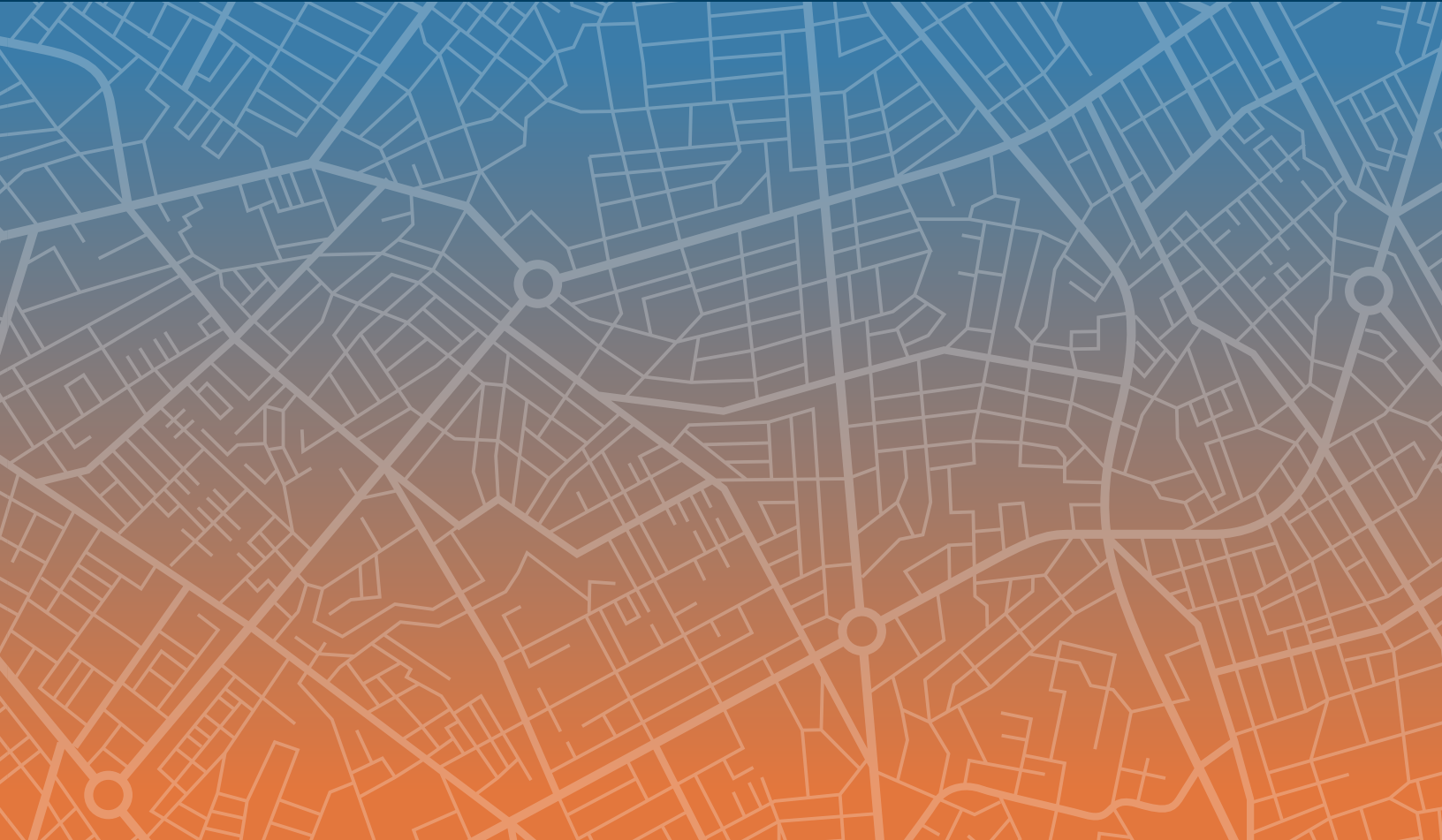




School of
Government

BENCHMARKING 2.0
MUNICIPALITIES



NORTH CAROLINA
BENCHMARKING PROJECT REPORT
2026

Employee Retention

The School of Government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill works to improve the lives of North Carolinians by engaging in practical scholarship that helps public officials and citizens understand and improve state and local government. Established in 1931 as the Institute of Government, the School provides educational, advisory, and research services for state and local governments. The School is also home to a nationally ranked Master of Public Administration program; a Law, Government, and Public Service minor beginning in academic year 2026–2027; the North Carolina Judicial College; and specialized centers focused on community and economic development, information technology, and environmental finance.

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ABOUT THE REPORT

THE NORTH CAROLINA BENCHMARKING PROJECT was established in 1995 so that participating municipalities could compare service-data and performance trends. In 2022, the Benchmarking Project relaunched as Benchmarking 2.0 with a new emphasis on collaboration and relationship-building. Benchmarking 2.0 offers revised framework metrics, streamlined data collection, an interactive online dashboard, and intensive in-person performance-strategy sessions.

CURRENT PARTNERS: Apex, Asheville, Chapel Hill, Charlotte, Concord, Gastonia, Greensboro, Hickory, Harrisburg, Holly Springs, Raleigh, Rocky Mount, Salisbury, Wake Forest, and Winston-Salem.

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INTERACTIVE DASHBOARD: Every October, the School of Government receives data from its partners through the Benchmarking 2.0 Data Collection Tool. The School audits the data and then uploads it to the interactive dashboard by November 1 so that service departments from across the state can use it to analyze and compare in-depth data and performance trends. The dashboard includes an array of easy-to-use features that make it possible to apply data normalization and calculate percentages, averages, and confidence intervals across comparison units. Informative, detailed graphs can be downloaded as shareable PDFs. Visit the [Benchmarking 2.0 website](#) to access the interactive dashboard.

PERFORMANCE STRATEGY SESSIONS: In November, the School brings service department officials from participating municipalities together to discuss data trends, strategies, challenges, and effective solutions. In these sessions, participants analyze data, identify and address current challenges, and share best practices and innovations. These sessions help the participating service departments understand and improve their organizational performance by engaging in peer-to-peer learning and networking.

BENCHMARKING REPORT: This report compiles and condenses the information and ideas that were exchanged during the November 2025 performance strategy sessions. The purpose of this report is to analyze retention issues and explore promising practices to improve retention in service departments. By simplifying complex concepts into actionable strategies, we aim to equip decision-makers with the necessary tools to drive tangible improvements in service delivery.

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2026 BENCHMARKING 2.0 PARTNERS



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Finally, we are deeply grateful to the service-department professionals who participated in the November 2025 strategy sessions. Their extraordinary dedication to public service, willingness to exchange insights, and forward-thinking mindset laid the foundation for this project's continued success and relevance to North Carolina's local governments.

CONTENTS

<i>Authors</i>	v
<i>About the Report</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	viii
<i>Introduction</i>	1
Purpose of the Report	1
Structure of the Report	1
Common Challenges and Strategies	2
Using the Dashboard While Reading	4
HUMAN RESOURCES	5
Defining Retention	7
Measuring Retention	8
Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention	10
ASPHALT MAINTENANCE	16
Defining Retention	18
Measuring Retention	18
Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention	21
BUILDING INSPECTIONS	26
Defining Retention	28
Measuring Retention	29
Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention	31
EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS	36
Defining Retention	38
Measuring Retention	39
Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention	41
FIRE SERVICE	47
Defining Retention	49
Measuring Retention	50
Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention	52

FLEET MAINTENANCE	57
Defining Retention	59
Measuring Retention	60
Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention	61
PARKS AND RECREATION	66
Defining Retention	68
Measuring Retention	69
Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention	71
POLICE SERVICE	76
Defining Retention	78
Measuring Retention	78
Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention	80
SOLID WASTE	86
Defining Retention	88
Measuring Retention	88
Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention	90
WATER AND WASTEWATER	96
Defining Retention	98
Measuring Retention	98
Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention	100
<i>Conclusion</i>	107
<i>Glossary</i>	108
<i>Glossary Sources</i>	109

INTRODUCTION

EMPLOYEE RETENTION IS A PERSISTENT ISSUE for local governments because it affects service continuity, institutional knowledge, and the return on investment in hiring and training. During the November 2025 Benchmarking performance strategy sessions, participants described retention as more than “keeping positions filled.” Discussions emphasized the importance of understanding who leaves, when employees tend to separate or transfer, and why departures occur, especially when separations involve experienced or high-performing staff.

Purpose of the Report

This report compiles and synthesizes information exchanged during the strategy sessions and organizes it into a consistent, service-oriented format. Its purpose is to help local governments

- clarify how retention is defined and interpreted in different service environments;
- identify practical indicators that practitioners use to assess retention outcomes (e.g., turnover patterns, tenure distribution, vacancy duration, and employee feedback);
- identify Benchmarking Project metrics that can serve as proxies for retention-related conditions (such as workload pressure, staffing structure, training investment, and service demand); and
- document common retention challenges and strategies discussed by participating jurisdictions.

The content is not intended to be exhaustive or authoritative. It is a structured synthesis of themes and examples shared by participants in the sessions.

Structure of the Report

This report is divided into sections. Each of the first ten sections is devoted to a service area or a combination of similar service areas. The report ends with a brief conclusion and a glossary of frequently used terms. Terms that are in the glossary appear in orange wherever they are introduced in each section.

The main sections follow a common structure to support consistent use across service areas. While service conditions vary, each service-area section is organized around three recurring components. First, each covers how session participants described “good” and “bad” retention and whether they interpreted retention in terms of remaining in a role, in a department, or in the broader organization. Second, each section describes two types of retention measures: *Practitioner-identified indicators* are measures that participants described as useful for interpreting retention conditions in their departments. While they may not directly quantify retention, they help explain workforce dynamics that influence retention outcomes, such as workload pressure, staffing levels, training timelines, supervisory capacity, and internal accountability systems. *Retention-related Benchmarking Project metrics* are metrics included

in the Benchmarking 2.0 dataset that either directly measure retention, such as turnover, tenure, vacancy duration, and internal movement, or provide structured workforce data that inform retention analysis, such as separation types, probation-completion rates, and employee-feedback indicators. Finally, each section organizes retention challenges into a set of cross-cutting categories (described below). Strategies for mitigating those challenges are presented as approaches that were discussed by session participants and may be adapted based on local policy constraints, organizational capacity, and workforce composition.

Common Challenges and Strategies

Although service-specific conditions vary, participant discussions frequently returned to a consistent set of retention drivers. For clarity and usability, sections group challenges and strategies into the categories below. These categories reflect how participants discussed retention in practice as a coordinated set of conditions and management choices rather than a single-factor problem.

Compensation and Economic Competitiveness

Compensation-related issues were repeatedly discussed as a retention pressure shaped by local labor markets and household affordability. Participants emphasized that retention risk increases when pay structures do not keep pace with market alternatives, when cost-of-living pressures outpace compensation movement, and when **pay compression** limits differentiation between newer and more experienced staff. Strategies discussed in sessions commonly included routine market review, clearer separation of **cost-of-living adjustments** and **merit-based raises**, and targeted incentives where recruitment and retention pressures are most acute.

Hiring and Onboarding

Participants described hiring and onboarding as a retention issue because early turnover is costly and destabilizing, particularly in roles with long training timelines or limited candidate pipelines. Common challenges included lengthy hiring processes, screening requirements, candidate drop-off, and early-tenure departures tied to unclear expectations or insufficient support. Strategies often emphasized streamlining internal processes, improving expectation-setting during recruitment, and treating onboarding as a multistage retention phase rather than a short orientation activity.

Career Development and Training

Career development surfaced as a consistent retention factor when employees do not see credible pathways for growth, skill development, or increased responsibility. In many discussions, training was described as both a retention investment and a mobility accelerant: When employees earn credentials or develop skills, they may become more likely to leave unless organizations also provide structured progression opportunities. Strategies included clearer **career ladders**, investments in continued education, cross-training approaches, and practical **succession planning** that matches development pathways to organizational capacity.

Supervision and Employee Accountability

Participants consistently linked retention to the quality of supervision and the day-to-day application of employee-performance expectations (including performance-appraisal practices). Discussions focused on whether employees receive clear direction and feedback, whether supervisors have the skills and time to coach and develop staff, and whether performance issues are addressed consistently. Participants also raised the retention risks that occur when high performers absorb additional workload in low-accountability environments.

Culture and Employee Support

Work conditions were discussed as a retention driver when workload, schedules, safety and physical demands, staffing shortages, or operational friction make jobs difficult to sustain. In many service environments, retention risks were described as cumulative: persistent vacancies increase workload, increase overtime, reduce training capacity, and accelerate burnout. Strategies discussed included aligning staffing plans with workload realities, managing schedule expectations explicitly, and reducing operational friction through better equipment, workflows, or support structures where feasible.

Culture and Organizational Support

Participants described culture and organizational support as the “everyday experience” of work: in other words, how employees interpret leadership follow-through, recognition, fairness, communication, and responsiveness to concerns. Culture-related discussions often concerned supervision and work conditions, particularly conditions that allowed inconsistent leadership practices or weak feedback loops to reduce trust. Strategies discussed included building practical recognition practices, improving two-way communication systems, and creating engagement mechanisms that result in visible action rather than simply collecting information.

Overlap and Patterns

The categories above are presented separately for clarity, but participants often described them as interconnected in practice. For example, hiring success is shaped by pay competitiveness and workplace conditions; training investments affect both development and workload; and supervision capacity influences culture, accountability, and onboarding effectiveness.

Several cross-cutting themes surfaced repeatedly across sessions:

- Retention is best understood through multiple measures rather than a single indicator.
- Some retention outcomes reflect movement rather than loss; interpretation may differ when retention is tracked at the departmental level versus the organizational level.
- Benchmarking metrics often function as proxies: They can help explain the conditions that shape retention outcomes, but they do not replace more direct workforce measures and local context.

The challenges and strategies described in this report represent a synthesis of discussion themes and should be adapted based on staffing models, operational demands, and implementation capacity.

Using the Dashboard While Reading

Where relevant, each service-area section references Benchmarking 2.0 metrics that can be explored in the interactive dashboard (benchmarking.sog.unc.edu). The dashboard supports normalization and comparison across jurisdictions and/or years, allowing readers to examine trends alongside local workforce context.

The screenshot displays the 'BENCHMARKING 2.0' dashboard. At the top, the UNC School of Government logo and 'North Carolina Benchmarking Project' are visible on the left, and 'Services Reports' on the right. The main header area features a stylized cityscape background with a central box containing the text 'BENCHMARKING 2.0'. Below this, the section is titled 'Select Your Base Services'. A sub-header reads: 'The North Carolina Benchmarking Project allows municipalities to compare their service and performance trends with other participating units.' An orange arrow points down to a grid of 12 service selection cards. Each card includes a category label (e.g., Public Works, Public Safety, Internal Services), an icon, and the service name.

Category	Service Name
Public Works	Asphalt Maintenance
Public Safety	Building Inspection
Public Safety	Emergency Communications
Public Safety	Fire Service
Public Works	Household Recycling
Internal Services	Human Resources
Public Works	Parks and Recreation
Public Safety	Police Service
Public Works	Residential Refuse
Public Works	Wastewater Service
Public Works	Water Service
Public Works	Yard Waste



HUMAN RESOURCES



THE HUMAN RESOURCES PERFORMANCE STRATEGY SESSION brought together practitioners from partner jurisdictions to examine employee retention, a persistent workforce challenge for many local governments. Participants shared perspectives from day-to-day HR operations by comparing approaches, identifying common barriers, and discussing strategies used to maintain workforce stability.

Across the session's activities, participants worked to define retention, identify meaningful indicators, and discuss common challenges and strategies. This section summarizes the session and highlights three key takeaways:

1. Retention efforts should seek to retain high-performing employees, not just maintain head counts.
2. No single measure adequately captures retention; organizations should instead rely on a combination of indicators related to tenure, turnover, vacancies, mobility, performance, and employee experience.
3. Retention strategies are most effective when they are implemented as a coordinated set of actions across compensation, career development, supervision systems, work conditions, and engagement, while accounting for variation in employee needs and implementation capacity.

Defining Retention

Participants defined retention as an organization's ability to sustain the workforce needed to deliver services while maintaining employee engagement, performance, and institutional knowledge over time. Participants noted that retention spans the employee life cycle within a jurisdiction from hiring to separation.

Successful retention maintains the workforce needed to deliver services without disruption, supported by systems that enable employees to remain engaged and aligned with the organization's mission. This framing emphasized retention as keeping talent within the organization over time, including through employee development and internal movement, into roles that better fit individual strengths and organizational needs. Participants connected this to organizational actions such as competitive salary and benefits, supportive working environments, work-life balance, and structured growth opportunities.

HR practitioners framed retention as an ongoing management practice focused on sustaining a productive workforce, preserving institutional knowledge, and supporting service continuity. At the same time, participants emphasized that retention is not inherently positive, distinguishing between retention that strengthens organizational capacity and retention that can undermine performance, morale, or culture.

What Is Good Retention?

Good retention was characterized as retaining high-performing employees who remain beyond probation, maintain job knowledge, and contribute positively to team dynamics and service outcomes.

Good retention is strengthened by development and appropriate internal movement, including promotions and prescribed career pathways. Participants described internal-placement decisions and **career ladder** structures as signals that an organization is successfully retaining and positioning its strongest employees.

The discussion also highlighted the role of accountability in effective retention. Participants noted that addressing performance issues through mechanisms such as improvement plans can strengthen both employee development and organizational effectiveness.

What Is Bad Retention?

Bad retention occurs when organizations focus on maintaining staffing levels rather than ensuring that employees are well suited to their roles and contributing positively to team performance. Participants emphasized that retaining employees who are disengaged, poorly aligned with job expectations, or consistently underperforming can weaken morale, reduce productivity, and create challenges for supervisors and coworkers.

Participants identified several indicators of bad retention:

- Employees stay for the wrong reasons, such as benefit structures that encourage employees to remain despite disengagement.
- Employees with poor performance take advantage of slow or sparse internal accountability processes.
- Employees remain in roles where they are misaligned with the core duties of their position.

Bad retention can also be reinforced by barriers to employee separation. Participants noted that HR processes and documentation requirements can make it difficult to address persistent underperformance, allowing problems to continue and contributing to stagnation and reduced productivity. These conditions can create additional organizational costs, including higher recruiting and training expenses when high-performing employees leave environments where poor performance is tolerated.

Measuring Retention

Retention cannot be understood through a single metric. Participants recommended using multiple indicators that reflect different stages of the employee life cycle and aspects of the employee experience. For each indicator, they suggested guiding questions that departments can use to interpret the data and better understand workforce trends.

Practitioner-Identified Indicators

Tenure

Tenure denotes the length of time an individual has been part of the organization.

- How long do employees stay in the organization?
- Is there a diversity of tenure within the organization? For example, does the organization have a healthy mix of experienced and new employees?

Time in Role

Time in role is simply the length of time an employee spends in a particular position. This metric can signal whether certain roles function as entry points, stepping stones, or long-term placements.

- Are there roles that employees typically only stay in for a short amount of time?
- What is the typical time between promotions for employees?

Turnover Rate

Turnover rate is the percentage of employees who separate from the organization. Participants noted the value of analyzing turnover rates by position, tenure, and reason for leaving to identify potential areas of concern.

- Are there certain positions with higher turnover?
- What are the reasons employees provide when they depart?
- Is turnover mainly due to retirements and planned transitions, or is it mainly from problematic exits?

Vacancy Rate

This is the ratio of vacancies to authorized staffing.

- How many vacancies typically exist in the organization?
- Are certain roles more likely to become or remain vacant?

Promotions and Internal Movement

This indicator addresses the extent to which employees transfer or advance within the organization.

- How many leadership positions are filled by internal candidates?
- Do employees exiting the organization or transferring to other departments often leave for higher-level roles?
- Do employees grow within the organization?

Beyond these indicators, participants discussed several considerations for interpreting retention data. For example, organizations must consider the role of cost and return on investment when evaluating retention outcomes. Because recruitment, onboarding, and training require significant organizational resources, retention analysis should consider how long employees remain with the organization relative to these investments. Organizations must examine tenure alongside demonstrated capability and performance rather than treating years of service as a standalone indicator.

Employee morale, culture, and engagement are also important considerations when measuring retention. These concepts can be measured through tools such as surveys, focus groups, and structured **stay interviews** that allow organizations to identify workplace challenges and address barriers to retention before employees choose to leave.

Participants also highlighted the value of examining the reasons behind vacancies rather than solely tracking **vacancy rates**. Understanding whether vacancies result from retirements, internal mobility, career advancement, or avoidable turnover can provide deeper insight into workforce dynamics and help organizations target retention strategies more effectively.

Retention-Related Benchmarking Project Metrics

In addition to direct measures of retention, the Benchmarking Project collects a range of workforce metrics that provide important context for understanding retention outcomes. Retention reflects workforce stability, employee experience, and organizational systems, and it cannot be reduced to a single indicator. These metrics help departments interpret retention across multiple dimensions, recognizing that individual metrics may not fully capture underlying workforce dynamics.

