creates significant costs for some cities is the requirement to pay for all medically necessary health care costs for Law Enforcement Officers and Firefighters (LEOFF 1) pension plan members. It was part of a historical compromise on cost-sharing. The costs of these benefits are estimated at over **\$2.1 billion** for approximately **5,000 retirees**.

Source: Law Enforcement Officers' and Fire Fighters' Plan 1 Other Postemployment Benefits Actuarial Valuation Report, Office of the State Actuary (2022)

Workers' compensation insurance (also known as industrial insurance) provides wage replacement and medical benefits to workers injured on the job. Workers' compensation is no-fault insurance, which means in most cases your business cannot be sued when a work-related injury or illness occurs. Washington's workers' compensation system is funded by premiums from employers and workers as well as income from investments.

Workers' compensation rate increases	
Worker type	Three-year cumulative increase in rates, 2021-2024
City public works/parks	+15%
City office & administration	+21%
City/County law enforcement	+34%
City/County firefighters	+32%

Source: AWC Legislative Bulletin, L&I proposes new workers' comp rates for 2024, first responders see large increases (2023)

Most large cities are self-insured, while mid-size to small cities participate in the state system. The cost of workers' compensation claims has increased with the cost of medical services. The cost of providing time-loss payments to employees also increases as wages increase.

Some city jobs are particularly challenging because the nature of the work entails a higher risk of on-the-job injuries—especially for firefighters, law enforcement, and public works field staff. Those types of jobs have seen particularly high rate increases in recent years.

Additionally, the Legislature created a class of presumptive occupational diseases for first responders covered by workers' compensation, including certain cancers and heart conditions. In 2018, the Legislature added post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to the list of presumptive conditions. Early analysis shows a significant number of claims being filed, but more work is needed to determine trends. Data from the National League of Cities shows that Washington's PTSD claims since 2018 are far higher than many other states.

One way that cities try to control workers' compensation costs is to engage in worker safety and injury prevention programs, including training, to keep employees safe on the job.

AWC Employee Benefit Trust

AWC has been a provider of employee health benefits for over 50 years. Currently, 280 cities and other local governments purchase health benefits for their employees and LEOFF 1 retirees through the Employee Benefit Trust. The Trust insures over 36,000 lives, making it one of the largest health benefit pools in the state.

Workers' Compensation Retrospective Rating Pools (Retro)

AWC provides workers' compensation services that help members make their workers' comp programs safer and more cost-effective. The Retro Pool includes similar entities in a retrospective rating pool, lowering claims costs through safety programs and claims management. Members share in the benefits of refunds on their workers' comp premiums and share the burden of higher costs when necessary. The Retro program's Safety Alliance provides claims and safety services without the risk/reward of retrospective rating.

3 Recruitment and retention at cities

Recruiting and retaining qualified city staff has been a growing concern over the last decade, especially in certain job categories like policing, engineering, and planning. Local government has often had a difficult time staying competitive with the private sector, especially during periods when the overall job market was strong.

Factors such as the push for more flexible or remote work options, changing jobs more frequently, increased retirements, shifting expectations of younger workers, and evolving technology are now impacting both private and public sector employment. The public sector has faced the compounding factor of some workers shying away from public service out of distrust for government. However, cities also have an opportunity with people seeking out meaningful public service-oriented careers where they can make a difference in their own communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic didn't so much upend city hiring and retention as accelerate existing trends. The pandemic saw hiring come to a standstill for a brief period, and while existing city employees were sometimes furloughed, some left city employment altogether to either care for loved ones at home or find other jobs. Some cities and job types also saw an uptick in retirements on top of the pre-existing high retirement rates impacting city workforces for the last decade.

Looking at city employee retention

Public employee retirement data from the Department of Retirement Systems (DRS) provides a picture of the extent to which cities are retaining public employees.

