

Solving the Staffing Crisis

Report at a Glance



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THE PROBLEM

New York City government is facing **a staffing crisis.**

Municipal employees have resigned by the thousands over the past two years, resulting in **23,000 vacancies** across City agencies.

This has already had wide-reaching impacts, impeding the delivery and quality of services to New Yorkers and delaying the fulfillment of legal mandates and key commitments.

This harms New Yorkers all over the city, with outside effects on our most vulnerable residents. **Citywide vacancies are five times higher** than at the start of 2020, with several agencies on the front lines serving low-income New Yorkers facing **vacancy rates approaching or exceeding 20%**. The reduction in staff is stalling affordable housing development and delaying the delivery of rental vouchers to families living in shelters. It is resulting in low-income families waiting to receive nutrition assistance to buy food, and in days-long delays to address emergency calls on safety conditions in buildings.

THE REASON

The City's staffing crisis has been driven by declining retention, low hiring, and workforce policies that have further exacerbated challenges.

A number of factors have brought the City to this point:

- 1 Growing burnout amongst existing staff**
- 2 Delaying promotions and raises for existing staff**
- 3 Offering non-competitive salaries to new job candidates**
- 4 Taking months to bring on new employees**
- 5 Requiring full-time in-person employment with no hybrid flexibility**
- 6 Enacting hiring policies that stymie agencies' abilities to fill vacant positions**
- 7 Requiring navigation of confusing application processes and systems**
- 8 Leaving the door open for other sectors to claim mission-driven workers**

THE SOLUTION

For a near-term solution to address the current crisis, we have developed a set of non-legislative recommendations that City Hall could immediately implement to attract and retain the high-performing public servants it needs to deliver for New Yorkers.

These recommendations have been informed by in-depth analyses of a variety of sources — including City data, jobs reports, private-sector best practices, case studies from other governments, testimonials of recently departed City workers, and conversations with NYC leaders representing diverse fields and interests. Over the long-term, the City must work with the State, labor unions, and other stakeholders to further assess and reform structural barriers.

Recommendation 1:

Save money – keep city workers employed

Curb the departure of City employees with strategies focused on retention

Public servants are exiting City government in record numbers, signaling the need to rethink business as usual. High employee turnover comes at a high cost to the City: recruiting, selecting, and training new staff can cost governments **16% to 200% of spending** on annual salaries. Retained employees also **enable the City** to maintain institutional knowledge, reduce interruptions to services, and prevent further turnover. City government should implement a comprehensive strategy to slow attrition and retain top employees. To do this, the City should:

- **Designate a Chief Retention Officer:** This individual can address the upstream challenges driving the staffing crisis and support agencies in the implementation of tailored retention strategies.
- **Facilitate annual reviews and exit interviews:** The data and insights collected can deepen the City's understanding of why individuals may be departing, while also improving culture, satisfaction, and commitment to the job.
- **Proactively track and address staffing trends and performance:** Tracking upticks in departures and other staffing metrics can help catch problems early in order to deploy measures preventing staffing-related service interruptions.
- **Build morale and cultivate a mission-driven culture:** Offering managerial trainings and workshops can help leaders motivate employees and foster an environment of employee empowerment, information sharing and professional growth.

Recommendation 2:

Win the talent war – bring in the best & brightest

Recruit the next generation of City workers to fill critical gaps

To maintain quality in City services and to meet Mayor Eric Adams' ambitious long-term goals, the City must rethink its approach to recruitment. State and local governments have struggled to attract talent to public service in recent years: nationwide, applications to these roles **declined by 32%** in recent years. City government should implement a comprehensive recruitment strategy to fill the most critical gaps with a modern, diverse, and motivated workforce. To bring in top talent, the City should:

- **Designate a Chief Recruitment Officer:** This individual should work closely with agencies to identify priority vacancies and implement targeted strategies to bring in new talent to these roles.
- **Identify and prioritize offices with the greatest staffing needs:** The City can proactively track unanticipated declines in service quality to identify roles that must be prioritized for staffing and workforce planning interventions.
- **Provide recruitment support for hard-to-recruit roles:** The City's list of roles that it deems as hard-to-recruit should be revamped by providing additional active recruitment support, such as utilizing recruitment firms, launching targeted social media campaigns, and creating councils of external experts who recommend candidates.
- **Market the City's mission-driven workplace:** More and more people are seeking work with a purpose, which the City can tap into with a compelling marketing campaign. The City should also reframe its excellent benefits package, which includes perks such as graduate school scholarships

that have been shown to be popular with employees.

- **Offer incentives for joining government:** To narrow the gap with the private sector, the City should identify creative hiring or referral incentives that are not subject to existing regulations, taking inspiration from some of the offerings in its February 2023 tentative agreement with the District Council 37 labor union.
- **Implement creative interim solutions to ease staffing burdens:** The City has already been implementing policies to ease hiring barriers, such as easing requirements for lifeguards and creating programs for legal fellows. Expanding this creativity to other hard-to-recruit roles, including for the tech sector, can help bridge the staffing gap.

Recommendation 3: Modernize government – the world of work has changed

Update City employment policies to build a 21st-century workforce

The City is in need of a significant overhaul to its internal workforce policies to ease bureaucratic hurdles and be more competitive with the private sector. Though there are deeper challenges that require longer-term, structural changes, the City still has near-term solutions at its disposal to tackle the immediate crisis. To modernize its workforce policies, the City should:

- **Provide balanced hybrid flexibility:** Allowing eligible employees to work remotely one to two days per week balances the expectations of a modern workforce with the need to facilitate in-person collaboration and support business district economies. This can be paired with strong internal policies on remote operations to maintain productivity.
- **Make applying easy:** 92% of potential candidates drop out before clicking “submit” on a job application, and byzantine civil service requirements pose further challenges. By modernizing the application system, providing clear guides, and cross-posting jobs to popular third-party websites, the City can ensure it reduces a major barrier to applying.
- **Speed up the time it takes to hire:** Though some of the reasons driving months-long hiring processes are baked into the civil service system and require longer-term reform, removing newly added hoops that hiring managers must go through and keeping applicants informed throughout the process can reduce chances of them jumping ship.
- **Provide fair compensation and promotion opportunities:** The City will continue to lose top experienced and in-demand employees and candidates if it offers only the lowest end of an advertised payscale and does not give well-deserved raises.

THE CONCLUSION

City government faces a severe staffing shortage undermining its ability to deliver critical services to New Yorkers. Our proposal aims to address the immediate crisis, preventing further disruptions while also recognizing the need to be prudent in the face of challenging financial outlooks.

The City must act quickly to adopt competitive workforce policies and ensure New York has a strong recovery and thrives for generations to come.

Read the 5BORO Institute’s full report, *Solving the Staffing Crisis: Saving City Government for New Yorkers*, for our detailed analysis and recommendations to the City.