Workforce Stability and Experience

Measures of tenure and separation provide insight into the overall stability of the workforce and the balance between long-term experience and employee turnover. The Benchmarking Project collects both part-time and full-time metrics for these measures:

- average length of service for employees,
- total separations as a percentage of positions,
- voluntary separations as a percentage of all separations, and
- retirements as a percentage of all separations.

Workforce Capacity and Staffing Conditions

Staffing levels and hiring timelines influence employee workload and organizational strain. The Benchmarking Project collects both part-time and full-time metrics for these measures:

- vacancy rate and
- median time to fill positions.

Hiring Effectiveness and Early-Tenure Outcomes

Early-employment metrics provide insight into how well hiring, onboarding, and initial job alignment support retention. The Benchmarking Project uses the probationary-completion rate for full-time employees as an early-employment metric.

Workforce Investment and Development

Investment in employee growth and advancement can support retention by strengthening skills, improving engagement, and creating internal career pathways. The metrics collected for this measure include

- employee participation in training and development;
- hours of internal training and development offered;
- percent of pay-plan increment, including **cost-of-living adjustments**; and
- median percent of performance-based pay increment.

Organizational Climate and Employee Experience

Indicators of workplace climate provide additional context for retention by reflecting employee satisfaction, organizational culture, and potential areas of concern. The Benchmarking Project uses grievances received per **full-time equivalent** as a metric for this indicator.

Together, these measures reflect both the direct and indirect dimensions of retention in human resources. Workforce metrics such as tenure, turnover, and separations provide the clearest indicators of retention, while staffing, hiring, and organizational-climate metrics help departments understand the conditions that influence those outcomes.

Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention

Session participants identified several common retention challenges and potential strategies to strengthen good retention. These challenges and strategies can be grouped into six broad categories: compensation and economic competitiveness, hiring and onboarding friction, career development and mobility, supervision and training systems, work conditions, and organizational culture. The following subsections explore these categories, elaborating on specific challenges and providing examples of solutions discussed in the session.

Compensation and Economic Competitiveness

Participants identified compensation as a persistent retention challenge, particularly in relation to competition from nearby jurisdictions and broader labor markets. The session focused on several factors that shape economic competitiveness.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- **pay compression** across classifications,
- budget and salary constraints,
- competition with larger organizations and private employers, and
- cost-of-living pressures affecting employees' financial stability.

Participants noted that compensation decisions influence both the number of employees an organization can retain and the quality of the workforce it attracts and keeps. While broader economic conditions (e.g., labor market downturns) may temporarily affect retention, these factors remain largely outside the control of individual departments. Organizations can implement promising strategies to help remain competitive within these constraints.

Strategies to Mitigate Compensation and Economic-Competitiveness Challenges

Conduct Compensation Studies and Market Adjustments

Regular **compensation studies** and salary analyses help organizations maintain competitiveness with nearby jurisdictions and comparable employers. Structured market adjustments allow compensation systems to respond to labor market changes more systematically.

Strengthen Benefits Packages

Enhancing benefits and retirement contributions can improve overall compensation competitiveness. One municipality adopted an innovative à la carte approach to benefits to better support employees at different stages of their careers.

Adopt Flexible Employer-Contribution Models

Some jurisdictions reported using flexible contribution structures in which employers provide a percentage above base salary that employees can allocate toward benefit options, such as health-savings accounts, dependent care, or retirement savings.

Implement Long-Term Compensation Planning

Participants emphasized that compensation strategies are most effective when supported by long-term financial planning rather than one-time salary adjustments.

Hiring and Onboarding

Early attrition presents a significant retention risk for organizations. Recruitment, background checks, onboarding, and training require substantial investment, and when employees leave early in their tenure, organizations may not fully recover these costs.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- lengthy background checks and state law enforcement processes,
- drug-testing requirements and compliance complications,
- technical or certification requirements for certain roles,
- citizenship and other legal-eligibility requirements, and
- extended hiring timelines that result in candidates accepting other positions.

These delays can leave positions vacant for extended periods, increasing workload pressure on existing staff and contributing to additional turnover risk.

Strategies to Mitigate Hiring and Onboarding Challenges

Streamline Hiring Processes

While certain requirements cannot be eliminated, jurisdictions can review internal hiring workflows to reduce avoidable delays and improve coordination across departments involved in recruitment.

Design Lifecycle-Based Onboarding

Participants described onboarding as an extended process rather than a short orientation period. Structured multistage onboarding programs can support employees through early tenure and improve retention beyond the probationary period.

Create Early-Tenure Support Structures

Formal check-ins, mentoring programs, and structured integration activities can be tools for supporting new employees, reducing early attrition, and strengthening long-term engagement.

Career Development and Training

Limited growth opportunities for employees remain a significant retention barrier, particularly in smaller departments with constrained advancement pathways. Participants noted that when employees do not see clear options for progression or development, they may be more likely to seek advancement outside the organization.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- limited promotional pathways for certain roles,
- shifting organizational expectations,
- difficulty creating career paths for nonsupervisory roles,
- unclear career trajectories that weaken confidence in long-term advancement,
- inconsistent leadership capacity to support career development, and
- role ambiguity, especially during periods of organizational change.

Strategies to Mitigate Career-Development and Training Challenges

Establish Career Ladders and Defined Career Paths

Establishing formal career ladders with clearly defined advancement criteria helps employees understand progression opportunities, even when promotional openings are limited.

Structured Professional Development and Leadership Programs

Internal training programs, leadership-development initiatives, and certification support can strengthen job readiness and support long-term career growth. Some jurisdictions also reported successful mentorship programs for newer staff.

Offer Cross-Training and Job Rotation

Cross-training and rotational assignments allow employees to broaden skill sets, explore different functions within the organization, and support **succession planning**.

Implement Performance-Linked Advancement Systems

Aligning performance appraisals with advancement opportunities reinforces development pathways and helps ensure that promotions support both employee growth and organizational needs.

Encourage Organizational-Capacity Alignment

Organizational capacity should be prioritized when creating new career-development structures, role definitions, or staffing models. Systems that are difficult to implement will not lead to successful retention.

Supervision and Employee Accountability

Supervision quality and accountability are closely linked to retention outcomes. Unclear expectations and limited supervisory support can contribute to disengagement and turnover, particularly when underperformance is not consistently addressed.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- inconsistent training delivery,
- increasing certification requirements without adequate resources or capacity to meet them,
- unclear performance expectations,
- supervisors being insufficiently prepared to coach and manage staff,
- lack of consistency in addressing underperformance, and
- limited opportunities for professional development.

These challenges often reinforce one another in practice. Several participants noted that high-performing employees can experience increased workloads and burnout in low-accountability environments, especially when performance concerns persist and workload is redistributed informally.

Strategies to Mitigate Supervision and Employee–Accountability Challenges

Regularly Update Job Descriptions and Keep Expectations Clear

Maintaining accurate job descriptions and clearly defined role expectations strengthens accountability and reduces confusion. Some municipalities reported regularly reviewing job descriptions to ensure they reflected evolving responsibilities.

Conduct Performance Appraisals

Participants emphasized the importance of fair and consistent employee-evaluation systems that support employee development and align with advancement pathways.

Encourage Frequent Check-Ins and Coaching Conversations

Regular one-on-one meetings, interim evaluations, and proactive engagement by supervisors can help identify performance concerns early and provide opportunities for employee development.

Utilize Employee-Survey Data and Feedback

Many municipalities use employee surveys to identify performance or engagement challenges within specific teams, allowing leadership to intervene at the unit level.

Work Conditions and Operational Realities

Burnout, emotional fatigue, and workload pressure were described as significant contributors to turnover. Work conditions often reflect both HR policies and daily operational-management practices, shaping how supported employees feel in their roles.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- staffing shortages that increase workload pressure,
- change-management fatigue,
- unclear expectations about roles and responsibilities,
- perceptions of favoritism or inequity, and
- insufficient recognition of employee effort in daily operations.

These factors can accumulate over time, particularly in environments where staffing gaps persist and workload expectations shift without corresponding support.

Strategies to Mitigate Work-Conditions and Operational-Realities Challenges

Offer Flexible Work Arrangements

Hybrid schedules, alternative work hours, and **flex-time** models were cited as ways to improve work-life balance.

Invest in Workplace Amenities and Operational Support

Practical improvements, such as onsite parking and workplace amenities, were discussed as incremental but meaningful support for employee satisfaction.

Promote Leadership Alignment and Resource Commitment

Participants emphasized that improving work conditions requires visible leadership commitment and consistent implementation across departments.

Culture and Organizational Support

Gaps between organizational policies and everyday practice are contributors to employee disengagement. Employees often evaluate organizations not only on written policies but also on how consistently leaders apply them and how responsive employers' systems feel in practice.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- cultural resistance during major process changes,
- limited recognition of employee contributions and achievements, and
- weak feedback loops between employees and leadership.

These issues can weaken trust and reduce engagement, particularly when employees do not see follow-through on stated priorities or communicated values.

Strategies to Mitigate Culture and Employee-Support Challenges

Encourage Recognition and Appreciation Programs

Formal-recognition initiatives, service awards, and internal-communication tools were identified as ways to reinforce employee value. In one example, a jurisdiction reported using its employee intranet to regularly recognize high-performing staff.

Establish Wellness and Work-Life Programs

Wellness initiatives help to support employee well-being and improve long-term engagement. Common examples of wellness initiatives include employee-assistance programs, wellness challenges and incentives, flex time, and remote- or hybrid-work options for eligible roles.

Create Structured Engagement Teams

Management engagement teams or committees can sustain engagement efforts beyond one-time events. Participants noted that a mix of small and large gestures can help sustain engagement, ranging from informal recognition to pay or benefit enhancements.

Develop Feedback Systems and Listening Sessions

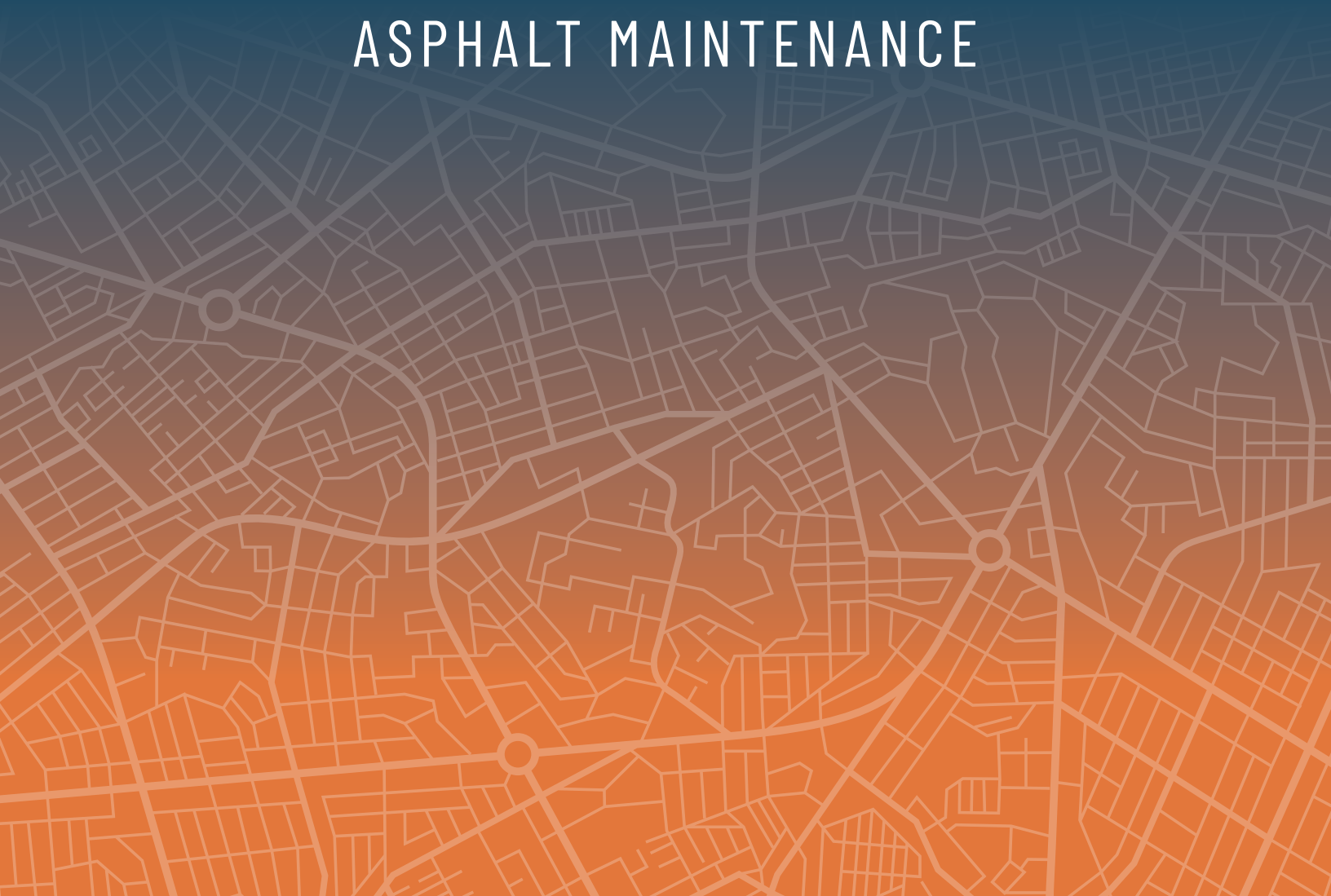
Stay interviews, focus groups, and small-group listening sessions can be useful tools for gathering actionable employee feedback.

Close the Feedback Loop

Participants emphasized that engagement strategies should visibly connect employee feedback to organizational decisions, where possible, to maintain trust and credibility.



ASPHALT MAINTENANCE





THE ASPHALT-MAINTENANCE PERFORMANCE STRATEGY SESSION brought together practitioners to examine employee retention. The discussion focused on what retention means in an asphalt-maintenance operation, how departments can measure it in practical terms, and which organizational conditions most influence whether employees stay long enough to become productive contributors.

Three key takeaways emerged from this conversation:

1. Retention in asphalt maintenance depends on a department's ability to recruit trainable employees, move them through onboarding and skill development, and keep them long enough to recover training investments and maintain stable crews.
2. Strong retention reflects alignment across compensation, supervision, internal systems, working conditions, career pathways, and hiring practices.
3. Asphalt-maintenance departments must recruit employees willing to complete physically demanding work, train them in specialized tasks and safe equipment operations, and incentivize longevity to maintain department stability.

Defining Retention

Participants defined retention as the ability to keep qualified employees for a meaningful period, particularly long enough for them to become operationally efficient, contribute positively to departmental culture, and eventually help train and lead others. This definition emphasizes operational value and skill development rather than nominal years of service. Retention reflects how employees experience the workplace, including whether they feel fairly compensated, supported in their roles, and able to sustain their work over time.

What Is Good Retention?

Good retention supports stable crews, preserves institutional knowledge, and helps consistent production. It also creates conditions in which employees want to stay because they can learn, grow, and see a future in the program.

Participants associated good retention with the following visible conditions:

- Crews are stable and can meet workload demands consistently.
- Employees stay long enough to become proficient and to support newer staff.
- There are clear opportunities for growth in skill, responsibility, and compensation.
- High morale is paired with accountability and performance expectations.

Departments should aim to retain employees who are effective, supported, and aligned with operational needs, placing qualified people in positions where they can contribute fully rather than treating all retention as inherently beneficial.

What Is Bad Retention?

Bad retention includes both frequent turnover and the continued presence of disengaged or underperforming employees. Participants emphasized that a department could have retention problems even when positions are technically filled. When low performance is tolerated, high-performing employees often absorb the additional workload, which weakens morale and increases the likelihood of further turnover. Retaining employees who are a poor fit can also disrupt operations, particularly in crew-based environments where work depends on trust, consistency, and shared responsibility.

Participants' discussion of bad retention included the following examples:

- Frequent turnover disrupts crew stability and safety.
- Employees leave soon after gaining marketable skills.
- Employees with performance issues are retained because supervisors avoid addressing those issues.
- Long-tenured employees remain disengaged, making no meaningful contributions.

Measuring Retention

Retention in asphalt maintenance should be measured through an array of indicators rather than a single metric. Measures of workforce stability, employee progression, employee feedback, and operational effects together can create a comprehensive look at departmental

retention. Participants noted that **turnover rate** itself does not show whether a department is losing new hires before training pays off, losing experienced staff after skill development, or keeping positions filled while crew performance and morale decline.

Practitioner-Identified Indicators

Core metrics discussed in the strategy session included the following.

Tenure and Workforce Stability

Years of service, tenure in position, and tenure in the department were discussed as basic indicators of retention. Participants also pointed to tenure at departure as a useful indicator, especially when assessing whether employees stayed long enough for the department to recover hiring and training investments. Departments can look at specific early-tenure points to assess specific retention goals. For example, two-year milestones can be used to represent early-retention success, while five-year milestones can indicate longer-term retention and investments.

Turnover and Separations

Turnover rate was one of the most identified retention metrics. Practitioners emphasized the value of looking at turnover by position type, as well as separating avoidable turnover from retirements and probation-related departures. Additionally, employees' reasons for leaving can be used to evaluate whether losses are tied to pay, internal transfers, dissatisfaction, or other factors.

Vacancies and Staffing Levels

Vacancy rate, vacancies compared with positions filled, and the number of vacancies outside retirement and probation were discussed as practical measures of retention pressure. These indicators help show whether staffing losses are disrupting operations and whether the department is maintaining enough personnel to support service demands.

Employee Feedback and Satisfaction

Exit interviews, **stay interviews**, employee-satisfaction surveys, engagement surveys, and general employee feedback were all identified as retention metrics. Participants viewed these as important indicators because they capture whether employees want to remain with the department and how they experience the workplace, not just whether they have formally separated.

Operational Readiness and Team Condition

Participants also described retention in operational terms, including whether staff are well trained, efficient, and able to maintain current workload. High morale and the stability of experienced staff relative to operational needs were treated as indicators of whether retention is supporting day-to-day performance.

Career Growth and Incentive Participation

Career ladder opportunities, growth within the department, and turnover data by position type were discussed as measures that show whether employees are progressing or leaving. Participants also referenced the number of incentive programs employees are eligible for, and participation in those programs, as indicators tied to retention and advancement patterns.

Qualified Staffing Depth

Participants noted the number of qualified applicants and the number of qualified staff available to support the operation as additional indicators. These measures help show whether the department is retaining enough trained and capable employees to sustain operations and support peer learning on crews.

Retention-Related Benchmarking Project Metrics

In addition to direct retention measures, Benchmarking Project metrics can help departments understand the operating conditions that shape employee stability in asphalt maintenance. These metrics do not show on their own whether employees stay or leave, but they can reveal staffing pressure, workload distribution, and the share of resources devoted to personnel. In a labor-intensive service area such as asphalt maintenance, those conditions often influence burnout, workload sustainability, and the department's ability to keep experienced crews in place.

Workload and Staffing Pressure

Metrics that compare service output or system responsibility with staffing levels help show whether crews are operating under manageable conditions. Departments with high workloads may face greater risk of fatigue, reduced morale, and turnover pressure. The Benchmarking Project uses

- lane miles per **full-time equivalent** (FTE),
- centerline miles per FTE,
- potholes repaired per FTE, and
- asphalt work orders completed per FTE.

Workforce Capacity and Staffing Scale

Staffing level metrics provide context for whether the asphalt-maintenance function is resourced at a level that can support service expectations. The Benchmarking Project uses

- approved asphalt-maintenance FTEs and
- asphalt-maintenance FTEs per 10,000 residents.

Personnel Investment

Personnel-spending metrics help show how much of the asphalt-maintenance program is devoted to employee compensation and staffing costs. The Benchmarking Project uses

- personnel expenses for asphalt maintenance and
- personnel expenses as a percentage of total asphalt-maintenance expenses.

Together, these benchmarking metrics provide context for interpreting retention conditions in asphalt maintenance. Direct retention metrics remain the clearest way to track whether departments are keeping employees over time, but workload, staffing, and personnel cost indicators help explain the environment in which those retention outcomes occur.

Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention

Retention in asphalt maintenance is shaped by a set of recurring operational and organizational pressures rather than a single cause. The session showed that departments often face overlapping issues related to compensation, career growth, hiring requirements, working conditions, supervision, and internal policies. These factors influence whether employees join the organization, remain through key training and tenure milestones, and continue contributing at a high level over time. The following sections outline the main retention challenges identified during the session, and the practical strategies departments are using to address them.

Compensation and Economic Competitiveness

Compensation remained one of the most consistent retention pressures in the session. Participants described difficulty competing with private employers, nearby jurisdictions, and even other departments within the same organization. They also noted that **pay compression** and internal **pay-equity** concerns can weaken morale and make experienced employees more likely to leave.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- competition with private employers, nearby jurisdictions, and other departments for skilled operators and crew members;
- pay compression between entry-level and experienced staff, and across roles or departments;
- cost-of-living pressures, including housing affordability; and
- budget constraints that slow pay adjustments and reduce flexibility.