For the purposes of the discussion in this section, "separations" include people changing to a non-city job, dropping out of the workforce entirely, or being fired from city employment. "Nonvested separations" represent those leaving city employment in their early years on the job (that is, before they are fully vested in the retirement system), and "vested separations" mean those that leave at a mid- to late-career point.

Specifically, the PERS and LEOFF 2 retirement systems capture most city employees working for city governments, city police, and city fire departments. According to DRS data analysts, an annual change of 5% or more in retirements, separations, or active members could be considered a "dramatic" or "significant" change.

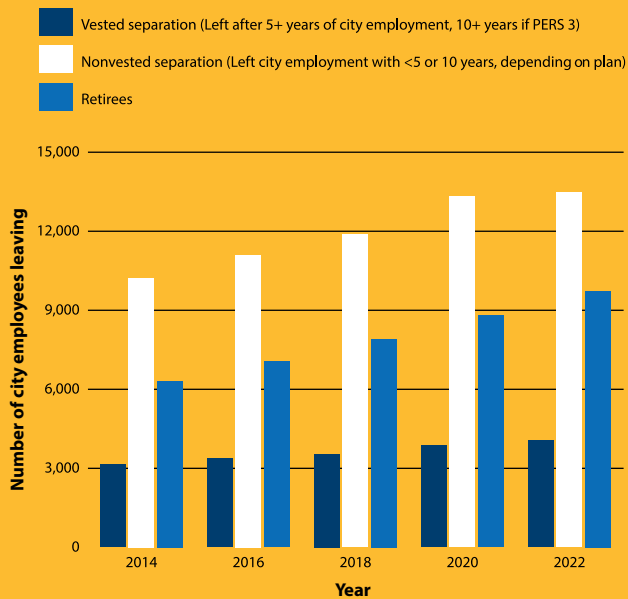
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to ensure your city workforce represents and reaches every corner of your community

DEI is far more than just a "feel good" exercise for cities. It is a critical component of building an effective government that reflects the people it is meant to serve and gains the buy-in needed to make long lasting solutions. Focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion is also an important tool for recruiting and retaining a quality workforce that feels valued and appreciated.

In the 2021 AWC City Conditions Survey, 87% of respondents reported that their city leadership supported diversity, equity, and inclusion conversations at the city level and 14% of cities had hired or assigned full-time staff to work on city DEI programs.

In 2023, 68% of respondents said they want AWC to offer more DEI-related trainings, and another 64% want AWC to provide resources on incorporating DEI in their cities. City DEI staff that want to join a statewide conversation on DEI in city workforces can contact AWC about joining our Equity Officer's Roundtable.

Retirements & separations - city non-uniformed employees



Source: Wash. Dept. of Retirement Systems, 2023

Non-uniformed city employees

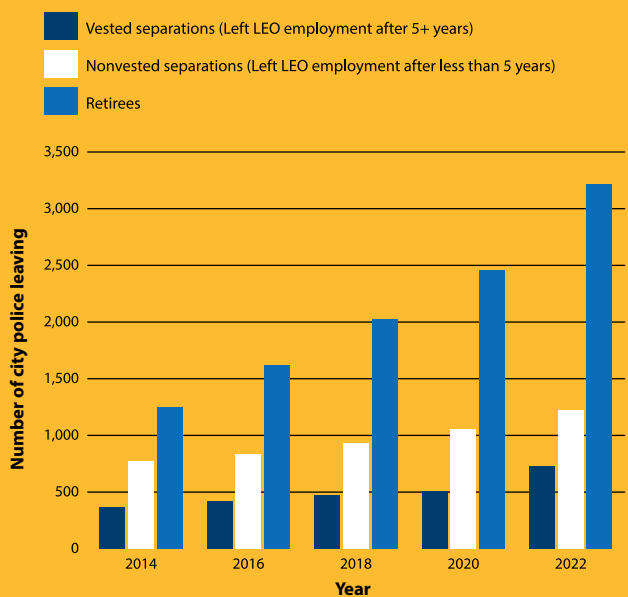
Most city employees in Washington are members of the PERS 2 or 3 retirement system. Over the last 10 years, the number of active PERS employees has remained relatively stable, with an obvious dip during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some key takeaways from the data are:

- Early-career separations are higher than for mid- to long-term employees.
- Mid-career separations are consistently less than 1/3 of the number of early-career terminations over the last decade.
- Retirements have increased at a consistently high rate of 5-6% per year throughout the last decade. Notably, there was no major spike during the pandemic, but a consistently high year-to-year retirement rate.
- No year saw a large increase in the number of active city employees.

The special case of city police and firefighters

The data for city police and firefighters tells a different story than that of other city employees. Both have seen much more noticeable differences in their retirements and retention trends. Not every city police officer or firefighter is a member of the LEOFF system. Our discussion below is based on LEOFF 2 data on city police and firefighters provided by the Department of Retirement Services.

Retirement is rising among city police.



Source: Wash. Dept. of Retirement Systems, 2023



Police officers

In 2022, cities employed 5,757 of the active police officers in LEOFF 2. The data supports anecdotal evidence that law enforcement staffing is stagnant, with decreasing numbers of active police coupled with increased retirements and officers leaving the profession.

Key takeaways:

- The number of active city police took a significant hit in 2020 and continues to trend downward.
- Early- and mid-career police officers left city police departments at a “dramatic” year-to-year rate, and the rate of mid-career officers leaving was often higher than for early-career officers, especially in 2021 and 2022.

- Retirements from city police departments have been consistently very high, averaging a “dramatic” increase of roughly 13% per year.
- 16% of the local government police will be eligible for retirement in the next few years. Another 22% of the local police workforce is already eligible for retirement.



Firefighters

In 2022, cities employed 4,349 of the active firefighters in LEOFF 2. The story here is different than for city police.

While the high retirement rate for firefighters is on par with police over the last decade, city fire departments do not appear to have the same recruitment and retention issues that city police departments have.

Key takeaways:

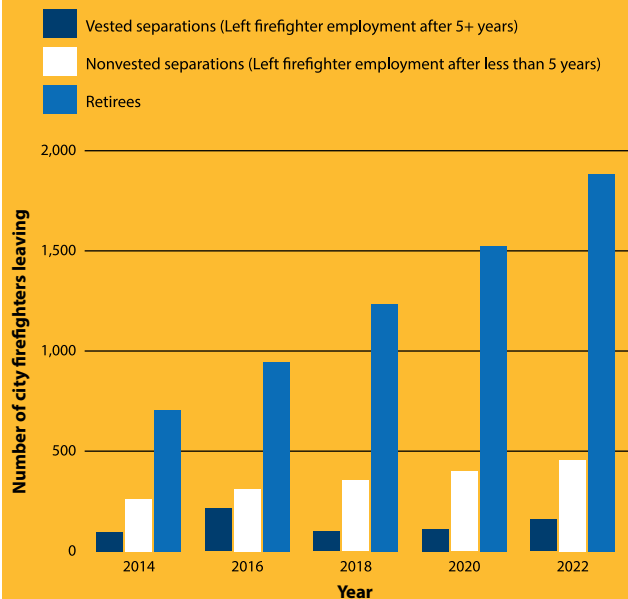
- The number of active city firefighters has been stable over the last 10 years, in contrast to the number of active city police, which has declined in recent years.
- A relatively small number of early and mid-career firefighters leave the city fire services. Over the past decade, 2022 saw the highest number of early-career firefighters leaving the service, at 455.
- While firefighters have seen high retirement rates, retention and recruitment rates have remained relatively stable over the last decade.