Strategies to Mitigate Compensation and Economic-Competitiveness Challenges

Conduct Regular Compensation Studies

Departments can use **compensation studies** to compare pay ranges externally and identify internal inconsistencies that encourage transfers or dissatisfaction. Regular pay reviews also help leadership respond with current data rather than waiting until turnover worsens.

Adopt an Organization-Wide Pay Scale

Municipalities may wish to implement a consistent pay scale to discourage interdepartmental competition.

Separate Cost-of-Living Adjustments from Merit Increases

Implementing both **cost-of-living adjustments** and **merit-based raises** help preserve distinctions between general wage movement and individual performance. Without that separation, strong employees may see little meaningful reward for higher contribution or skill growth.

Adopt Step-Based or Skill-Based Progression Systems

Structured progression gives employees a clearer view of how pay can grow as they gain capability. It also helps departments reward verified skill development instead of relying only on tenure.

Offer Specialized Incentives

Targeted incentives, such as certification pay or license reimbursements, can help departments compete in a narrow labor market without restructuring the entire pay plan immediately. They are most effective when tied to positions or skills that are hardest to recruit and retain.

Hiring and Onboarding

Participants noted that asphalt maintenance often depends on credentials, physical readiness, and operational fit, all of which narrow the hiring pool. When the hiring process is slow or rigid, departments can lose candidates early and place more strain on the staff they already have.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- reduced size of the candidate pool due to certifications and job-entry requirements;
- probation and qualification filtering that delay full productivity;
- misalignment between job requirements and the compensation offered; and
- HR procedures that reduce flexibility in hiring, reclassification, or separation.

Strategies to Mitigate Hiring and Onboarding Challenges

Distinguish Prerequisite Skills from Trainable Ones

Some qualifications may be necessary on day one, while others can be developed after hire with the right support. Clarifying that difference can expand the applicant pool without lowering operational standards.

Reduce Avoidable Hiring Delays

Long hiring timelines increase the chance that candidates accept another offer or lose interest. Streamlining handoffs, approvals, and onboarding can help departments secure candidates while they are still available.

Use Training and Qualification Pathways

Departments can hire employees with the capacity to succeed, then help them obtain required credentials through structured training, supported by financial assistance when applicable. This approach can widen access while still preserving accountability for completion.

Establish Early Probation Check-Ins and Coaching

Probation works better when expectations are clear and supervisors identify problems early. Frequent check-ins can help the organization improve employee fit, reinforce standards, and reduce surprise failures late in the process.

Career Development and Training

Participants described career development as both a retention strategy and a retention risk. Asphalt maintenance requires hands-on skill development, but employees often become more marketable as they gain experience. When departments do not show how employees can continue growing, they risk losing them soon after the investment in their training begins to pay off.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- employees' leaving after gaining transferable skills or certifications,
- lack of a clear path to career advancement within the organization,
- early-tenure turnover before the department recovers its training investment, and
- succession gaps when experienced employees retire or disengage.

Strategies to Mitigate Career-Development and Training Challenges

Create Defined Career Ladders and Expectations

Employees are more likely to stay when they can see what positions exist above them and what is required to reach them. Clear ladders also help supervisors discuss advancement in concrete terms rather than general encouragement.

Implement Mentorship Programs for New Employees

Participants said that mentoring can speed up skill acquisition and help new employees integrate into crew expectations. It also creates a more intentional transfer of knowledge from experienced staff.

Connect Compensation with Skill Acquisition

Employees are more likely to see training as worthwhile when new skills lead to advancement or pay growth. This approach allows departments to reward demonstrated capability rather than tenure alone.

Supervision and Employee Accountability

Participants linked retention problems to poor relationships with supervisors, weak day-to-day leadership, and inconsistent follow-through when performance concerns arise. They also described the cost of avoiding accountability. When departments keep consistently poor performers or allow long-tenured employees to disengage without consequence, the burden shifts to stronger employees and crew performance suffers.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- poor relationships between employees and supervisors,
- inconsistent handling of poor performance, and
- disengaged long-tenure employees remaining without accountability.

Strategies to Mitigate Supervision and Employee-Accountability Challenges

Strengthen Supervisor Support

Frontline leadership can directly affect whether employees feel supported day-to-day. More effective communication and more consistent coaching can improve clarity, reduce friction, and help employees address issues before they become resignation drivers.

Promote Consistent Performance Expectations

Keeping consistently poor performers and allowing disengaged senior staff to remain in place without consequence can be discouraging to high-performing employees. Earlier intervention protects crew morale and reduces the informal redistribution of work to stronger employees.

Work Environment and Operations

In asphalt maintenance, work is physically demanding, schedule-sensitive, and dependent on equipment readiness. When staffing is thin and equipment is unreliable, frustration builds quickly and can push employees toward burnout or departure.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- equipment issues that create frustration and inefficiency,
- burnout from workload demands and staffing shortages, and
- increased burden on strong performers when crews are short.

Strategies to Mitigate Work-Environment and Operations Challenges

Prioritize Adequate Equipment and Safe Working Conditions

Reliable equipment reduces avoidable frustration and supports safer, more predictable operations. It also signals investment in the tools that employees need to do the job.

Monitor and Manage Workload During Seasonal Peaks

Departments can reduce operational strain by anticipating periods of increased demand and aligning staffing and task priorities accordingly. Clear prioritization enables teams to focus on critical work rather than attempting to absorb all pressures simultaneously.

Expand Feasible Leave and Recovery Opportunities

Time away from work can help reduce fatigue in a physically demanding environment. Even when leave options are limited, reinforcing recovery expectations supports sustainability.

Culture and Employee Support

Participants connected retention to morale, growth opportunities, leadership support, recognition, internal competition, and organizational policies that either support or frustrate employees over time. The discussion suggested that employees are more likely to stay when they see a stable team environment, a fair accountability system, and visible support for advancement and day-to-day success.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- low morale or weak team stability,
- limited organizational support for department advancement and retention,
- internal competition from other units and transfer dynamics that weaken commitment to asphalt maintenance, and
- lack of incentive and recognition for strong employees.

Mitigating Culture and Employee-Support Challenges

Recognizing high-performing employees can mitigate these challenges. Departments often experience a recurring imbalance in which good employees receive more work without enough incentive or support. Recognition, fair workload distribution, and tangible support can help preserve trust and reduce avoidable loss among the employees that departments need the most.



BUILDING INSPECTIONS



THE BUILDING INSPECTIONS PERFORMANCE STRATEGY SESSION brought together practitioners from jurisdictions across North Carolina to examine employee retention in a field that depends on specialized credentials, experience, and consistent delivery. The discussion focused on how departments define retention, distinguishing between strong and weak retention outcomes; how they measure workforce stability; and which operational and organizational factors most influence whether employees stay long enough to become fully effective. Across the discussion, three key takeaways emerged:

1. Retention must focus on keeping qualified, engaged employees long enough to reach full productivity.
2. Departments need a combination of measures that reflect tenure, certification progress, employee movement, and reasons for leaving.
3. Retention outcomes depend on coordinated decisions across compensation, hiring, training, supervision, and daily work conditions.

Defining Retention

In the session, practitioners described retention as keeping qualified employees long enough to sustain service levels and preserve institutional knowledge. This view prioritizes retaining employees who contribute positively and meet performance expectations. Departments also distinguished between retention in a specific role, within the department, and within the broader organization, noting that internal movement can be a positive outcome when it supports both operational needs and employee career growth.

Departments conceived “long enough to sustain service levels and preserve knowledge” in practical terms tied to training and workforce mix. Retention needed to extend beyond the point where hiring, onboarding, and certification investments began to pay off, and it needed to support a balanced team with enough experienced staff to handle complex work while developing newer inspectors.

What Is Good Retention?

Departments described good retention as the sustained presence of high-performing employees who remain engaged as they build technical expertise and become dependable contributors to day-to-day operations. In practice, good retention entails stability in staff composition, continuity in how the department applies codes and serves customers, and a steady internal pipeline where newer employees develop underexperienced colleagues rather than cycling out before they become fully productive.

Participants associated good retention with the following examples of visible conditions:

- Coverage is stable, with few unexpected gaps from short-tenure departures.
- Employees progress steadily from basic proficiency to independent performance and higher responsibility.
- Day-to-day interactions reflect trust, clear communication, and little or no unresolved conflict.
- New staff are supported by peer-to-peer problem-solving and informal coaching.

What Is Bad Retention?

Departments described bad retention as either the loss of effective employees for reasons that the organization could influence or the retention of employees whose performance issues or behavior weaken the team. Bad retention can exist even when vacancy counts look manageable, because the underlying strain shows up in workload distribution, morale, and the department’s ability to maintain consistent service. Over time, unresolved issues often shift pressure onto strong performers and can trigger additional departures, particularly when external opportunities improve.

Examples of bad retention discussed during the session included the following:

- Strong employees leave for avoidable reasons.
- Employees resign soon after attaining key certifications or reaching full productivity.
- High performers regularly take on heavier workloads to cover gaps.
- Timely, consistent employee appraisals are avoided.
- Process changes needed for evolving work demands meet with resistance.

Measuring Retention

Departments emphasized that retention in building inspections cannot be captured through a single metric. **Turnover rate** alone does not show whether the department is losing new hires early, losing experienced staff after development, or retaining staff whose performance no longer supports operational needs. Instead, departments described using a set of indicators that reflect workforce stability, employee movement and development, employee experience, and service-delivery continuity. Departments also highlighted the need to interpret measures through the lens of certification and experience. Departments often need to track retention against training milestones and the period required to achieve basic and advanced certification levels.

Practitioner-Identified Indicators

Tenure and Workforce Stability

Tenure measures the length of time that employees remain employed, typically captured as years of service in the department and years of service with the organization. Departments discussed looking at tenure distributions to describe overall stability and the balance between early-career, mid-career, and long-tenured staff.

Turnover and Separations by Type

Turnover captures the share of the workforce that separates over a defined period, while separations by type distinguishes voluntary versus involuntary exits and separates retirements from other departures. Departments discussed using these measures together to describe both the overall level of position churn and the underlying mix of departure types.

Vacancy Rate and Position Fill Time

Vacancy rate reflects the portion of authorized positions that are unfilled during a given period, and fill time measures how long it takes to hire into vacant roles. Departments discussed tracking both to describe the scale and persistence of staffing gaps.

Time in Position and Internal Movement

Time in position tracks how long employees remain in a specific job classification or assignment, while internal movement captures transfers, reassignments, and advancement within the organization. Departments discussed using these indicators to describe whether staffing changes reflect progression and internal mobility versus frequent churn.

Retirements and New-Hire Volume

Counts of retirements and new hires track workforce outflow and inflow over time and can be summarized as totals or as rates relative to authorized staffing. Departments discussed monitoring these trends across multiple years to understand whether staffing change reflects a short-term fluctuation or a sustained pattern.

Exit Surveys and Exit Interviews

Exit surveys and interviews capture structured information from departing employees about their reasons for leaving and the conditions tied to their decision. Departments discussed summarizing these results by recurring departure reasons or themes and tracking the frequency of those themes over time.

Retention-Related Benchmarking Project Metrics

In addition to direct retention measures, operational and staffing benchmarks can help explain why retention outcomes improve or worsen in building inspections. These metrics do not measure retention directly, but they can signal workload strain, staffing risk, or resource constraints that make it harder to keep inspectors long enough to reach full productivity.

Workload and Throughput per Staff Capacity

Productivity metrics help departments understand whether inspection and review demand is sustainable relative to available staff. The Benchmark Project uses these productivity metrics:

- total plan reviews per **full-time equivalent** (FTE),
- total permits issued per FTE, and
- total inspections per inspector.

Workforce Size and Staffing Availability

Staffing-level metrics describe the capacity available to absorb normal fluctuations, cover vacancies, and support training needs. These metrics include

- total department FTEs and
- total FTEs per capita.

Inspector and Administrative Staffing Structure

Role-mix metrics provide insight into whether inspectors receive adequate administrative support or whether inspectors absorb administrative tasks that reduce field capacity. The Benchmarking Project measures role mix with the following metrics:

- approved inspector FTEs,
- approved administration FTEs, and
- the ratio of administrator to inspector FTEs.

Reliance on Temporary or Supplemental Staffing

Temporary-staffing metrics help departments understand whether they are using short-term staff to stabilize service delivery. The Benchmarking Project uses these temporary-staffing metrics:

- approved temporary-administration-staff FTEs and
- the ratio of temporary-staff to inspector FTEs.

Training Investment and Development Capacity

Training-investment metrics capture the level of financial support available for developing staff and sustaining certifications. These metrics provide context for how aggressively a department can build internal capability, which affects both retention and the pace at which vacancies can be filled with qualified staff. The Benchmarking Project uses training and development expenses as a metric for this indicator.

Personnel Cost Structure

Personnel-expense metrics provide context for the department's resource position and the share of spending tied to staffing. These indicators can help interpret compensation competitiveness, constraints on pay progression, and the department's ability to absorb

turnover-related costs. The Benchmarking Project uses the following metrics to measure personnel cost structure:

- personnel expenses for building inspections and
- personnel expenses for building inspections as a percentage of total expenses.

Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention

The session showed that departments often need to respond simultaneously to pay competitiveness, pipeline development, certification timelines, supervisory capacity, and daily work conditions. These factors shape whether employees join, remain long enough to become fully effective, and continue contributing at a high level.

Compensation and Economic Competitiveness

Compensation pressures show up most clearly when nearby jurisdictions or private employers can offer higher pay, and when cost-of-living increases outpace internal pay movement. Departments also emphasized that one-time recruitment adjustments do not solve retention if budgets cannot sustain competitive pay, especially alongside rising operating costs such as software and vendor services.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- competition from nearby jurisdictions and private employers,
- housing and cost-of-living pressures outpacing wage growth,
- difficulty sustaining pay competitiveness within budget constraints,
- reduced differentiation for high performers when pay approaches are overly uniform, and
- rising nonpersonnel costs that crowd out compensation flexibility.

Strategies to Mitigate Compensation and Economic-Competitiveness Challenges

Link Pay Progression to Certifications

Tie salary movement to certification milestones to reinforce development and clarify pay growth.

Support Exam and Travel Costs

Cover certification exam fees and travel to reduce barriers and encourage completion.

Target Incentives at Pressure Points

Use sign-on and retention bonuses to respond to market gaps without immediate full pay redesign.

Define Separation of General and Performance-Based Pay

Communicate how **cost-of-living adjustments** differ from **merit-based raises** to avoid perceptions of unfairness.

Hiring and Onboarding

Departments described a hiring environment where fully credentialed applicants are harder to secure, pushing many organizations toward entry-level hiring and internal development. That shift increases the importance of onboarding quality, early supervision capacity, and keeping new hires long enough to reach certification milestones that make them fully productive.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- limited pools of candidates who meet certification and experience needs,
- retirements that create experience gaps and reduce mentorship capacity,
- greater onboarding and training loads due to entry-level hiring, and
- low awareness of building inspections as a career path.

Strategies to Mitigate Hiring and Onboarding Challenges

Develop Career Awareness with Outreach

Run recurring community outreach to explain the work and expand the candidate pipeline over time.

Build Education Partnerships

Build relationships with high schools and community colleges to create early pathways into inspections.

Recruit from the Trades

Target candidates with relevant trade or construction experience to improve fit and reduce early turnover.

Deploy Apprenticeships and Internships

Use structured entry points to develop candidates and assess fit before long-term commitments.

Career Development and Training

Departments emphasized that building inspections relies on credentialed expertise, and retention must cover the time it takes employees to progress through certifications and gain judgment through experience. Career-development support can improve retention when it improves growth predictability, but it can also increase risk if employees leave soon after achieving marketable milestones.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- loss of employees soon after the department invests in certification and training,
- multiyear certification timelines that require sustained support,
- limited internal capacity to train while maintaining service levels, and
- coverage challenges across inspection types as staff specialize.

Strategies to Mitigate Career-Development and Training Challenges

Build Defined Progression Pathways

Publish clear career steps tied to credentials and responsibilities so employees can see a future in the department.

Support Credential Completion

Reduce friction by funding exam fees and required travel to keep employees moving through the pipeline.

Incorporate Intentional Knowledge Transfer

Build routine methods for sharing expertise so capability is not concentrated with a few staff members.

Utilize Mid-Career Growth Options

Create advancement opportunities that retain experienced inspectors without requiring them to leave the department to progress.

Supervision and Employee Accountability

Departments linked retention to employees' expectations of fair accountability and supervisors' ability to address performance issues early. They emphasized that retaining underperforming employees can damage morale and push stronger staff out, especially in smaller teams where workload shifts quickly when one role is not pulling its weight.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- avoidance of difficult employee-performance conversations,
- inconsistent or weak employee-appraisal practices,
- barriers to separating chronic underperformers after probation, and
- high performers' disengaging due to perceived inequity.

Strategies to Mitigate Supervision and Employee-Accountability Challenges

Create Consistent Performance Expectations

Standardize what high performance looks like and evaluate it consistently across staff.

Build Supervisor Capability

Train and support supervisors to document issues early and embrace difficult conversations with employees.

Tie Advancement to Contribution

Align development and advancement opportunities with demonstrated capability and reliable performance.

Align Pay and Performance

Explain how employee performance and progression relate to compensation decisions to support trust in outcomes.

Work Environment and Operations

Departments noted that difficulties associated with affordability and commute time can become long-term retention risks and that tools, policies, and workflows influence whether employees experience the job as efficient and sustainable.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- lengthening commute times due to affordability constraints,
- rising software and technology costs that limit tool improvements,
- daily interpersonal friction that slows problem resolution, and
- vehicle- and dispatch-policy complexities, including administrative and tax considerations.

Strategies to Mitigate Work-Environment and Operations Challenges

Employ Clear Field-Logistics Policies

Set and communicate workable vehicle and dispatch practices, including any tax implications tied to take-home use.

Match Your Workforce Planning to Capability

Align staffing and coverage plans to certification timelines so workload expectations match staff capacity.

Center Retention in Total-Compensation Planning

Combine benefits and paid-time flexibility, such as ten-hour, four-day workweeks, with wage actions to improve job sustainability when affordability pressures rise.

Culture and Employee Support

Departments described culture as a daily experience shaped by trust, communication, and visible support for the work. They emphasized that engagement and recognition practices can support retention when they fit field realities and when leadership creates feedback loops that lead to action rather than merely circulating information.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- low morale when poor fit or negative behavior persists,
- perceived unfairness when contributions are not recognized,
- perception among employees of weak organizational understanding or support, and
- engagement approaches that do not match how field staff work.

Strategies to Mitigate Culture and Employee-Support Challenges

Create Structured Feedback Loops

Create forums or regular engagement mechanisms that surface issues early and reinforce leadership responsiveness.

Align Recognition with Field Conditions

Recognize staff in ways that match their schedules and work locations. Do not restrict acts of employee recognition to centralized events.

Make Paid Time and Other Benefits Easier to Use

Adjust leave and benefit practices to improve day-to-day usability and perceived support.

Develop Wellness Incentives

Offer wellness support, such as mental health or nutrition counseling, that employees can readily use as a signal of organizational commitment to employee wellbeing.



EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS



THE EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS PERFORMANCE STRATEGY SESSION highlighted employee retention as a requirement for maintaining service continuity in a twenty-four-seven, year-round operating environment. The discussion directly connected retention and recruitment. Participants noted that the workplace conditions and organizational signals influencing employee retention also play a significant role in attracting candidates and supporting their success during the early stages of employment. Because emergency-communications centers depend on highly specialized role-specific knowledge that may take several years to fully develop, participants emphasized retention timeframes that exceed standard early-tenure benchmarks.

Three practical themes from the session can inform local government decision-making:

1. Retention is defined by performance and proficiency rather than head count alone, particularly in roles that require extended skill development and cultural fit.
2. Retention is best measured through complementary indicators that examine who leaves, when they leave, and why, especially during the initial one-to-three-year period.
3. Retention functions as an organization-wide strategy, aligning compensation, recognition, and structural support for the emergency-communications role.

Defining Retention

Emergency-communications practitioners defined retention as keeping engaged employees in the department long enough to build and sustain the workforce needed for reliable operations. This definition focuses on having stable staffing levels and employees who remain committed to their work. Retention was consistently connected to maintaining positive energy, a functional culture, and a service orientation.

The session also positioned retention as a function of organizational structure and management practices, not merely employee preference. Departments described retention as something leadership can influence through the work environment, coaching, support, growth opportunities, and competitive compensation. Participants also linked retention to internal development, including promoting from within when feasible and creating pathways that allow employees to grow within the department.

What Is Good Retention?

Practitioners described good retention as retaining employees who strengthen operations rather than simply maintaining staffing levels. Good retention occurs when experienced, reliable employees remain long enough to sustain performance, support newer staff, and reduce operational strain.

A key feature of good retention is knowledge continuity. Because emergency-communications roles require extended skill development, departments benefit when employees remain beyond initial proficiency. Participants frequently cited five years as a meaningful benchmark for operational maturity, with longer tenures contributing to greater training capacity and shift stability.

Internal advancement was also viewed as a positive outcome, as it reflects intentional **workforce planning**. Movement within the department can signal healthy development, provided operational coverage remains stable.

Importantly, good retention includes employee-performance standards. Departments emphasized that strong retention means keeping employees who demonstrate professionalism, reliability, and alignment with operational expectations. Retention is considered successful when high-performing employees choose to remain and when their presence supports team effectiveness.

What Is Bad Retention?

Practitioners defined bad retention as either losing capable employees or retaining employees who undermine performance and culture. Both were operational liabilities.

High turnover among trained, reliable employees creates immediate strain. When experienced staff leave, departments lose institutional knowledge, increase training burdens on remaining employees, and often rely more heavily on overtime. Frequent early-tenure departures are particularly costly because they represent a loss of investment before employees reach full proficiency.

At the same time, participants said that retaining employees who do not meet performance or behavioral expectations was equally harmful. They emphasized that staffing pressure can lead departments to tolerate poor fit, weak accountability, or disengagement among employees to

avoid creating vacancies. Over time, this can erode morale, increase supervisory burden, and contribute to the departure of strong performers who do not want to work in a low-accountability environment.

Bad retention was also linked to reliability and workplace conduct. Patterns such as chronic attendance issues, negative peer interactions, and resistance to performance standards can have outsized effects in a twenty-four-seven environment, where employees rely on one another's consistency.

Practitioners said that retention quality matters as much as retention quantity. Maintaining head count without establishing clear standards may prevent a short-term vacancy, but it can contribute to longer-term instability.

Measuring Retention

Practitioners agreed that no single measure adequately captures retention in emergency communications. They identified a small set of indicators that, when considered together, help departments assess overall workforce stability and pinpoint where risks are concentrated across the employee life cycle.

Practitioner-Identified Indicators

Core measures discussed in the strategy session included the following.

Turnover Rate

Turnover rate remains a baseline measure, but participants stressed the importance of distinguishing between expected turnover (such as retirement or internal advancement) and avoidable turnover. Departments also noted that turnover should be reviewed by position type to identify concentrated risk areas.

Tenure

Years of service provide insight into experience depth and succession risk. Practitioners recommended examining both average tenure and the distribution of tenure across the workforce. A department with many employees under three years of service may face training strain, while a department with clustered long tenures may face simultaneous-retirement exposure.

Milestone Retention Points

Participants described specific service milestones as meaningful checkpoints. Three years was viewed as a moderate benchmark, while five years was frequently cited as a stronger indicator of proficiency and stability. Tracking how many employees remain at these points helps departments understand whether they are retaining staff long enough to achieve operational maturity.

Vacancy Rates and Duration

Vacancy rates and the length of time that positions remain unfilled were described as operational indicators closely tied to retention. Prolonged vacancies increase overtime, compress training capacity, and elevate burnout risk.

Employee Feedback

Exit interviews, **stay interviews**, and employee surveys were described as essential qualitative measures. Practitioners emphasized actively requesting feedback rather than relying solely on resignation patterns to identify issues.

Organizational Movement

Internal transfers may increase departmental turnover statistics while benefiting the broader organization. Participants encouraged reviewing movement patterns carefully before categorizing them as negative retention outcomes.

Participation in Incentive Programs

Participation rates in **longevity pay**, certification incentives, tuition reimbursement, or career-development programs can signal whether retention tools are aligned with employee priorities. Low participation may indicate communication gaps, misalignment between incentives and employee needs, or structural barriers to access. High participation, particularly across tenure groups, can indicate that incentives are reinforcing retention goals.

Retention-Related Benchmarking Project Metrics

Emergency-communications departments can use Benchmarking Project metrics to measure their retention. Benchmarking data can establish staffing “denominators” for retention indicators. These metrics do not capture retention directly, but they signal workplace pressure, employee career development, or staffing instability.

Hiring and Positions

Approved staffing numbers are essential to tell the story of tenures and vacancies. Use the split between approved and nonfunded seats to interpret whether staffing gaps are driven by funding capacity or by hiring and retention outcomes. Tenure and vacancies should also be examined by position type to see concentrated risk areas. Benchmarking Project metrics for this measure include

- the approved NC 911 board-funded seat count,
- the nonfunded seat count,
- approved telecommunicator **full-time equivalents** (FTEs),
- approved administrative FTEs,
- telecommunicators hired,
- call-taking-only positions, and
- dispatch positions.

Workload and Staffing Pressure

Rising call volume can overburden staff, leading to burnout and turnover. Departments can monitor call trends to identify workload-related burnout risks and manage staffing pressures. Benchmarking Project metrics for staffing pressure in this area include the number of

- 911 calls per FTE,
- administrative calls,
- text-to-911 calls,

- outgoing calls,
- calls for service dispatched, and
- dispatch volumes by type.

Workforce Support and Development

Training data can be a tool to show employee engagement, readiness for succession, and whether departments are retaining employees long enough to reach operational maturity, with significant training. Quality assurance metrics can be an indicator of support linked to training and coaching capacity. The Benchmarking Project uses the following metrics for workforce support and development:

- hours of mandatory training per FTE,
- hours of optional training per FTE, and
- calls reviewed for quality assurance per FTE.

Service Performance and Timeliness

High service performance and low response times to calls can show that a department is retaining quality employees. The Benchmarking Project's metrics for timeliness in this service area includes timeliness in answering calls and in processing high-priority calls.

Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention

Retention challenges in emergency communications rarely stem from a single issue. Departments must manage a combination of compensation pressures, limited advancement opportunities, supervisory capacity, demanding work conditions, and organizational culture. In practice, these factors often reinforce one another, making it harder to keep experienced staff and maintain a stable workforce. Effective retention strategies rely not on one-time fixes but on coordinated changes to address daily working conditions and long-term career sustainability.

Compensation and Economic Competitiveness

Compensation emerged as a consistent retention pressure, shaped by both external labor markets and local cost conditions. The session also discussed the risks of different pay structures. A strong focus on starting pay can improve recruitment but can also increase **pay compression** and weaken incentives for experienced staff to stay.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- high housing costs in the jurisdiction, which can drive job changes even when employees value their positions;
- immediate salary expectations from younger employees;
- internal compensation competition, particularly when nonemergency (e.g., 311) operators receive comparable pay for significantly less-stressful work;
- weak incentives for experienced staff to stay, caused by pay compression; and
- overuse of overtime and holiday pay.

Strategies to Mitigate Compensation and Economic-Competitiveness Challenges

Conduct Regular Compensation Studies

Professional **compensation studies** can help department leaders understand whether pay remains competitive in their labor markets and where compression may affect experienced staff. Some practitioners also used pay studies as the basis for explaining pay adjustments to administrators and elected officials.

Offer Longevity Pay

Some local government leaders use retention bonuses tied to years of service to reward experienced staff for reaching key service milestones. Longevity pay is especially useful in emergency communications, where operational proficiency and institutional knowledge build over time.

Combine Compensation Increases

A mix of **cost-of-living adjustments**, **merit-based raises**, and career-development pay can create a transparent progression model. Practitioners said that this approach helped employees see a future in their departments rather than focusing only on entry pay.

Adjust Overtime Assignments

After studying overtime patterns, some practitioners created overtime assignments ahead of time to reduce employee frustration with last-minute assignments. The strategy improved predictability and perceived fairness for employees in some jurisdictions.

Communicate Benefits Clearly

Instead of offering new benefits, some practitioners focused on providing clearer information to staff and candidates about their compensation packages. Emphasizing available benefits can give departments an advantage over competing employers that offer less-stressful work but similar pay.

Career Development and Training

Practitioners consistently linked retention to development capacity. Emergency-communications roles require sustained skill acquisition, and employees often decide within the first few years whether they see a future in the department. When advancement pathways are unclear or development stalls, turnover risk increases.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- limited internal capacity for professional development;
- sustained skill-acquisition requirements to be proficient in the job;
- unclear pathways to advancement;
- multiyear proficiency curves for operators;
- new expectations from younger employees, who tend to prioritize early progression, pay growth, and working conditions;
- difficulty balancing call volume and mentoring when short-staffed;
- reduced access to conferences, certifications, and development programs because of budget limitations;

- increasing training demands because of rapid technology changes, especially when rollout outpaces support; and
- differences in organizational scale (small centers versus large centers) affecting the skills of incoming employees from other jurisdictions.

Strategies to Mitigate Career-Development and Training Challenges

Increase Access to Training and Conferences

Practitioners said that external training is important for employees to build emergency-communications skills. With an adequate training budget and operational planning, employees can attend opportunities without creating excessive backfill burdens. Expanding access to training and conferences can also signal that the department is investing in employees for the long-term.

Reimburse Relevant Tuition and Fees

Education support is a retention tool, particularly when employees seek formal credentials. For some employees, this kind of support may strengthen long-term commitment by linking personal development with continued service.

Structure Rookie Academies

Emergency-communications skills are not always easily transferable from other roles, so some jurisdictions use rookie academies to help new hires acquire essential skills. Academies may also create more consistency in early training and reduce future confusion about expectations.

Invest in Simulation-Based Training

Integrating artificial intelligence tools into training has been useful for several practitioners. Simulations can mimic real callers, help employees become comfortable with high-stress scenarios, and provide immediate feedback that mirrors the real work setting.

Create Career Ladders

Practitioners described **career ladder** positions (like Telecommunicator I, II, and III) to keep advancement inside the department and to build a pipeline of future trainers and supervisors.

Plan for Succession

Succession planning supports retention by reducing uncertainty about employees' futures with the department. Local government leaders also use succession planning to prepare for turnover in key roles without relying only on external hiring.

Get Employee Buy-In for Training New Employees

Experienced staff often carry significant training responsibilities. Department representatives described the need to support trainers and to build a culture in which training is valued and shared rather than being treated as an informal burden placed repeatedly on the same employees.

Supervision and Employee Accountability

The session connected retention and department outcomes to the quality of supervision. Supervisory support emerged as a major factor in whether employees remain engaged over time. Departments also described structural barriers to holding employees accountable for their performance.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- inconsistent frontline supervision;
- unmotivated employees who require active support to sustain their engagement,
- limited ability to address persistent performance problems due to long termination processes;
- the tension that staffing shortages can create between maintaining shift coverage and enforcing timely accountability;
- declines in team morale or team performance, stemming from negative individual behaviors and poor performance;
- pressure to retain probationary employees in order to reduce vacancies; and
- early signs of poor performance that get ignored, including high-intensity training calls that can indicate poor fit.

Strategies to Mitigate Supervision and Employee–Accountability Challenges

Build Stronger Supervisory Systems

Supervisors can be trained to be more supportive and consistent. Practitioners described the use of certified training officers and floor supervisors to provide coaching support in real time during calls.

Promote Based on Leadership Skills

A technically skilled employee may not succeed as a supervisor if they cannot coach, build trust, and manage interpersonal dynamics in a stressful environment. Several local government leaders said that they prioritize leadership ability during the promotion process.

Hire Based on Fit

Early screening for motivation can reduce downstream performance issues and help departments identify applicants who are more likely to work well within the demands of emergency communications. This strategy also prevents poor-fit hires and avoids relying on corrective systems later.

Use Coaching to Strengthen Accountability

Coaching can give employees a fair opportunity to improve while still preserving performance expectations. Participants discussed the value of focusing on improvement, where appropriate, while avoiding long-term tolerance of harmful performance or behavioral patterns.

Work Environment and Operations

Emergency-communications centers must have around-the-clock staffing, which, practitioners said, increases fatigue risk and complicates scheduling fairness. Practitioners also described the growing challenge related to the nature of public interaction: increasingly rude and

impatient callers. The fact that less intensive call-taking work offers pay comparable to that of emergency communications was also discussed.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- atypical hours of operation, including nights and holidays, when call volume may increase;
- increased incivility and impatience from callers and first responders;
- compassion fatigue, emotional exhaustion, and burnout, particularly for experienced staff who have handled high volumes of stressful calls;
- overtime pressure created by compounding vacancies;
- insufficient recovery periods, resulting in greater cognitive and emotional loads per shift; and
- insufficient training and support to implement rapidly changing technology.

Strategies to Mitigate Work-Environment and Operations Challenges

Plan Overtime

Create overtime schedules in advance to reduce the stress of last-minute coverage and improve perceived fairness among employees.

Structure Recovery Time

Implementing paid lunch, longer breaks, and designated workout or fitness time when feasible can help staff decompress after stressful events. Many departments also strive to offer childcare options to their telecommunicators but are restrained by the cost. Practitioners described these supports as signals that the organization recognizes the strain of emergency communications.

Create Public-Facing-Gratitude Channels

Structured caller-feedback tools allow the public to recognize the positive impact of dispatchers. Some departments use platforms that send text surveys to callers and route feedback to supervisors, categorized as positive, neutral, or negative. This approach gives the public a structured way to express gratitude and provides employees with tangible evidence of impact, which departments viewed as supportive of morale and legitimacy.

Update Facilities

Departments described facility upgrades, new furniture, upgraded equipment, and in some cases, building new communications centers, as tangible supports that can strengthen morale and improve recruitment by signaling investment in those functions.

Culture and Employee Support

Practitioners described how negative employees can pull focus away from mission work and create persistent culture and morale problems. Because the work is continuous and interdependent, culture problems can spread quickly and affect both employee performance and retention of high-performing staff.

Practitioners also described emergency communications as sometimes siloed from the rest of the public safety system, particularly from field operations. Dispatchers are not always

recognized as first responders, which affects morale in several jurisdictions. This separation can weaken shared identity and contribute to the perception that emergency-communications work is less understood by leadership and by peer agencies.

Relationships with organizational leadership, including administration and elected officials, directly influence culture in many jurisdictions. Poor understanding of emergency-communications work at the leadership level can lead to misaligned expectations, incomplete support, and decisions that emphasize head count metrics without fully addressing the conditions that create turnover.

Strategies to Mitigate Culture and Employee-Support Challenges

Emphasize Clear, Consistent Communication

Leadership can use communication to reinforce respect and clarify expectations. Practitioners also found that sharing emergency-communications stories can help maintain a department's visibility across the organization.

Prioritize Employee Well-Being

One-time wellness initiatives are not as effective as routine well-being practices in the workplace. Practitioners suggested that respectful daily interactions, flexibility where possible, and attention to work-life balance may do a great deal to shape whether employees feel supported.

Address Persistently Negative Employees

Removing the employees who create the most negative workplace effects and avoiding long-term tolerance of negative behaviors protects the culture and morale.

Build Culture During Recruitment

Screening for fit can reinforce the department's values. Commercials and social media are helpful for helping recruit new populations. Local government leaders said that this strategy prevents mismatches that could otherwise become problems later.

Improve Integration with Field Operations

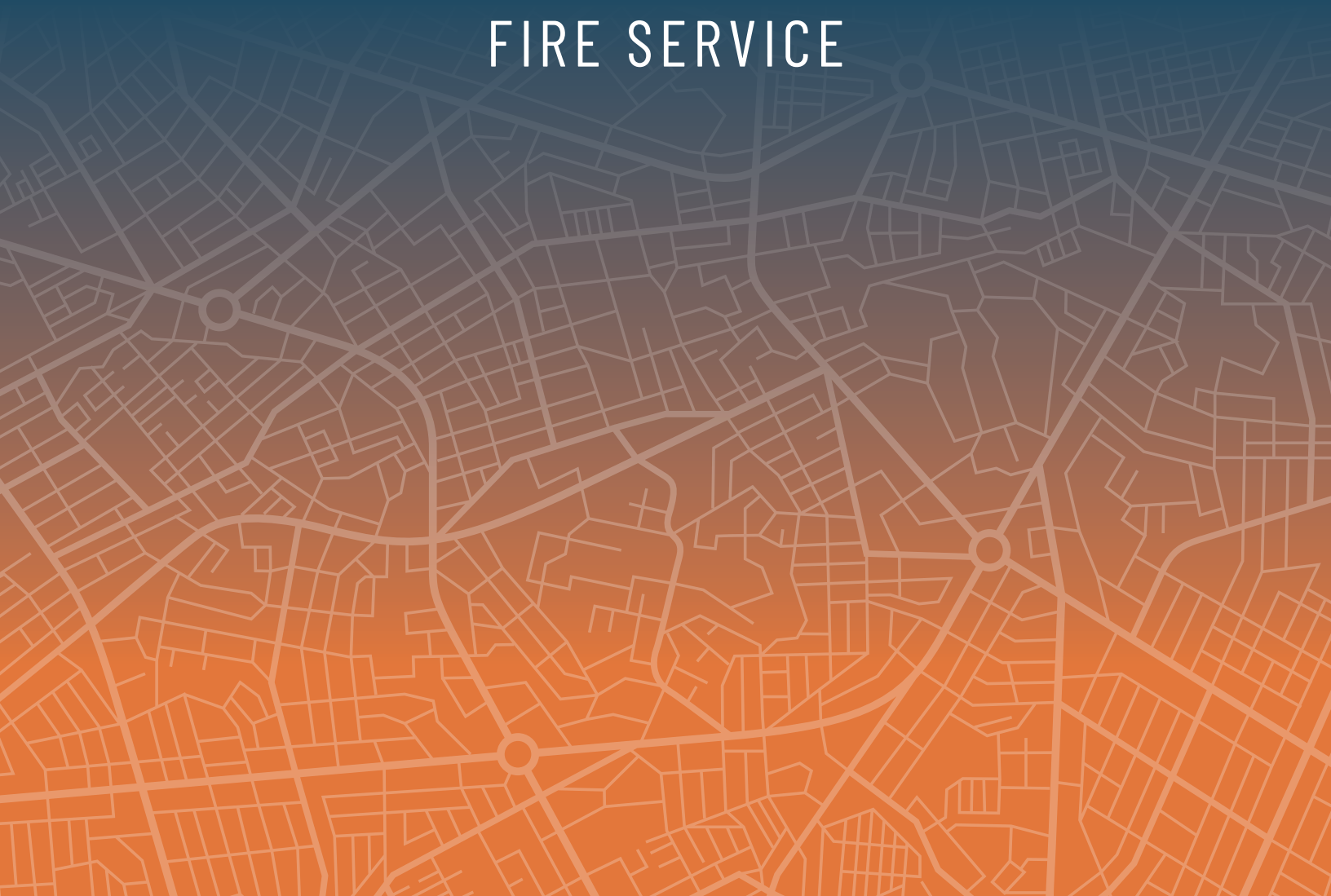
Some jurisdictions host shared trainings to create stronger contact with field responders and strengthen recognition of dispatch as essential operational work. Over time, that integration may improve mutual understanding and reduce the sense that emergency communications is separate from other public safety services, such as fire and police.

Redesign the Organization

Models in which the emergency-communications division operates as a stand-alone call center can strengthen identity and reduce the perception of being peripheral to public safety decision-making. This kind of change may not fit every local government, but practitioners suggested that structure can influence whether employees feel respected and understood within the broader public safety system.



FIRE SERVICE





THE FIRE SERVICE PERFORMANCE STRATEGY SESSION focused on employee retention as a practical-management issue that directly affects staffing stability and service continuity. Participants framed retention as more than keeping positions filled.

Several themes emerged that inform practical decision-making for local governments:

1. Retention practices should prioritize keeping high-performing employees and maintaining operational capability, not simply minimizing separations.
2. A useful retention picture requires multiple indicators, including tenure, reasons for departures, vacancy durations, and employee experiences, not just annual turnover.
3. Retention strategies work best as a coordinated set of actions across compensation, hiring and onboarding, career development, supervision, work conditions, and culture.

Defining Retention

Departments described retention as the ability to consistently keep quality team members who support the mission, maintain staffing levels, and build experience over time. In practice, this definition entailed employee satisfaction, competitive pay and benefits, career progression, and the organization's ability to recover the cost of onboarding and training. Retention also included attention to "natural" attrition (such as retirement) versus separations that organizations viewed as avoidable or disruptive.

For fire service, retention is characterized by a longer time horizon than other departments. Long tenure matters in fire service because training pipelines and qualification requirements can make staffing losses difficult to replace quickly, even when hiring interest exists.

What Is Good Retention?

Good retention was characterized at the session as keeping employees who positively contribute to operations and culture and who continue developing over a sustained period. Jurisdictions emphasized employee engagement, mission alignment, pride in work, and positive team dynamics as indicators that people remain by choice and stay invested in the organization's success.

Stability is also an element of good retention. Departments described a "healthy" environment as one where vacancies do not linger, transitions do not destabilize crews, and the organization can sustain performance expectations because it retains skilled personnel and maintains a pipeline for progression. In this view, retention includes both keeping strong employees and positioning them through development and promotion so the department remains capable as senior staff retire or move on.

What Is Bad Retention?

Practitioners described bad retention as keeping employees who erode morale, underperform, resist improvement, or create conflict. Some participants had poor experiences when their organization tolerated issues to avoid vacancies or administrative effort. Retention becomes harmful when it preserves staffing numbers but weakens service delivery and the team.