AWC City Conditions Survey results on retention

AWC’s annual City Conditions Survey shows that the departments facing the most difficulty recruiting new workers over the past several years have consistently been police, public works, general government, and community development. In fact, the 2023 survey shows that difficulties recruiting have increased from what cities reported about their recruitment efforts just a few years ago. However, some indicators like staff turnover appear to be coming down. In 2022, 47% of respondents reported higher-than-normal staff resignations and retirements compared to 2021. In 2023, that number dropped to 35% of respondents seeing higher turnover:

- 57% of large cities (50,000+ pop.) saw higher turnover.
- 38% of medium cities (5,000-50,000 pop.) saw higher turnover; and
- 25% of small cities (<5,000 pop.) saw higher turnover.

Retirement is rising among city firefighters.



Source: Wash. Dept. of Retirement Systems, 2023

66% of cities

in the City Conditions Survey reported that they were having trouble filling vacancies.

- **93% of large cities** (50,000+ population) say they had difficulty;
- **88% of medium cities** (5,000-50,000 population); and
- **32% of small cities and towns** (<5,000 population).



Source: AWC 2023 City Conditions Survey

AWC City Conditions Survey: More cities are reporting difficulty filling open positions, especially in certain departments

In 2021, 54% of respondents reported trouble filling vacancies. The top four most difficult departments were:

- Police (62%)
- Public Works (60%)
- General Government/Admin (35%)
- Community Development/Planning (31%)

Source: AWC 2021 City Conditions Survey

In 2023, 66% of respondents reported trouble filling vacancies. The same four departments remained the most difficult to staff up:

- Police (84%)
- Public Works (61%)
- General government/Admin (41%)
- Community development/Planning (39%)

Source: AWC 2023 City Conditions Survey

City recruitment data on the national level

National data on public sector recruitment is fairly consistent with what AWC has found locally for Washington's cities.

The State and Local Workforce—2023 Survey Findings report by MissionSquare Research Institute finds that police and engineers are among the hardest public sector jobs to recruit for nationally, along with corrections officers, health care workers, commercial equipment operators, and skilled trades. 70% of that survey's respondents reported getting fewer qualified applicants than they had positions to fill, especially in jobs that were listed as hard to fill.

NEOGOV's *The Quiet Crisis in 2023 – What Government Job Seekers Actually Want* found that governments across the country are struggling to find quality applicants for open jobs, reporting that:

- Between 2021 and 2022 there was a 20% increase in government job openings and a 15% decrease in the number of applicants per job;
- These and other factors combined resulted in a 55% decrease in the number of applicants per job from 2019; and
- Respondents also identified voluntary turnover (82%), retirements (54%), and lack of qualified candidates (50%) as factors driving the recent job openings at their jurisdictions.

Another recent report by Route Fifty examines a national survey of young adults (ages 18-36) and their attitudes towards government, including their feelings on working for state or local government. While nearly half of respondents were politically active, only 18% of respondents said they would want to work for local government at some point in their career, and only 38% of respondents even knew how to get a job in local government. The report suggests cities can make changes to operations and workplace culture to build a more attractive workplace for younger workers and get the word out to potential job candidates about how to apply.

The survey results point out the great need for local governments to improve their image with younger workers to attract the next generation of city employees. Far too many people entering their prime working years are missing out on the incredible opportunities offered by cities, as well as the chance to serve their communities.

4 Strategies for building your city workplace

Given what state and national statistics show, cities can work in a few ways to be more competitive in recruiting and building a quality workforce. Here are some resources that may be helpful.

[The Quiet Crisis in 2023 – What Government Job Seekers Actually Want](#)

This report by NEOGOV surveyed government job candidates to gain an understanding of what job seekers actually want and how governments can restructure their recruitment efforts by understanding that:

- Most candidates look to online job boards for openings;
- Benefits matter to candidates, especially those related to work/life balance;
- Candidates want a quick, communicative, and streamlined the hiring process; and
- Passive candidates, like strong prior candidates, can be a good place to actively recruit for new vacancies.

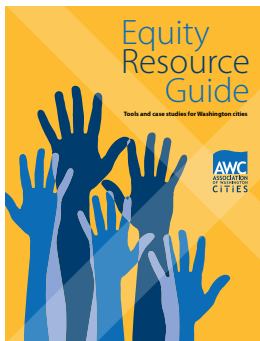


[5 Best Practices for Recruiting Top Talent Today](#)

Another NEOGOV report on recruitment highlights best practices for public sector employers to improve their ability to source quality candidates, such as:

- Marketing your city's story and building a brand as a quality employer;
- Actively sourcing quality candidates where you already know they are;
- Streamlining, accelerating, and clearly outlining the hiring process, as well as early and frequent communication with applicants;
- Using online job boards and other tools to manage candidate relationships; and
- Using data-supported decisions to improve your process.

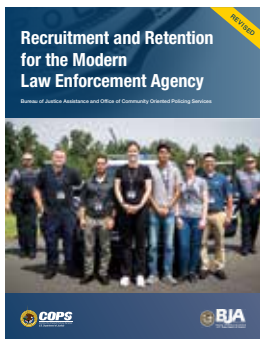




[AWC Equity Resource Guide](#)

AWC's guide on how cities can incorporate diversity, equity, and inclusion into their own affairs, using case studies from state and local governments around the country. Some workforce-related topics include:

- Building more diverse applicant pools;
- Targeting recruitment efforts at underrepresented communities
- Removing unnecessary job qualifications from job descriptions, and regularly reviewing education and experience requirements in descriptions;
- Anonymizing applications and maintaining a transparent hiring process; and
- Providing unconscious bias training for HR and hiring staff.



[Recruitment and Retention for the Modern Law Enforcement Agency](#)

A new guide from the U.S. Department of Justice makes recommendations on ways to address recruiting and retention challenges for law enforcement. Recommendations include:

- Modernizing and streamlining hiring practices and processes;
- Focusing training on day-to-day duties and field experience;
- Reviewing and reevaluating current retirement options and hiring bonuses, and considering additional incentives;
- Enabling work-life balance through scheduling changes and other supports;
- Promoting DEI practices inside departments and recruiting for diversity; and
- Addressing workplace cultural issues head-on, making sure the community knows about those changes and how they improve the workplace.

Conclusion

Cities provide an important and growing suite of services to their residents to help them meet their basic needs, improve their lives, and build community. In an increasingly divisive world, people continue to trust and look toward local governments to be responsive to their needs and to keep the lights on. This kind of dedicated public service is delivered every day by the tens of thousands of city employees that make up Washington's city workforce. Without them, little would get done and our local communities would be worse for it.

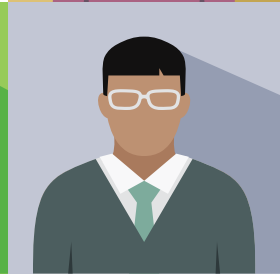
City workforces face significant challenges as the demands on cities and city workers evolve. Increasing populations, expanding roles, and an aging workforce mean cities face persistent headwinds in recruitment, retention, retirements, and rising costs. More must be done to help cities build the staff they need to serve their residents.

In addition, the state must specifically do more to control the cost drivers that eat into cities' ability to field an adequate team. The Legislature can help ensure that cities have the funding and policy tools available to attract and support a high-quality workforce with competitive compensation and benefits for our local public servants.

City governments themselves can do more to promote their public service mission by highlighting their jobs as meaningful careers that help communities thrive. In addition, cities can more actively promote their excellent benefits, job stability, work environment, and the sense of mission that city employment provides.

And we all can do more to ensure that cities intentionally build a workforce that is as diverse and inclusive as the communities they serve.

Despite the challenges, cities are still great places—not just to live, but also to work. The more successful we are at supporting a strong city workforce, the more successful we'll be at ensuring our cities remain vibrant, livable communities.



Introduction

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Chapter 1 – City workforce needs and challenges

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Chapter 2 – City workforce cost drivers

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