Bad retention also included outcomes that affect external standing. Some departments described how a poor reputation can spread among peer fire departments when a station struggles with culture or accountability. That reputational effect can then reinforce staffing challenges by making recruitment harder and increasing the likelihood that high-performing employees will look elsewhere.

Several participants distinguished bad retention from low turnover; sometimes separation is appropriate, even after investing in an employee. Focusing too heavily on recouping costs can encourage a "sunk cost" mindset that delays necessary separation decisions for poor performance. A retention strategy that ignores fit can trap the organization into keeping the wrong people and losing the ones who carry the work and culture forward.

Measuring Retention

Departments described retention measurement as a set of indicators that, taken together, show whether the organization retains the workforce it needs and whether the employees who stay support performance and culture.

Practitioner-Identified Indicators

Core measures discussed in the strategy session included the following.

Turnover Rate

Practitioners in the session commonly use **turnover rates** as a retention measure. If possible, it is helpful to track turnover by retirements or other separations, but also by job classification, pay grade, or rank. The session emphasized that both the quality and quantity of turnover in a department matters.

Vacancy Measures

Departments can monitor their **vacancy rates**. A large number of vacancies may mean that existing staff will become overworked, which could become a reason for decreased retention.

Reasons for Leaving

Exit interviews and surveys help distinguish regrettable departures, when high-performing employees leave, from nonregrettable departures. Some departments also track where departing employees go and ask supervisors whether losses were preventable or part of a natural transition.

Tenure

How long employees stay in the department is an important measure of current retention and can be a predictor of future retention. Measures of tenure that practitioners found useful included median tenure, the combined years of service on the team, and how many employees stay after ten years.

Employee Experience

Asking about employee satisfaction, employee engagement, and whether employees are actively seeking other opportunities can be a sign of future retention. Surveys and open conversations are useful ways to collect data about employee experience.

Return on Investment

Fire departments have high onboarding costs. Participants said that it is useful to calculate whether employees are, on average, staying long enough to avoid financial loss from training and onboarding.

Career Progression

Employees' ability to grow in the department or the limits on their professional development are important indicators of retention. The number of employees receiving promotions and lateral transfers, particularly into supervisory roles, can show the department's ability to support career development.

Retention-Related Benchmarking Project Metrics

Performance and workload shape employee experience. Departments can use several benchmarking examples to illustrate why apparent outliers in performance data do not automatically signal a retention or management problem.

Hiring and Positions

How many firefighters, fire inspectors, and administrators the department approves versus how many positions it fills is important for workload, response times, overtime hours, and other areas where retention problems can later occur. The Benchmarking Project uses the following related hiring metrics:

- approved fire-inspector **full-time equivalents** (FTEs),
- approved firefighter FTEs, and
- approved administration FTEs.

Workload and Staffing Pressure

The average workload may rise in low-incident environments because fixed staffing and readiness costs spread across fewer calls. The Benchmarking Project measures this with the number of fires or incidents per approved FTE.

Service Performance and Timeliness

High service performance and short response times to calls can show that a department is retaining quality and motivated employees. This can be measured with the following Benchmarking Project metrics:

- fire dispatch time, turnout time, travel time, and response time;
- time from arrival to first water on fire;
- time from arrival to incident stabilization;
- nonfire dispatch time, turnout time, travel time, and response time;
- state-mandated inspections completed; and
- code violations and code violations cleared within ninety days.

Training and Employee Development

Separating recruit training from other training categories can help avoid mixing one-time academy costs with continuing development. The Benchmarking Project's metrics for employee development in this area include

- training expenses per FTE,
- training-division expenses per FTE,
- hours of operations training or internal training and development per FTE, and
- participation in internal training and development per FTE.

Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention

Participants in the strategy session emphasized that retention challenges often emerge from the interaction of compensation pressures, lengthy hiring and training pipelines, limited career-growth opportunities, supervisory capacity, demanding work conditions, and department culture. Because these factors reinforce one another, retention problems can affect not just current staffing but also morale, workload, service continuity, and long-term organizational capability.

Practitioners described retention as an ongoing management responsibility that requires coordinated action across pay and benefits, onboarding, employee development, leadership, work environment, and organizational support. Such a coordinated approach can help departments retain high-performing employees, reduce avoidable turnover, and sustain a stable and effective workforce over time.

Compensation and Economic Competitiveness

Compensation pressures affect recruitment and retention, especially as costs rise for both jurisdictions and employees. Poor pay can lead to unwanted vacancies and turnover, which can create broader organizational effects.

Departments identified the following compensation challenges:

- competition from nearby jurisdictions offering higher pay;
- rising cost-of-living preventing employees from living in the jurisdiction they serve in;
- **pay compression**, when newer employees' starting pay is close to or above the pay of experienced staff;
- demand for meaningful benefits in addition to base salary; and
- differing employee preferences by career stage.

Strategies to Mitigate Compensation and Economic-Competitiveness Challenges

Use Merit-Based Adjustments

Merit-based raises can be used to reward good performance and motivate staff. Some participants said that they connect merit decisions to clear performance expectations and annual evaluations so that employees can better understand how pay changes are determined.

Expand Longevity-Pay Elements

Longevity-pay structures can reduce the incentive for experienced personnel to leave at mid-career points, and it recognizes long-term staff who carry institutional knowledge and operational competence.

Address Pay Compression

Adjusting the pay structure can preserve meaningful spacing between experience levels and ranks, particularly after entry-level pay changes to meet market conditions. Some jurisdictions use **compensation studies** to differentiate pay between newer and tenured personnel.

Offer Retiree Health Coverage

Because of the physical demands of fire service, firefighters sometimes retire or depart at the end of their career, before Medicare coverage starts. Health care bridges for retirees can reduce late-career departures driven by health care timing.

Hiring and Onboarding

Fire department hiring processes are lengthy and resource intensive, increasing the impact of early departures for many departments in the session.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- long timelines from selection to independent assignment, which raise operational costs;
- delays in the hiring process, sometimes leading good candidates to go to other employers;
- expensive training processes, including fire academies;
- the struggle to attract qualified applicants and the need to hire from a limited candidate pool; and
- increased workload and overtime hours because of vacancies.

Strategies to Mitigate Hiring and Onboarding Challenges

Place New Hires with Strong Crew Members

Having supportive coworkers to learn from can reinforce good expectations and reduce early frustration on the job for new employees. Some departments also pair this approach with informal or formal mentoring to support cultural integration and skills development.

Pay for Overtime During Onboarding

Using overtime as a reward and a scheduling tool can accelerate the completion of training hours and motivate new employees during the hiring process. It can also support staffing coverage while recruits move through training and steps to field readiness.

Strengthen Recruitment Outreach and Messaging

Improving recruitment through better marketing and broader outreach can create a larger, more diverse applicant pool. Targeted efforts may be needed to reach minority groups that have been historically underrepresented in fire service.

Career Development and Training

Participants identified training and development as both a retention driver and a budget challenge. Employees may seek other environments that offer broader career-development pathways, more calls, or more specialized teams when there are not robust career-development options.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- limited funding for training;
- insufficient opportunities for employee growth;

- **career ladder** stagnation, particularly when rank structures limit advancement opportunities;
- strained operational capacity stymying the department's ability to plan and train for succession; and
- fewer specialties for employees in smaller jurisdictions and lower-call-volume settings, which can limit their potential to gain diverse experiences.

Strategies to Mitigate Career-Development and Training Challenges

Incentivize Education

Benefits that pay for conferences, education expenses, or tuition reimbursement encourage development and reinforce a long-term career path within the organization.

Expand Specialty Opportunities

Creating specialized teams or adding new responsibilities can give employees additional skill pathways without requiring them to leave the organization to find that experience.

Rotate Departmental Roles

Rotating employees into different positions can broaden the team's experience and maintain employee engagement when promotional openings are limited. Some departments use scheduled rotations to build depth across stations, functions, and operational responsibilities.

Supervision and Employee Accountability

Departments described supervision capacity as central to retention. Jurisdictions experience challenges moving firefighters into management roles because of the shift in skill requirements.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- weak supervisory capacity due to a lack of support or training,
- reluctance to elevate positive leadership voices,
- employee mistrust of central administration,
- inconsistent support from town leadership in the budget and programs, and
- shifted stress onto high-performing employees, increasing burnout risk.

Strategies to Mitigate Supervision and Employee-Accountability Challenges

Use Shared-Leadership Structures

- Committees and employee representatives for leadership can increase employee buy-in, bring operational insights to light, and expand participation in decision-making. During the session, participants shared stories of success in forming hiring-focused committees, fitness committees, and policy-review committees.

Provide Leadership and Supervisor Training

Leadership-development opportunities focused on personnel management, communication, and practical leadership skills, especially for captains and other first-line supervisors.

Build Clearer Internal Pathways to Leadership

Ambitious, engaged employees need developed paths to entering management roles. Participants explained that cultivating strong internal leadership candidates prevents the department from relying on difficult external hiring processes or last-minute promotion decisions when vacancies occur.

Work Environment and Operations

Firefighters work in uniquely difficult environments. In some jurisdictions, fire employees leave the profession entirely due to the demands of the job.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- employee burnout driven by schedule demands, exposure to traumatic events, and high workload;
- schedule variations, like twenty-four-hour shifts, that place strain on employees and their families;
- inflexibility when employees' life circumstances change;
- staffing shortages, which can increase overtime and reduce recovery time from stressful events, and
- increasing service demand from community growth, which can lead different stations to face very different demands.

Strategies to Mitigate Work-Environment and Operations Challenges

Offer Caregiver Leave

Flexible leave options can better match workforce needs at all life stages and reduce unnecessary separations for family responsibilities. Participants also emphasized the importance of clarifying the eligibility rules for caregiver leave to employees so that they know it is an option when they need it.

Evaluate Alternative Schedules

Schedule variations that allow for more consecutive days off were appealing to employees in several jurisdictions. For example, implementing a forty-eight-hour weekly schedule can improve work-life fit for some employees.

Rotate Stations

Cycling practices that move employees between higher-volume and lower-volume stations provide more time for recovery. Practitioners also recognized that this strategy can reduce sustained burnout exposure.

Align Staffing Assignments with Station Demand

Participants explained that busier stations have added workload and stress. Managers could assign employees to such stations who perform the best under stress.

Culture and Employee Support

Maintaining a strong culture is essential in the high stakes of fire stations. Participants emphasized that culture affects whether employees feel pride in the organization and whether they can envision a long-term career within it. A lack of investment in this area can make employees feel unsupported and contribute to lower morale and operational frustration.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- persistent negative behavior and “bad apples” in the workplace;
- changes in the layout of firehouses, like shifting from dorm-style living to more segmented or communal layouts, which change the station’s culture and sense of cohesion; and
- outdated facilities, fleets, and daily-use resources.

Strategies to Mitigate Culture and Employee-Support Challenges

Regularly Recognize High-Performing Staff

Consistent appreciation virtually and in person signals that leadership values day-to-day contributions.

Build Camaraderie Intentionally

Strong team cohesion matters in a shift-based environment, where informal culture can strongly influence retention. Annual events, like sports competitions or cook outs, can foster team building and a strong culture.

Create Small Quality-of-Life Supports

Small additions to fire stations can improve the lived experience of the workplace, such as therapy dogs or garden space.

Invest in Employee Satisfaction as an Operating Priority

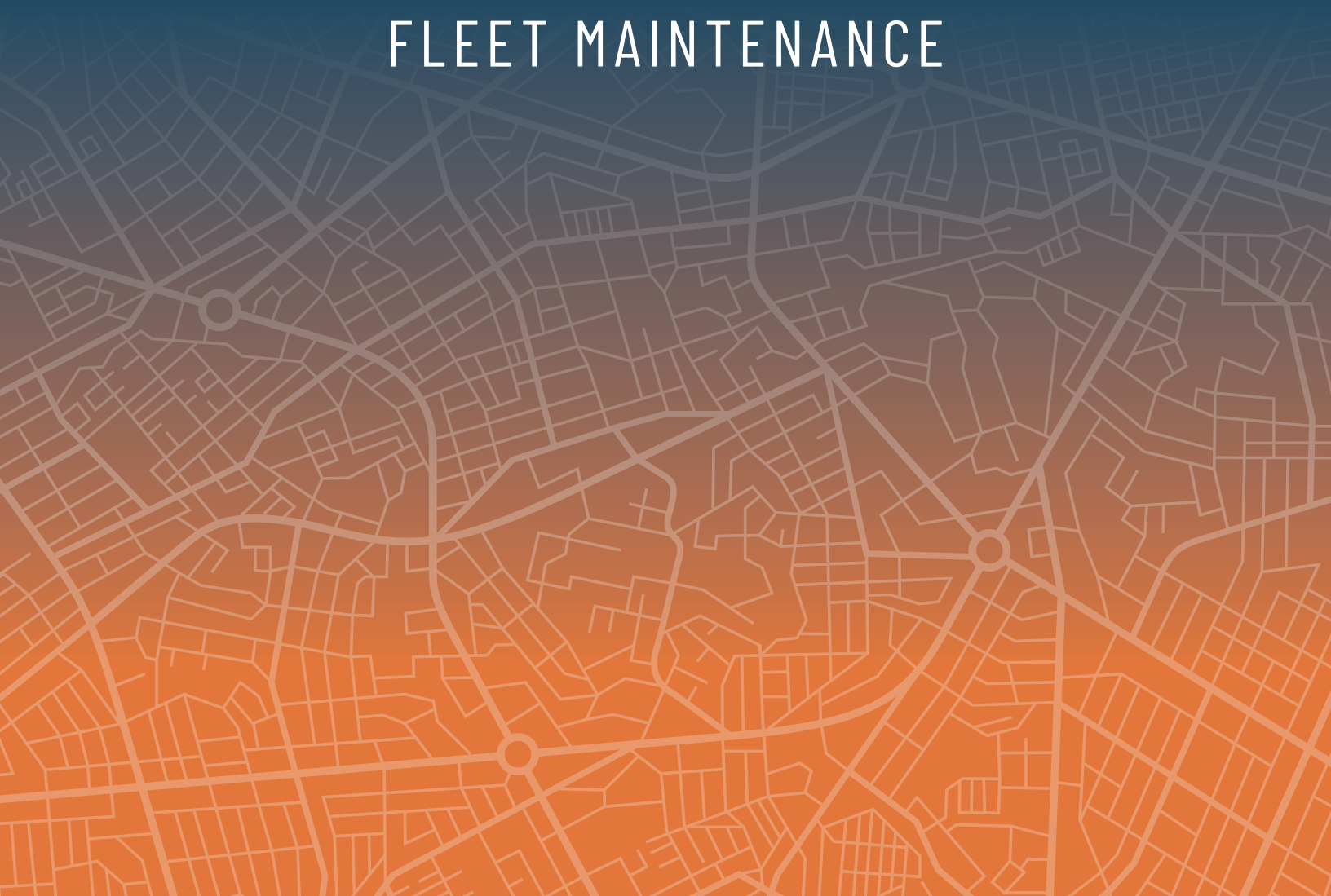
Morale is not separate from staffing strategy. Administering regular employee-satisfaction surveys and implementing staff suggestions shows leadership’s commitment and the value placed on employees.

Educate Employees About Benefits and Resources

Informed staff can seek the support they need for their mental health and other needs from on-the-job stressors. Employees value benefits they can realistically access and use.



FLEET MAINTENANCE





THE FLEET MAINTENANCE PERFORMANCE STRATEGY SESSION brought participants from various jurisdictions together to share perspectives and operational experiences related to retention. Participants compared approaches to workforce stability, identified recurring barriers, and discussed strategies to sustain technical capacity within fleet operations. Participants emphasized that fleet retention is shaped by the distinct realities of technical-service delivery, including specialized-skill development, production demands, shop conditions, supervision practices, and the operational impact of vacancies on vehicle readiness and service continuity.

Three key takeaways emerged from this session:

1. Retention in fleet maintenance should focus on keeping qualified, productive technicians who contribute positively to shop performance rather than simply maintaining filled positions.
2. Fleet retention is captured through a combination of workforce stability and operational measures. Departments benefit from monitoring turnover, vacancies, tenure patterns, voluntary separations, and fleet-specific performance indicators to better understand capacity risk and continuity.
3. Retention strategies are most effective when they holistically address compensation competitiveness, hiring and onboarding practices, career-development structures, supervisory accountability, scheduling practices, and the adequacy of tools, facilities, and organizational support.

Defining Retention

Fleet-maintenance practitioners defined retention as the ability to keep employees long enough to meet operational needs and sustain shop capability. Because fleet-maintenance positions often require specialized, time-intensive training, participants emphasized the importance of viewing retention as a life-cycle issue, from hiring and development to eventual offboarding. Retention therefore encompasses the ability not only to recruit and develop staff but also to keep the right employees engaged and to maintain continuity so that training investments translate into long-term capability. Participants' concept of retention was broad in scope, including employees who remained within the organization even if they changed positions and moved between roles.

What Is Good Retention?

Good retention was defined as retaining employees who contribute to safe, reliable, and efficient maintenance operations over time. Practitioners identified several characteristics of good retention:

- Employees want to stay and continue developing their skills.
- The shop maintains knowledge and capability by supporting multiple experience levels.
- The department promotes or advances qualified staff internally when appropriate.
- Morale and productivity remain stable because expectations and accountability are clear.

Retention is successful when it preserves institutional knowledge and supports a pipeline of technicians who grow from entry-level competence to independent production and higher-skill roles.

What Is Bad Retention?

Bad retention was defined as keeping employees simply to avoid vacancies, even when fit or conduct undermines the department's operational functions. Practitioners raised several examples:

- The department retains staff to keep positions filled, regardless of performance.
- Underqualified or disruptive employees continue to be employed because separation processes are lengthy and difficult.
- Firing stagnates due to a limited hiring pool because fleet maintenance is a specialized skill.
- Poor behavior or inconsistent effort is overlooked due to supervisors' weak documentation or follow-through.

Additionally, bad retention has compounding effects in fleet maintenance: High performers, who tend to be more skilled in their roles, carry greater workloads. This leads to declines in morale and a struggle to attract and train new employees.

Measuring Retention

Fleet practitioners said that retention is best understood through a small, consistent set of indicators that show both staffing stability and operational effects. Participants described using a combination of workforce measures and qualitative signals, paired with fleet-specific performance indicators. Participants also noted that cross-jurisdiction benchmarking can be difficult when classification structures and system definitions vary, so consistent internal definitions remain important for interpreting trends over time.

Practitioner-Identified Indicators

Core measures discussed in the strategy session included the following.

Workforce Stability and Tenure

Tracking total turnover, **turnover rates** over time, and tenure patterns (length of employment / time of service) can help show whether staffing is stabilizing or functioning as a “revolving door.” Participants also referenced monitoring vacancy levels and vacancy duration, including small-shop contexts where even single vacancies are operationally significant.

Voluntary Separations (Excluding Retirements)

Monitoring the percentage of employees who voluntarily leave for reasons other than retirement helps to distinguish avoidable departures from expected separations and to understand where retention risk is concentrated.

Employee Morale and Engagement

Qualitative results from employee surveys and other morale indicators can identify retention risk not captured by turnover counts alone, including links between turnover patterns and morale.

Workforce Quality and Performance

Paying attention to quality and performance allows organizations to look beyond head count and assess whether they are retaining employees who contribute positively. Session participants said that work quality and overall team morale were practical indicators of whether a team was being strengthened by retention or undermined by performance issues.

Fleet Operational Performance

Capacity strain and declines in performance consistency can be detected with fleet-specific measures, including “comebacks” (repeat repairs within a period of roughly thirty days) and productivity measures such as billable hours relative to paid hours.

Fleet Composition and Maintenance Demand

The fleet’s size and makeup affect the technical demands placed on employees. Comparing the number of vehicles in different classes with related repair, labor hours, mileage, and age measures can help departments understand whether retention challenges are occurring in a more demanding operating environment or in areas requiring specialized skills. This indicator may be difficult to compare across jurisdictions due to varying class identifications from district to district.

Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention

The discussion treated retention as a coordinated-management problem. The most common challenges and the corresponding strategies are summarized below.

Compensation and Economic Competitiveness

Participants described compensation competitiveness as a persistent retention challenge for fleet operations, driven by direct competition with private shops and other employers for qualified technicians. Pay pressure was described as uneven across regions and particularly acute for senior technicians and specialized roles. Participants also noted that some employees prioritize immediate wage levels over longer-term benefits, contributing to early-career churn.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- competition with private sector shops and other employers for qualified technicians,
- elevated retention pressure for senior technicians and specialized roles,
- regional variation in pay pressure and market competitiveness,
- difficulty retaining employees who prioritize immediate wage levels over long-term benefits, and
- early-career churn linked to compensation expectations and market alternatives.

Strategies to Mitigate Compensation and Economic-Competitiveness Challenges

Use Periodic Compensation Studies and Classification Reviews

Periodic **compensation studies** will keep pay ranges aligned to market conditions, and review of job classifications and their responsibilities will allow current employee roles to better fit expectations.

Use Pay Tools to Target Specific Retention Pressure Points

Common pressure points in fleet-maintenance departments include second-shift coverage, specialized roles, or hard-to-fill skill sets. Directing resources towards these issues, such as shift-differential pay, tool allowances, and skill- or **merit-based raises**, will alleviate some of the problems they create.

Pair Pay Actions with Clear Progression Standards

Linking compensation to progression will create clarity so that employees can see how skill development translates into compensation growth.

Communicate Total Compensation in a Practical Way

Emphasize the values of benefit packages and pay progression while also acknowledging that some employees will prioritize immediate cash more than comprehensive benefits.

Hiring and Onboarding

Participants described hiring and onboarding as a retention pressure point for fleet operations because the candidate pool for technician roles is limited and training time directly reduces

concurrent shop capacity. When early turnover occurs, departments lose the time invested in onboarding and place additional workload pressure on experienced technicians, who must sustain production while bringing new employees up to speed.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- limited pools of candidates with relevant hands-on experience,
- training and onboarding demands that reduce day-to-day shop capacity,
- loss of training investment when new hires leave early,
- increased workloads for experienced technicians, who must cover production while training new staff, and
- compounded capacity strain when vacancies and early turnover occur in succession.

Strategies to Mitigate Hiring and Onboarding Challenges

Treat Onboarding Capacity as Part of the Production Plan

Build training time into shop scheduling instead of treating it as extra work. This helps reduce burnout for current employees and makes onboarding more manageable for new ones.

Review Minimum Qualifications for Job Relevance

Reassess degree requirements and other screening criteria to ensure they reflect the skills the job requires. This can widen the applicant pool and improve hiring fit.

Use Consistent Probation Checkpoints

Set clear review points early in employment to assess employee fit and performance. This helps departments address problems before they become harder to correct.

Strengthen Mentorship and Coaching for New Staff

Pair newer employees with experienced staff for practical guidance during early tenure. This supports skill development and can reduce early turnover.

Career Development and Training

Participants described limited **career ladder** structures as a retention challenge in fleet operations, particularly in departments with narrow technician classifications. When employees do not see a clear pathway to higher pay, skill recognition, or increased responsibility, they may pursue advancement opportunities elsewhere. Participants also noted succession risks in specialized roles when experienced employees near retirement without a clear internal-replacement pipeline.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- limited career ladder structures and narrow technician classifications,
- unclear pathways to higher pay or increased responsibility,
- employees' leaving to pursue advancement opportunities elsewhere,
- succession risks in specialized roles as experienced employees approach retirement, and
- limited internal pipelines to replace specialized skill sets and preserve institutional knowledge.

Strategies to Mitigate Career-Development and Training Challenges

Build a Technician-Advancement Pipeline

Develop internal talent through structured on-the-job training and mentorship. This helps to reduce reliance on a strong external labor market.

Tie Progression to Demonstrated Skills and Certifications

Connect advancement to verified skills or certifications where possible. This gives employees a clearer path forward and supports retention.

Use Reclassification and Internal Movement Intentionally

Adjust classifications and create internal-movement opportunities to retain capable employees. This can support advancement while opening entry-level opportunities.

Reinforce Mentorship and Knowledge Sharing

Pair newer staff with experienced technicians and encourage routine knowledge transfer. This supports early-tenure stability and preserves shop capability.

Plan for Knowledge Transfer in Specialized Roles

Use overlap periods, shadowing, and targeted development to prepare newer employees for hard-to-fill roles. Bring back retirees for a defined period to support transitions and transfer institutional knowledge. This can help stabilize operations during staffing changes and preserve technical knowledge during transitions.

Supervision and Employee Accountability

Participants described supervision as a key retention lever within fleet operations, shaping perceptions of fairness, workload distribution, accountability, and trust in the shop environment.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- variability in supervisory practices affecting fairness, workload distribution, and accountability;
- maintaining trust and consistent expectations within the shop environment; and
- limited leadership visibility and limited recognition of the fleet's operational role across the organization.

Strategies to Mitigate Supervision and Employee-Accountability Challenges

Increase the Frequency of Coaching and Performance Conversations

Hold regular coaching discussions instead of relying only on annual reviews. This allows supervisors to address issues earlier and reinforce expectations.

Document Employee Performance and Conduct Consistently

Maintain clear documentation of employee-performance issues, conduct concerns, and corrective actions. This supports fairer and more defensible supervision.

Use Operationalized Indicators to Support Supervision

Incorporate measures such as comeback tracking and basic productivity indicators into oversight. This gives supervisors more concrete information for coaching and follow-up.

Apply Standards and Accountability Consistently

Use regular coaching, documentation, and follow-through on employee-performance expectations. This protects morale by reducing uneven workload distribution and avoiding tolerance of persistent underperformance.

Work Environment and Operations

Participants saw work environment and operational conditions as direct drivers of retention in fleet operations. Limited shop space, fleet growth without corresponding facility expansion, and gaps in tools or supplies were identified as recurring constraints that increase day-to-day strain. Participants also noted that retention pressure rises when scheduling demands, particularly second-shift coverage, on-call expectations, and work-life conflicts, create conditions employees find difficult to sustain over time.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- limited shop space and facility constraints as fleet size and workload grow;
- fleet growth without matching expansion in facilities, tools, or operational resources;
- impeded productivity and increased frustration because of inadequate tools or supplies;
- second-shift-coverage challenges that affect staffing stability; and
- on-call expectations and work-life conflicts contributing to burnout and turnover risk.

Strategies to Mitigate Work-Environment and Operations Challenges

Align Facilities, Tools, and Equipment with Fleet Growth

Expand or update shop space, equipment, and operational resources as fleet demands increase. This helps reduce inefficiency and frustration.

Reduce the Burden on Employees of Paying for Tools Out of Pocket

Provide shop tools or tool allowances where appropriate. This can reduce a practical barrier to recruitment and retention.

Offer Schedule Flexibility

Use **flex time**, or alternative schedules, and shift-movement options when staffing levels allow. This can help departments respond to work-life pressures while maintaining coverage.

Manage On-Call Expectations Explicitly

Review on-call rotations and coverage expectations instead of letting them expand informally. This helps control burnout risk and clarify tradeoffs.

Culture and Employee Support

Participants said that culture and employee support shape whether employees feel valued, connected to the broader organization, and treated fairly in day-to-day work. Morale challenges were noted when fleet work is less visible, when leadership follow-through on staffing or basic operational needs is inconsistent, and when other departments do not understand fleet-capacity constraints. Participants also indicated that uneven accountability can increase retention risk when high performers perceive workload and expectations as unfair.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- low prominence of fleet work, contributing to perceptions of being undervalued;
- inconsistent leadership follow-through on staffing and core operational needs, affecting morale;
- limited cross-department understanding of fleet-capacity constraints and workloads;
- perceived unfairness when accountability and standards are applied unevenly; and
- disproportionate workloads being placed on high performers due to uneven performance or expectations.

Strategies to Mitigate Culture and Employee-Support Challenges

Increase Leadership Visibility and Recognition of Fleet Work

Use consistent leadership communication and practical recognition to reinforce the significance of the fleet's role in service continuity. This helps reduce perceptions that fleet maintenance is undervalued.

Improve Cross-Department Understanding of Fleet Constraints

Use simple interactions, such as periodic walkthroughs or structured check-ins with other departments, to build relationships and set realistic expectations. This can strengthen organizational connection without adding unnecessary time burdens.

Strengthen Shop-Level Identity and Pride

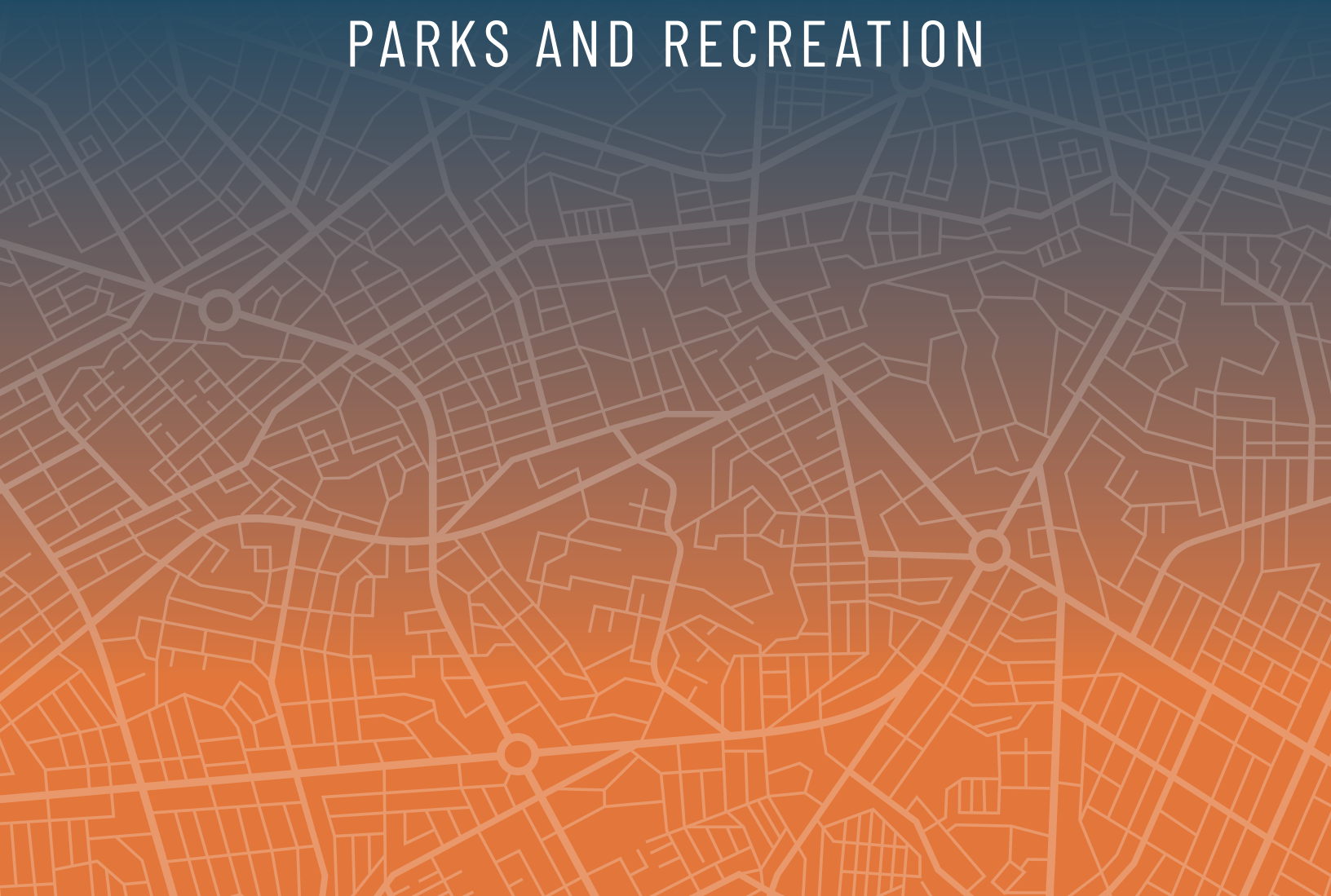
Recognize that fleet operations often work outside town hall and may feel disconnected from central administration. Reinforce shop identity through visible branding, updated facilities where feasible, and communication of the fleet's direct impact on public safety and service delivery.

Stabilize Scheduling Practices

Offer predictable shift structures, such as four ten-hour-day schedules or clearly defined first and second shifts, where workload allows. Scheduling flexibility and clarity were repeatedly cited as contributors to morale and retention in technical environments.



PARKS AND RECREATION





THE PARKS AND RECREATION PERFORMANCE STRATEGY SESSION convened departmental employees and municipal leadership to share practical ways that local governments could strengthen employee retention. Across the discussion, the group consistently returned to two practical realities:

1. Retention must be addressed differently for full-time versus part-time and seasonal positions.
2. Departmental retention outcomes are strongly shaped by the cost and time required to hire, screen, onboard, and train staff.

These realities create unique retention challenges for each jurisdiction, but departments shared strategies during the session to mitigate their retention issues.

Defining Retention

In parks and recreation, retention must be understood across the full employee lifecycle, from hiring through departure. Sustained employment supports service continuity and allows departments to recover investments made in recruitment, training, uniforms, equipment, and required background screenings.

Retention expectations vary significantly between full-time roles and part-time or seasonal roles. Unlike many other municipal services, parks and recreation relies heavily on seasonal staffing. Returning seasonal employees are essential to maintaining operational stability. Without experienced returning staff to serve as lifeguards, camp counselors, and program leaders, departments face increased onboarding demands and greater risk of service disruption.

What Is Good Retention?

Good retention was described as retaining capable employees long enough to develop proficiency and meaningfully contribute to departmental goals. For part-time staff, participants described good retention as strong **seasonal-return rates**, particularly among high-performing employees.

For full-time employees, retention is strengthened when clear opportunities for progression, professional development, and positive team morale are present. Participants noted that external promotions do not always represent a negative outcome. When employees leave for advancement and maintain positive relationships with their former department, such movement can enhance organizational reputation and expand professional networks. In some cases, former employees later return with new skills and experience that strengthen departmental capacity.

Participants said that effective retention practices include recognizing when a role is no longer a good fit. Addressing performance or engagement concerns constructively helps preserve team morale and maintain a productive work environment. Proactive **succession planning**, **pay equity**, and structured professional development were identified as practices that support strong retention outcomes.

What Is Bad Retention?

Bad retention occurs when staffing stability is maintained at the expense of performance, culture, or service quality. Participants identified unhealthy workplace dynamics, ineffective supervision, and low morale as recurring contributors to poor retention outcomes. Employees who are misaligned with their roles or who consistently underperform can weaken team cohesion and discourage higher-performing staff from remaining with the organization. When leadership fails to address these issues through clear accountability and professional standards, the negative effects can compound over time.

An excessive focus on keeping every position filled can also undermine retention quality. Departments described the difficulty of addressing performance or fit concerns when disciplinary or separation processes are lengthy or complex. In some cases, employees remained in roles despite persistent concerns, with consequences only emerging after a significant operational or reputational impact. Prioritizing vacancy avoidance over performance standards can lead to reduced service quality, slower organizational improvement, and the eventual loss of strong employees who seek higher-functioning work environments.

Measuring Retention

Retention in parks and recreation is measured through a combination of direct workforce indicators and operational signals that reflect employee tenure, workforce stability, career progression, and overall employee experience. Retention challenges, particularly in seasonal and high-demand environments, are understood in the context of service demand, staffing structure, and workload.

Practitioner-Identified Indicators

Core measures discussed in the strategy session included the following.

Tenure and Workforce Stability

Tenure serves as a practical indicator of whether departments are realizing value from hiring and onboarding investments. For full-time employees, three to five years is often the point at which organizations begin to see a meaningful return on investments such as screening, onboarding, uniforms, and training. Examining retention across multiple time horizons helps departments understand whether employees are staying long enough to contribute meaningfully to operations and institutional knowledge.

Seasonal and Part-Time Return Rates

For part-time and seasonal roles, return rates are a central measure of retention. These positions make up a significant portion of the workforce, and their stability directly affects program continuity and service delivery. High return rates indicate a reliable labor pipeline, while low return rates require departments to repeatedly recruit, hire, and train new staff.

Promotions and Internal Advancement

Internal advancement reflects both retention and organizational health. Departments monitor the extent to which supervisory and specialized roles are filled internally as an indicator of career progression and the effectiveness of retention strategies. Strong internal pipelines signal that employees see long-term opportunities within the organization.

Turnover, Vacancies, and Hiring Timelines

Turnover rates and **vacancy rates** remain core measures of retention and workforce stability. These metrics are most informative when analyzed by division, role, or tenure group to identify where challenges are most pronounced. Time to fill positions also affects retention, as prolonged vacancies can increase workload pressure on existing staff and contribute to burnout.

Reasons for Departure

Understanding why employees leave provides essential context for interpreting turnover patterns. Departments distinguish between expected separations, such as retirements, and avoidable departures that may reflect issues related to compensation, work conditions, or supervision. Patterns across roles or divisions can help identify systemic challenges.

Culture, Morale, and Employee Experience

Workplace culture and morale are central to retention but are often more difficult to measure directly. Departments rely on employee surveys, focus groups, and ongoing conversations to understand employee satisfaction, engagement, and overall experience. These insights help identify underlying issues that may not be captured in quantitative metrics.

Exit and Stay Interviews

Structured exit and **stay interviews** provide additional insight into retention dynamics. Some departments incorporate feedback from these conversations into performance-management practices to address concerns earlier and improve employee experience. Because exit interviews may not always produce fully candid responses, departments often combine multiple feedback channels to develop a more complete understanding of workforce conditions.

Retention-Related Benchmarking Project Metrics

In addition to these direct measures, operational data can provide important context for understanding retention, particularly in environments with significant seasonal staffing and fluctuating service demand. While these metrics do not capture retention directly, they can signal workforce pressure, staffing instability, or reliance on temporary staff.

Workload and Staffing Pressure

Measures of workload relative to staffing levels help departments assess whether employees are operating under sustainable conditions. Workload metrics used by the Benchmarking Project in this area include

- park acres per **full-time equivalent** (FTE),
- miles of greenway per FTE,
- facilities per FTE, and
- program participation per FTE.

Seasonal Workforce Structure

Workforce composition provides insight into reliance on part-time and temporary staff. Departments with a higher share of seasonal employees may face greater challenges maintaining continuity if return rates are low. The Benchmarking Project measures this reliance in terms of

- part-time employees as a share of total workforce and
- temporary employees as a share of total workforce.

Workforce Support and Development

- Investment in employee training and development supports retention by strengthening skills and creating pathways for advancement. The Benchmarking Project uses training and development expenses per FTE as a metric for workforce support.

Operational Stability and Service Continuity

Changes in participation levels or program delivery can reflect underlying staffing challenges, particularly in departments that rely heavily on seasonal staff. The Benchmarking Project's metrics for these measures include

- total program participation and
- number of events with over 1,000 participants.

Financial Indicators Related to Service Delivery

Cost and revenue metrics provide additional context for understanding the effects of staffing instability, including the costs associated with onboarding and turnover. The Benchmarking Project's metrics for these indicators include

- recreation expense per participant and
- revenue per participant.

Together, these metrics reflect both the direct and indirect dimensions of retention in parks and recreation. Workforce metrics such as tenure, turnover, and return rates provide the clearest indicators of retention, while operational and benchmarking data help departments understand the conditions that influence those outcomes.

Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention

Participants noted that parks-and-recreation departments face a range of retention challenges, including structural and recurring factors. They discussed practical strategies that can be implemented within typical local government constraints and the importance of prioritizing investments most likely to improve retention outcomes.

Compensation and Economic Competitiveness

Participants described compensation as a persistent pressure point shaped by competition with the private sector and neighboring jurisdictions, internal pay structures, and broader fiscal constraints. Pay levels and classification systems influence both recruitment and long-term retention, particularly in competitive labor markets.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- competition with the private sector and nearby jurisdictions for talent,
- limited budget capacity to adjust pay levels,
- inconsistencies in internal pay and classification, and
- resource-intensive compensation reviews and adjustments.

Strategies to Mitigate Compensation and Economic-Competitiveness Challenges

Conduct Routine Compensation Studies

Regular **compensation studies** help jurisdictions remain competitive with neighboring municipalities and the private sector. One jurisdiction conducted a pay study that recommended compensation increases for several positions to remain competitive with a larger jurisdiction nearby. As a result, local leadership determined that raising taxes to fund these adjustments was worthwhile to retain employees and stabilize the workforce.

Implement Recognition Programs

Participants noted that **merit-based raises** tied to performance reviews can encourage employees to remain with the organization and continue improving their performance. Some jurisdictions have also implemented **longevity pay** to recognize long-serving employees. Pay increases for returning seasonal employees were also identified as a strategy to encourage consistency in the seasonal workforce.

Provide Regular Cost-of-Living Adjustments

Annual **cost-of-living adjustments** provide incremental pay increases that help employees manage rising living costs, particularly in rapidly growing municipalities.

Regularly Evaluate Job Duties and Classifications

Reviewing and updating job titles, descriptions, and associated compensation structures can help address internal pay-equity issues.

Hiring and Onboarding

Participants emphasized that hiring and onboarding processes are often misaligned with seasonal staffing needs and constrained by regulatory and organizational requirements. Delays in hiring can directly affect retention by reducing the ability to secure and retain qualified candidates.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- lengthy hiring timelines, including background-check requirements;
- misalignment between hiring processes and seasonal staffing need;
- loss of candidates to faster-moving employers;
- organizational policies that disrupt continuity for part-time staff; and
- barriers created by drug testing and other hiring requirements.

Where feasible, engaging seasonal employees throughout the year can reduce the need for repeated onboarding and strengthen continuity for summer programming. One jurisdiction began paying summer employees for mid-year training in December so they could remain on the payroll. Keeping seasonal employees on payroll can also reduce the need for repeated background checks when the busy season begins.

Career Development and Training

Participants noted that career-growth opportunities were uneven across departments, particularly in smaller organizations. Limited advancement pathways and credential requirements can create barriers to retention, even when employees are otherwise satisfied.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- limited upward mobility in smaller departments,
- bottlenecks caused by low turnover in senior roles,
- employees leaving to pursue advancement elsewhere,
- certification and credential requirements that limit hiring and retention, and
- competition for specialized skills and qualifications, such as commercial driver's licenses.

Strategies to Mitigate Career-Development and Training Challenges

Adopt Clearly Defined Career Ladders

Creating clear progression pathways for park-maintenance roles helps outline expectations for employee growth. Participants emphasized that effective **career ladders** include succession planning, which helps departments prepare for retirements or departures while providing employees with a clear path for advancement.

Prioritize Budgeting for Certifications and Continued Education

To address competition for specialized credentials, many jurisdictions budget to cover training and certification costs. Some also offer compensation incentives tied to certifications or educational attainment. These investments can encourage longer tenure while helping departments build a more skilled workforce.

Expand Focused Career-Development Opportunities for Part-Time Staff

Step programs can encourage part-time employees to remain with the organization while developing new skills. One jurisdiction created more permanent part-time roles within the department and provided benefits for those positions. Participants described this approach as a middle ground between seasonal staffing pools and full-time positions, supporting workforce stability while maintaining scheduling flexibility.

Invest in New Training Opportunities

Providing opportunities for employees to attend trainings and professional conferences can help them strengthen their skills while improving morale and engagement.

Supervision and Employee Accountability

Participants said that frontline supervision plays a central role in retention, influencing workload distribution, accountability, and employee experience. Inconsistent supervision and limited capacity to support employee development can contribute to burnout and turnover.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- variability in supervisory quality and support,
- overreliance on high-performing employees,
- uneven workload distribution and limited accountability structures, and
- limited capacity to support employee development and performance improvement.

Strategies to Mitigate Supervision and Employee-Accountability Challenges

Promote Mentoring and Shadowing

Mentoring and job-shadowing programs can help develop future leaders while also giving employees opportunities to learn new skills and improve their performance.

Develop Leadership Academies

Leadership-development programs designed specifically for supervisors can strengthen managerial capacity and improve the overall employee experience across the organization.

Implement Employee-Coaching Procedures

One-on-one coaching conversations provide supervisors with opportunities to support employee development while also addressing performance concerns and reinforcing accountability.

Work Environment and Operations

Participants described the nature of parks-and-recreation work as physically demanding and operationally complex, with schedules and conditions that can make retention more difficult, particularly in frontline roles.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- irregular schedules, including evenings and weekends,
- physically demanding outdoor work in adverse conditions, and
- retention challenges in lower-paid frontline roles.

Strategies to Mitigate Work-Environment and Operations Challenges

Offer Flexible Work Arrangements

Implement flexible-scheduling options, such as **flex time**, to help employees manage evening and weekend obligations while supporting overall work-life balance.

Increase Appreciation Efforts for Front-Line Workers

Participants cited small gestures, such as delivering cold water to park maintenance staff on hot days or hosting complimentary breakfasts, as practical ways for jurisdictions to recognize front-line employees. They stressed that appreciation events should be scheduled to accommodate all work schedules, including those of field staff and shift employees, rather than primarily office-based personnel.

Culture and Employee Support

Participants highlighted the importance of communication, engagement, and organizational support in shaping employee experience, especially for part-time and seasonal staff, who may feel less connected to the organization.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- communication gaps affecting both full-time and part-time staff,
- limited connection to departmental decisions and updates, and
- inconsistent engagement across the workforce.

Strategies to Mitigate Culture and Employee-Support Challenges

Promote Staff-Led Appreciation Initiatives

Some jurisdictions created employee-led appreciation teams with small budgets to plan engagement activities throughout the year. These teams operated independently from management so the employees themselves could identify the most meaningful ways to recognize and support their colleagues.

Use Park Facilities for Employee Engagement

Parks-and-recreation departments can use their own facilities to host team-building activities at little or no cost. One jurisdiction organizes sports tournaments, cookouts, and activity days for employees and sometimes their families.

Support Employee Interest Groups

Informal gatherings such as book clubs, group outings to baseball games, or theater events were described as effective ways to strengthen relationships between employees and build morale.

Expand Internal Communication Channels

Participants said that consistent communication can improve morale and engagement when delivered at an appropriate cadence. Internal newsletters were described as a useful tool for sharing updates with part-time and seasonal employees who may otherwise feel disconnected from departmental developments.

Develop Structured Employee Surveys

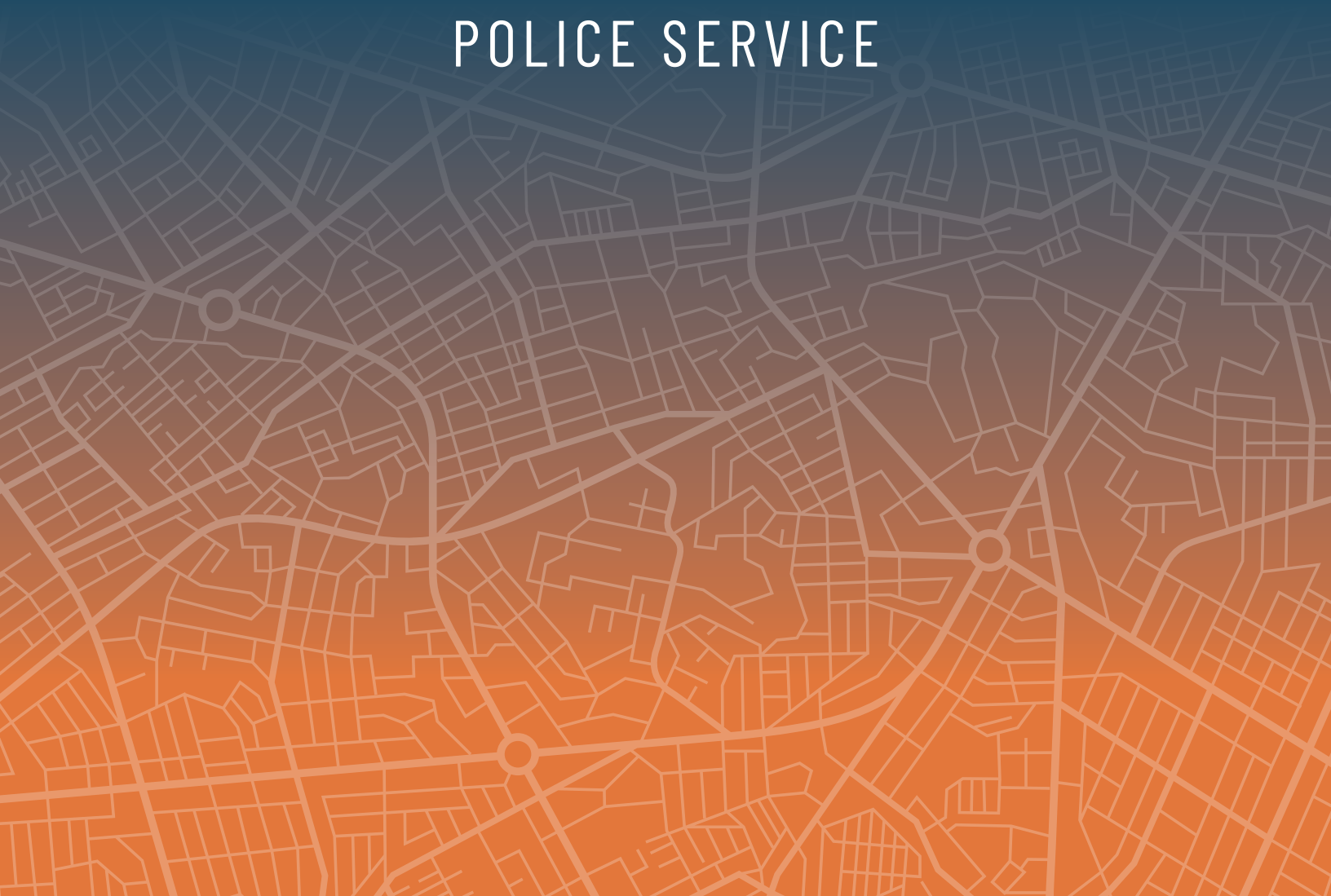
Anonymous employee-satisfaction surveys allow employees to provide candid feedback on workplace conditions and departmental changes. Well-designed surveys can help leadership identify concerns early and better understand employee perspectives.

Conduct Regular One-on-One Conversations

Individual conversations between supervisors and employees provide an opportunity to discuss career goals, workplace concerns, and project ideas. These conversations can strengthen engagement while allowing supervisors to incorporate employee input into planning and operations.



POLICE SERVICE





THE POLICE SERVICE PERFORMANCE STRATEGY SESSION brought participants from partner jurisdictions together to share perspectives and experiences related to retention. Participants compared retention approaches, identified common barriers, and discussed workforce-stability strategies. For this group, retention was shaped by the distinct realities of law enforcement, including training investment, field readiness, leadership culture, public perception, and the long-term effects of turnover on institutional knowledge and service delivery.

Three key takeaways emerged from this session:

1. Retention in police departments should focus on keeping qualified, engaged, and mission-aligned officers, not simply maintaining filled positions.
2. Police retention is captured through a variety of measures. Departments benefit from measuring years of service, reasons for separation, and turnover to better understand workforce patterns.
3. Retention strategies are most effective when they holistically address compensation, hiring and onboarding, work conditions, leadership culture, and opportunities for professional growth.

Defining Retention

Participants defined retention as keeping employees who contribute positively to the department and support the long-term strength of the workforce. This view of retention emphasizes return on training investments, preservation of institutional knowledge, and active employee engagement. Retention was discussed not only as a staffing concern but also as a matter of operational readiness. Retaining employees long enough to develop experience and contribute meaningfully to the department is critical to maintaining effective service delivery and workforce stability.

What Is Good Retention?

Good retention means keeping the employees who contribute most to the department's effectiveness. These employees carry institutional knowledge, strengthen team performance, and remain open to learning and professional growth. Participants associated good retention with employees who align with departmental goals and continue developing in ways that benefit both the individual and the organization.

Participants also said that good retention does not occur by chance. Departments must create conditions that encourage strong employees to remain with the organization. This includes fostering a culture that supports learning, development, and engagement while addressing issues of poor fit or weak performance. In this context, good retention involves both attracting and sustaining the right employees and ensuring that the department's culture reinforces its mission and the professional standards expected of officers.

What Is Bad Retention?

Bad retention is a distinct concern in policing because police officers are expected to take initiative, exercise sound judgment, and remain committed to the work. Within this context, bad retention occurs when departments retain employees whose attitudes or performance undermine team effectiveness and contribute to a negative organizational culture.

Participants noted that retention in police services is closely tied to morale and accountability. In environments with limited accountability, disengagement and poor attitudes can persist and influence the broader workplace culture. Over time, this dynamic can push stronger employees to leave while weaker performance remains unaddressed. When this occurs, retention shifts away from preserving talent and toward maintaining staffing levels at the expense of long-term effectiveness.

Measuring Retention

Participants said that retention in police departments should be measured using multiple indicators to provide insight into workforce stability, organizational health, and the return on investment associated with training and developing officers.

Practitioner-Identified Indicators

Core measures discussed in the strategy session included the following.

Years of Service

Tracking the length of time officers remain with the department helps determine whether employees remain long enough to build experience and justify the investment required for recruitment, hiring, academy training, and field training. The aim of this measure is to determine whether tenure patterns are consistent with the investment.

Voluntary Separations Versus Department-Initiated Separations

This measure aims to track whether resignations occur voluntarily or are initiated by the department. Participants noted that this distinction is particularly important in police services because some departures may be related to professional standards, performance, or physical-fitness requirements.

Reasons for Voluntary Exits

Structured conversations with officers who are leaving the department help departments understand the reasons behind departures and distinguish between expected transitions and potential organizational concerns.

Retention-Related Benchmarking Project Metrics

In addition to these direct measures, benchmarking data can provide important context for understanding retention in police departments. While these metrics do not capture retention directly, they can help departments identify workload pressure, staffing strain, and organizational conditions that may make long-term retention more difficult.

Workload and Staffing Pressure

Metrics that examine service demand relative to sworn staffing can help departments assess whether officers are operating under sustainable conditions. Workload metrics used by the Benchmarking Project in this area include

- system calls dispatched per **full-time equivalent** (FTE),
- high-priority calls per FTE,
- median response time for high-priority calls per FTE, and
- high-priority-call responses within ten minutes.

Staffing Capacity and Organizational Structure

Metrics related to staffing levels and workforce composition can help departments understand whether they have enough personnel to support patrol, supervision, investigations, and other core functions. The Benchmarking Project's metrics for this measure include

- approved sworn-officer FTEs,
- approved civilian FTEs, and
- system calls dispatched per sworn-officer FTE.

Professional-Development and Workforce Support

Metrics related to training investment and organizational support can help departments assess whether they are creating conditions that support officer growth and long-term career development. These investments can strengthen proficiency, morale, and organizational commitment. The metrics used by the Benchmarking Project include

- training and development expenses per sworn-officer FTE and
- approved civilian FTEs.

Financial Indicators Related to Workforce Stability

Cost metrics can help departments understand the organizational effects of turnover, vacancy, and sustained workload pressure. These indicators provide context for the resources required to recruit, train, equip, and retain officers over time. The Benchmarking Project's measures for these indicators include

- personnel expenses for police service per FTE and
- operational expenses for police service per FTE.

Together, these metrics reflect the indirect dimensions of retention in police services. Workforce metrics such as years of service, separation patterns, and reasons for departure remain the clearest indicators of retention, while benchmarking data helps departments better understand the operational and organizational conditions that shape those outcomes.

Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention

Participants identified several retention challenges facing police departments and discussed strategies that may help address them. The following subsections describe these areas in greater detail and highlight examples of approaches discussed during the session.

Compensation and Economic Competitiveness

Participants described compensation competitiveness as an ongoing retention pressure for police agencies, driven by regional competition and cost-of-living constraints. Officers may move to nearby jurisdictions offering higher pay, stronger benefits, or more favorable working conditions. The cost of housing can further affect officers' ability to live near the communities they serve.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- competition with neighboring jurisdictions that offer higher salaries, better benefits, and/or lower call volumes;
- cost-of-living and housing-affordability pressures that limit officers' ability to live near their work;
- compensation structures that may not fully reflect the demands and risks associated with policing;

- broader public perceptions of policing that affect the attractiveness and competitiveness of the profession; and
- ongoing need for coordinated review and adjustment of pay and benefits to remain regionally competitive.

Strategies to Mitigate Compensation and Economic-Competitiveness Challenges

Conduct Compensation Studies and Market Adjustments

Departments conduct regular **compensation studies** to review pay structures and compare salaries with neighboring jurisdictions. These studies help agencies adjust pay scales to remain competitive and treat compensation evaluation as an ongoing retention strategy rather than a one-time staffing response.

Strengthen Benefits Packages

Departments enhance recruitment and retention by offering competitive benefits specific to law enforcement, such as take-home-vehicle programs, mental health and wellness resources, flexible scheduling, and policy updates related to professional appearance. These initiatives improve organizational competitiveness and support long-term workforce stability.

Hiring and Onboarding

The high upfront investment required to recruit, screen, and train new officers can affect retention during the hiring and onboarding processes. Long and intensive hiring timelines can result in candidates accepting employment elsewhere, and early attrition during academy or field training can prevent departments from realizing a return on recruitment and training efforts. Participants also noted that some early departures stem from misaligned expectations about the day-to-day demands of police work.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- resource-intensive recruitment, screening, academy preparation, and field training;
- lengthy hiring timelines that increase the likelihood that candidates will exit the process or accept other offers;
- early attrition during academy training or field training that limits return on investment;
- misaligned candidate expectations about the realities of police work, contributing to early exits; and
- need for clearer communication during recruitment and for stronger early-career support for new hires.

Strategies to Mitigate Hiring and Onboarding Challenges

Promote Hiring Transparency

Departments can set clearer expectations for applicants about the realities of police work before hiring. Participants discussed the importance of communicating the day-to-day responsibilities, challenges, and demands of policing during recruitment and early training to reduce mismatched expectations and early attrition.

Implement Robust Onboarding

Providing strong mentorship and support during the academy, the field training, and the first years of service can help new officers adjust to the profession and build confidence in their roles.

Streamline Hiring Processes

Some departments review their hiring timelines and onboarding procedures to identify unnecessary steps that slow the process. Streamlining these processes can help departments retain candidate interest and reduce the likelihood that qualified applicants accept other positions before hiring is finalized.

Career Development and Training

Participants identified limited access to professional development, specialized assignments, and clear advancement pathways as contributors to turnover in police departments. When officers do not see viable options to build new skills or move into roles aligned with long-term career goals, commitment can weaken over time. Staffing shortages can restrict the ability to sustain specialized units or provide rotation opportunities, further limiting career mobility.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- limited access to specialized units and assignments that support long-term career goals;
- unclear or inconsistent pathways for advancement and role progression;
- insufficient training opportunities aligned with individual interests and development needs;
- staffing shortages that constrain rotations, backfill coverage, and specialized-unit capacity; and
- reduced long-term retention when growth opportunities are not visible or attainable.

Strategies to Mitigate Career-Development and Training Challenges

Create Professional-Growth Pathways and Career Planning

Departments can support retention by creating clear pathways for professional growth and advancement. Participants emphasized the importance of regular conversations between supervisors and officers about career goals and potential development opportunities.

Increase Support for Specialized-Training Opportunities

Providing access to specialized training and professional development allows officers to build skills aligned with both their interests and departmental needs. Supporting these opportunities can help officers see a long-term future with the department.

Offer Assignment Rotations and Career Exploration

Some departments allow officers to explore different career paths through temporary rotations, assignment flexibility, and structured opportunities to experience specialized units. These approaches help align organizational needs with individual career goals.

Supervision and Employee Accountability

Participants described frontline supervision and accountability systems as central to retention in police departments. Sergeants and other frontline supervisors shape morale, trust, and day-to-day working conditions, and inconsistent support or excessive micromanagement can contribute to disengagement. Participants also noted that when operational concerns are not addressed, often due to staffing pressure or avoidance of difficult conversations, team culture can deteriorate and stronger employees may become frustrated by perceived tolerance of poor performance.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- inconsistent supervisory support and management practices, including micromanagement;
- limited capacity or willingness to address performance issues through timely corrective action;
- retaining employees whose performance or behavior negatively affects team culture and morale; and
- staffing shortages that reduce departments' ability to absorb vacancies and reinforce accountability.

Strategies to Mitigate Supervision and Employee–Accountability Challenges

Strengthen Frontline Leadership

Participants emphasized reinforcing the leadership role of sergeants and other frontline supervisors. For police, this means creating an expectation that leaders “serve their people” and approaching discipline from a perspective of coaching rather than punishment. Strong supervisory leadership can shape workplace culture, provide clear expectations, and maintain consistent communication with officers.

Adopt Clearer Performance-Appraisal Systems

Departments can improve accountability by implementing more structured and role-specific performance-appraisal systems. Clear evaluation criteria help supervisors identify performance concerns and provide more consistent feedback.

Pair Accountability with Development

Effective accountability systems combine performance expectations with opportunities for improvement. Remedial plans and coaching can allow employees to address mistakes while maintaining professional standards.

Demonstrate Consistent Supervisory Practices

Building consistent communication and leadership practices can help foster trust between supervisors and officers. Participants noted that supervisors who demonstrate flexibility, responsiveness, fairness, and professionalism contribute to stronger morale and engagement.

Work Environment and Operations

The work environment and operational conditions are ongoing retention pressures in police departments, driven by nontraditional schedules, administrative workload, and the cumulative emotional demands of the job. Coverage requirements for nights, weekends, and holidays can limit flexibility, while paperwork and bureaucratic processes add strain to daily operations. Participants also noted that repeated exposure to difficult incidents and recurring calls, often without clear long-term resolution, can contribute to frustration and disengagement over time.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- schedule demands requiring nights, weekends, and holidays, with limited flexibility in some assignments;
- administrative burdens, including paperwork and procedural requirements, increasing daily workload;
- psychological strain from frequent exposure to emotionally difficult situations;
- recurring calls for service involving the same individuals or locations, often without observable long-term resolution, contributing to employee frustration and diminished morale; and
- misalignment between the expectations of policing and the day-to-day reality of the work.

Strategies to Mitigate Work-Environment and Operations Challenges

Allow Operational Autonomy

Participants discussed the importance of allowing officers greater input in assignments, schedules, and unit placement when operationally feasible. Providing appropriate autonomy and reducing unnecessary micromanagement can improve workplace satisfaction and reinforce trust between supervisors and employees.

Communicate the Impact of Police Work

Create structured feedback loops that help officers see case and community outcomes, such as routinely sharing resolution information with officers. Connecting the outcomes to work rather than reports and administrative steps can reinforce the value of the work performed and the purpose of daily responsibilities.

Connect Operational Tasks to Departmental Mission

Supervisors can strengthen engagement by helping officers understand how routine tasks contribute to broader departmental goals and public safety outcomes.

Support Employee Wellness

Participants emphasized the importance of structuring work environments that help officers manage the cumulative stress associated with policing. Wellness initiatives and practices that support both physical and mental health can help departments make demanding work conditions more sustainable over time.

Culture and Employee Support

Participants described organizational culture and leadership support as key determinants of retention in police departments. Retention is strengthened when officers feel respected, supported, and connected to the department's mission, and when leaders remain engaged with operational realities. Participants also noted that external pressures can affect morale and professional identity, as reflected in evolving public perceptions of policing in recent years. Because of these challenges, internal communications and resilience is key to police retention.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- maintaining officer morale and commitment when employees do not feel respected or supported;
- awareness of operational day-to-day realities being threatened by command staff's lack of engagement;
- effects of external public perceptions of policing on officers' professional identity and job satisfaction;
- internal-communication limitations that reduce clarity, trust, and alignment around mission and expectations; and
- sustaining a culture of support and recognition amid ongoing external and operational pressures.

Strategies to Mitigate Cultural and Employee-Support Challenges

Reinforce Department Identity and Purpose

Participants said that it was important to reinforce a shared sense of mission and professional identity within the department. Clear communication about departmental goals and values can help employees maintain a sense of purpose and connection to the organization.

Ensure Leadership and Value Alignment

Building trust between leadership and frontline officers through clear communication and alignment between stated values and daily leadership practices can strengthen employee engagement. Participants emphasized the importance of leadership environments in which employees feel that their concerns are addressed. Leaders who demonstrate responsiveness and investment in employee success can strengthen long-term organizational commitment.

Build Internal Employee-Support Systems

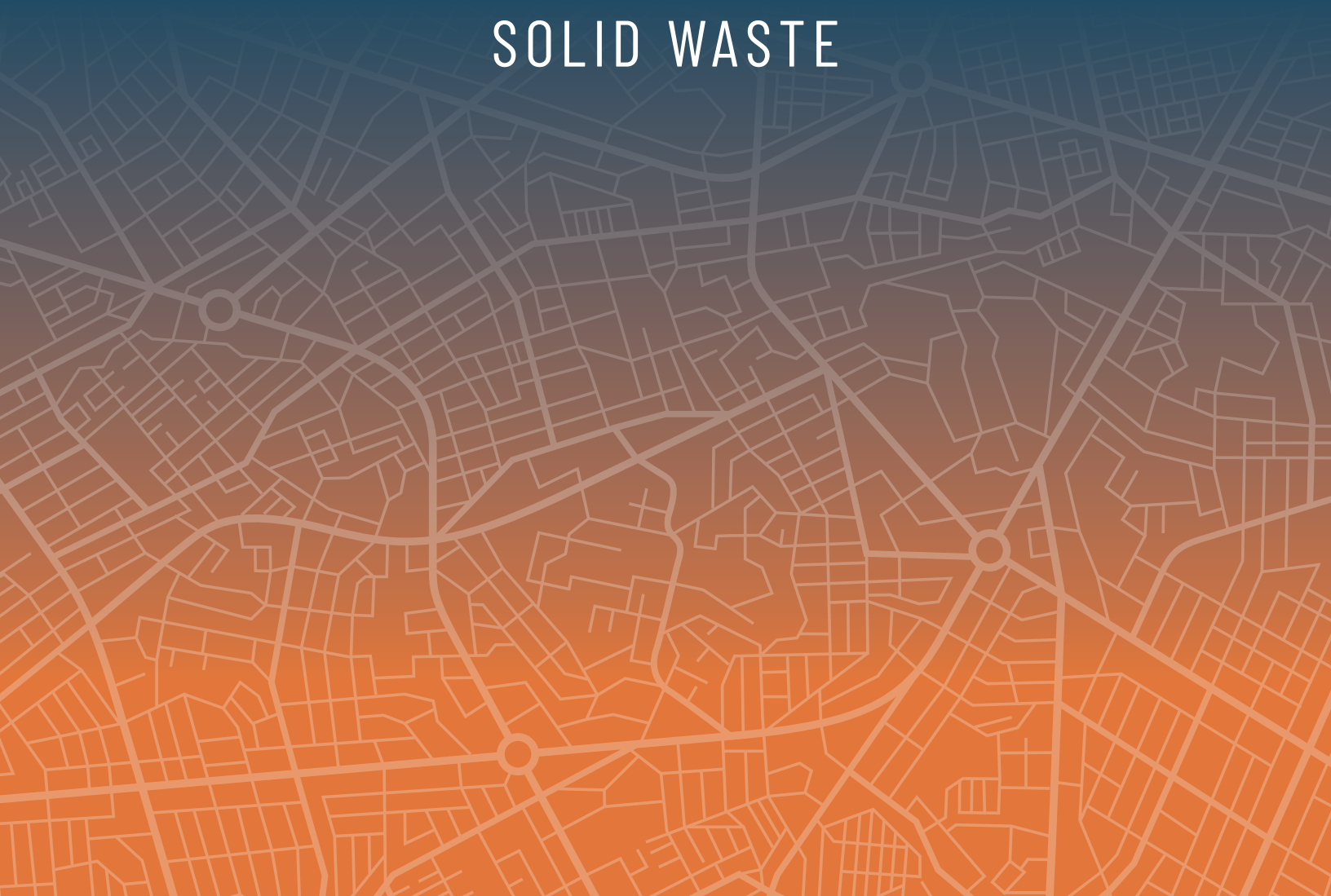
Reinforcing internal support structures, including peer support and leadership engagement, can help departments maintain morale and retain employees despite broader profession-wide pressures.

Invest in Organizational Stability and Credibility

Departments that maintain consistent leadership, clear expectations, and a strong relationship with the community may be better positioned to retain employees, even during periods of broader profession-wide pressure.



SOLID WASTE





THIS SESSION CONVENEED SOLID-WASTE PRACTITIONERS from partner jurisdictions to discuss employee retention in solid-waste operations. The conversation focused on how departments define retention, how they distinguish “good” from “bad” retention, what measures are practical for tracking retention over time, and what operational and management strategies can reduce unwanted turnover. Retention challenges often sit at the intersection of workforce policies (pay, hiring requirements, discipline, training) and the day-to-day realities of route-based service delivery (equipment readiness, schedule reliability, resident interactions, and public visibility). Key takeaways from the session include the following:

1. Retention is an operational issue as much as a workforce issue. Departments connect staffing stability directly to route completion, equipment reliability, schedule predictability, and public-facing service demands.
2. “Good” retention is not the same as “keeping everyone.” Departments aim to retain capable employees and support progression, while addressing performance issues early to avoid situations in which poor performance is tolerated and high performers disengage.
3. Measurement and management need to work together. Tracking turnover and vacancy pressure alongside separation reasons, advancement, and engagement signals helps departments target interventions that improve stability without relying on a single headline rate.

Defining Retention

Solid-waste departments described retention as keeping trained, qualified employees long enough to support reliable operations and justify the investment in onboarding and training. This includes retaining employees within the organization as they change positions. Departments framed retention as a persistent concern throughout the full employee lifecycle, from hiring through separation.

Several descriptions of what retention entails mentioned the employee's relationship with the work. Retention improves when employees see their jobs as more than a means to collect a paycheck and view their work as purposeful. Departments also distinguished between simply "keeping positions filled" and retaining the people who strengthen service quality, team stability, and long-term capability.

What Is Good Retention?

In solid-waste operations, good retention reflects a stable workforce that can deliver consistent service while developing skills and capability over time. Departments described good retention as keeping employees who contribute reliably day-to-day and who remain long enough to justify the investment in onboarding, training, and progression.

Participants associated good retention with the following conditions:

- Staffing is stable and supports consistent route completion.
- Unwanted turnover is low, especially after employees are trained.
- Attendance is reliable across crews and shifts.
- Employee careers progress via promotion into higher-skill roles.
- There is a steady pipeline of qualified staff ready to fill supervisory or lead openings.

What Is Bad Retention?

In solid-waste operations, bad retention occurs when the department either keeps employees whose performance harms the operation or loses strong employees because the work environment feels unfair or unsupported. Departments linked bad retention to unclear expectations, inconsistent accountability, and preventable turnover after the organization has invested in hiring and training.

Examples of bad retention discussed during the session included the following:

- The organization keeps underperformers who slow the work and add burden.
- Discipline is delayed due to weak documentation or follow-through.
- Strong staff leave because accountability feels unfair.
- Early departures post-training waste onboarding investment.

Measuring Retention

The session emphasized that no single measure captures retention well for solid waste. Departments recommended tracking a small set of measures that reflect staffing stability, employee movement, and workforce engagement, then reviewing results by job group and crew where

possible. This approach helps departments separate normal movement (like retirements and planned promotions) from unwanted losses that disrupt daily operations.

Practitioner-Identified Indicators

Core measures discussed in the strategy session included the following.

Tenure and Time in Role

Tenure with the municipality, department, and role was used as a practical indicator of whether the department was retaining employees long enough to benefit from training investments and to build operational capability. Participants also recommended tracking the average time that staff remain in a position to identify roles with rapid churn versus roles with sustained stability.

Vacancy Duration and Staffing Stability

Vacancy rates were described as both operational measures and retention signals. Departments discussed monitoring how long positions remain vacant and whether the department stays fully staffed over time. Several participants affirmed the value of tracking vacancies “outside of retirements” to separate expected lifecycle movement from avoidable departures that disrupt routes and reduce service reliability.

Turnover and Separation Patterns

Turnover rate was consistently identified as a foundational measure, but participants maintained that the reasons for separation matter. Recommended approaches included categorizing turnover by reason (for example, retirement, promotion, departure to another agency, disciplinary action, or relocation) and distinguishing voluntary separations from other types of departures. These approaches clarify which losses are most damaging to staffing continuity and which reflect healthy progression.

Internal Advancement and Growth Through the Organization

Participants described internal advancement as a direct proxy for good retention, especially when employees remain with the organization while moving through positions and developing skills. Internal promotion and other markers of movement were discussed as part of measuring whether the department is building a pipeline of capable employees rather than losing them after initial training.

Performance and Retention of High Contributors

Several groups said that retention measurement should account for who is being retained, not just how many. Participants discussed the importance of retaining high performers while reducing the persistence of low performers who create operational drag and morale impacts. Some participants described ranking or rating retention outcomes among high performers to keep attention on “regrettable” loss.

Employee Sentiment and Indications of Intent to Leave

Departments described practical “early warning” measures that can be captured through short surveys, including the percentage of employees who report looking elsewhere or planning to leave. They also saw morale as a meaningful indicator that helps interpret quantitative turnover and vacancy measures, particularly when departments are trying to detect new problems that might encourage more separations.

Retention-Related Benchmarking Project Metrics

In addition to direct retention measures such as turnover, vacancy duration, and tenure, benchmarking metrics can provide operational context to help explain why retention risks emerge and where they concentrate. These metrics do not capture retention directly. Instead, they reflect workload intensity, equipment condition, safety outcomes, staffing authorization, and compensation structure. In solid-waste operations, shifts in these indicators can signal rising workforce pressure, growing service instability, or increased reliance on a small number of experienced employees to sustain daily routes. Each metric presented has a corresponding metric in the household-recycling, residential-refuse, and yard-waste sections of the Benchmarking Dashboard.

Workload and Staffing Pressure

Productivity metrics, expressed as tons of curbside waste collected per **full-time equivalent** (FTE), help departments assess whether workloads appear sustainable relative to staffing levels.

Equipment Age and Reliability

Vehicle age is a practical indicator of operational stability. A higher share of trucks beyond typical replacement cycles can increase downtime, create more difficult working conditions, and reduce schedule predictability. The Benchmarking Project uses the percentage of waste trucks that are at least ten years old as a metric of reliability.

Safety and Injury Indicators

Injury metrics provide insight into the day-to-day risk environment. Higher injury rates, measured in staff injuries during waste operation per FTE, can indicate training gaps, equipment issues, route conditions, or workload levels that increase fatigue.

Authorized Staffing Capacity and Service Coverage

Authorized FTEs and population served per authorized staff member provide context for whether staffing levels align with service demand.

Compensation Structure and Cost Composition

Personnel expenses as a share of total expenses provides a consistent way to examine how strongly labor costs drive service-delivery spending. This metric helps frame the fiscal space available for pay competitiveness and staffing stabilization efforts.

Together, these metrics help local governments connect workforce outcomes to operational conditions. Turnover, tenure, and vacancy metrics show whether the department is keeping employees. Benchmarking indicators such as tons per FTE, truck age, injuries, authorized staffing, and personnel cost share help explain the environment employees work in and the constraints managers face when trying to stabilize the workforce.

Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention

The challenges and strategies discussed in this section reflect how solid-waste retention is shaped by both workforce systems and daily service-delivery realities. Departments described

retention risks that emerge when compensation structures limit competitiveness or progression, hiring processes move too slowly for the labor market, and training or career pathways are hard to sustain under route demands. Participants also said that supervision practices, working conditions (especially equipment reliability and schedule predictability), and visible organizational support materially affect whether employees stay, develop, and perform. The strategies presented focus on practical levers that departments can control to reduce unwanted turnover while maintaining operational standards and service reliability.

Compensation and Economic Competitiveness

Compensation pressures in solid waste show up as both external competition and internal structural issues. Departments described the difficulty of staying competitive with nearby employers while also managing **pay compression**, limited flexibility to hire experienced candidates above minimum rates, and constraints on pay increases for lateral moves. Participants also raised the need to align pay recognition with required skills and credentials, particularly for roles that required commercial driver's licenses, so employees see a clear connection between progression and compensation.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- pay that does not keep pace with competing employers;
- pay compression that limits a department's ability to make hiring offers to experienced candidates;
- limited pay increases for lateral moves, due to classification structures;
- internal **pay-equity** concerns across roles with different levels of physical work and equipment responsibility; and
- unclear or inconsistent pay recognition for specialized credentials (such as commercial driver's licenses).

Strategies to Mitigate Compensation and Economic-Competitiveness Challenges

Employ Skill-Based and Credential Pay

Implement flex pay or structured compensation tied to equipment level and commercial driver licensure. Provide pay supplements as add-ons to base salary that apply only while the employee maintains the credential or performs the higher-skill assignment.

Create Lateral-Move Incentives

Establish a set-percentage pay increase for lateral moves where classification rules otherwise block pay progression, especially when lateral movement supports operational coverage.

Center Benefits Retention in Department Messaging

Communicate and reinforce benefits that compare favorably with private sector options, particularly where employees cite health coverage as a reason to stay.

Hiring and Onboarding

Departments described hiring speed and screening requirements as relevant to retention because delays can cause candidates to accept other jobs before onboarding begins. Participants identified long background-check timelines, late-stage disqualifications, and drug-testing

results (including consequences for employees maintaining commercial driver's licenses) as points where the process can lose otherwise viable candidates.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- background-check timelines that extend to a month (or longer),
- screening outcomes that disqualify candidates late in the process,
- new legal requirements that affect eligibility for commercial driver's licenses, and
- limited availability of qualified applicants for specialized roles.

Strategies to Mitigate Hiring and Onboarding Challenges

Fast-Track Hiring Events

Hold single-day hiring events that combine interviews and conditional job offers to reduce time to hire. Ensure that the department is able to complete background checks and the onboarding steps that follow.

Design Pipeline Positions

Use temporary or seasonal positions as potential precursors to full-time roles, creating lower-barrier entry points while the department screens for reliability and fit.

Utilize Structured Onboarding Support

Use mentorship, training, and shadowing programs as part of onboarding to stabilize early tenure and reduce avoidable early exits.

Career Development and Training

Training and career development were framed as essential for both operational coverage and retention but difficult to deliver under route and staffing constraints. Departments discussed the scarcity of time, money, and sometimes employee availability or commitment for training, alongside a broader lack of consistent standards in the field. Their solutions to help employees stay longer and strengthen internal pipelines included visible progression pathways, cross-training, and targeted preparation for advancement.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- insufficient training standards or inconsistent training practices across the field,
- limited employee commitment to training in some cases,
- bottlenecks in career ladders when positions collapse into too few levels, and
- role-specific-training needs for specialized equipment and truck types.

Strategies to Mitigate Career-Development and Training Challenges

Build Career Ladders with Incremental Progression

Maintain progression ladders (including equipment-operator levels) so employees can earn certifications and pay increases without waiting for formal vacancies in higher positions.

Offer Commercial-Driver's-License Training Internally

Operate in-house training (including trainer and tester capacity where feasible) to expand the pool of eligible employees and reduce reliance on external pipelines.

Use Apprenticeship Pathways

Implement an apprenticeship model for commercial drivers that combines supervised experience with defined progression milestones.

Incorporate Promotion-Preparation Supports

To reduce attrition and improve readiness for promotion, offer mock interviews and career-development classes in areas like resume writing, interview skills, and computer skills.

Supervision and Employee Accountability

Participants linked retention outcomes to supervision readiness and the clarity of performance expectations. Departments described challenges that arise when senior staff are promoted without preparation for people management, when performance issues are not addressed early, and when policy "gray areas" make consistent accountability difficult.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- senior staff who are not prepared to supervise,
- supervisory roles with extensive credential and training requirements that narrow the internal candidate pool,
- delayed performance intervention, and
- outdated policies that reduce accountability or create avoidable conflict.

Strategies to Mitigate Supervision and Employee-Accountability Challenges

Create Pipelines to Supervisory Roles

Establish structured development programs that prepare employees for supervisory roles through mentorship, defined competencies, and progression milestones before promotion.

Employ Management and Soft-Skill Trainings

Provide training on how to have difficult conversations, maintain documentation, and set consistent expectations. Prepare prospective supervisors with the skills they need to address issues early and fairly.

Coordinate Disciplinary Guidelines

Work with human resources to create role-appropriate disciplinary guidance and performance metrics that reduce operational gray areas and improve the defensibility of disciplinary actions.

Develop Leadership-Visibility Routines

Use practices such as small-group lunches or regular touchpoints with department leadership to detect problems earlier and reduce the distance between frontline employees and managers.

Work Environment and Operations

Solid-waste retention is closely tied to the operational realities that employees experience daily, especially equipment condition, route reliability, and public-facing pressure. Departments described how limited equipment and slow replacement cycles reduce productivity and increase frustration, and how social media criticism and resident complaints can contribute to burnout. They also portrayed work scheduling as a retention lever, noting that more predictable or flexible schedules can reduce callouts and improve work-life balance.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- reduced productivity due to limited equipment and resources;
- vehicle-reliability issues;
- public criticism and negative resident interactions, including social media pressure; and
- minimal staffing, which limits flexibility for training and planned absences.

Strategies to Mitigate Work-Environment and Operations Challenges

Provide Alternative Schedules

Offer **flex time** or alternative schedules, such as four ten-hour days or adjusted start and end times, to improve work-life balance and reduce unscheduled absences.

Adjust Holidays and Weekends

Use defined holiday-schedule adjustments (including limiting Saturday work where feasible) with rules for make-up days. Shift schedules around holidays to keep weekend assignments predictable and avoid last-minute call-ins.

Improve Operational Technology

Use route technologies that document set-out issues (for example, photo documentation) to reduce repeated resident disputes and support enforcement of service rules.

Advocate for Equipment and Resources

Build internal cases for equipment replacement. Document the operational and service effects of inadequate equipment. Make sure that leadership and council members understand what is at stake in resource-allocation decisions.

Culture and Employee Support

Departments discussed culture in the context of practical management actions that affect whether employees feel valued, heard, and connected to the organization's purpose. Participants described the value of leadership visibility, consistent communication about budgets and priorities, and structured ways for frontline employees to provide input. Recognition and engagement efforts were described as most effective when they are intentional, inclusive of employee preferences, and supported by policies and resources that reinforce respect for the work.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- perceived lack of support or respect for solid-waste work, especially when public criticism is frequent;
- limited mechanisms for frontline staff to influence decisions that affect daily work; and
- culture strain when poor performance is tolerated and high performers carry the workload.

Strategies to Mitigate Culture and Employee-Support Challenges

Develop Frontline-Extension Teams

Create employee-extension teams that include frontline workers in planning events and surfacing operational ideas, a small, rotating group of route and field staff who serve as a structured liaison between frontline crews and leadership, strengthening trust and improving decision quality.

Include Employees in Appreciation Design

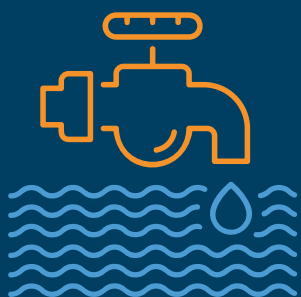
Let employees shape appreciation events and use small incentives to increase participation across shifts and locations.

Include Public Leaders in Appreciation

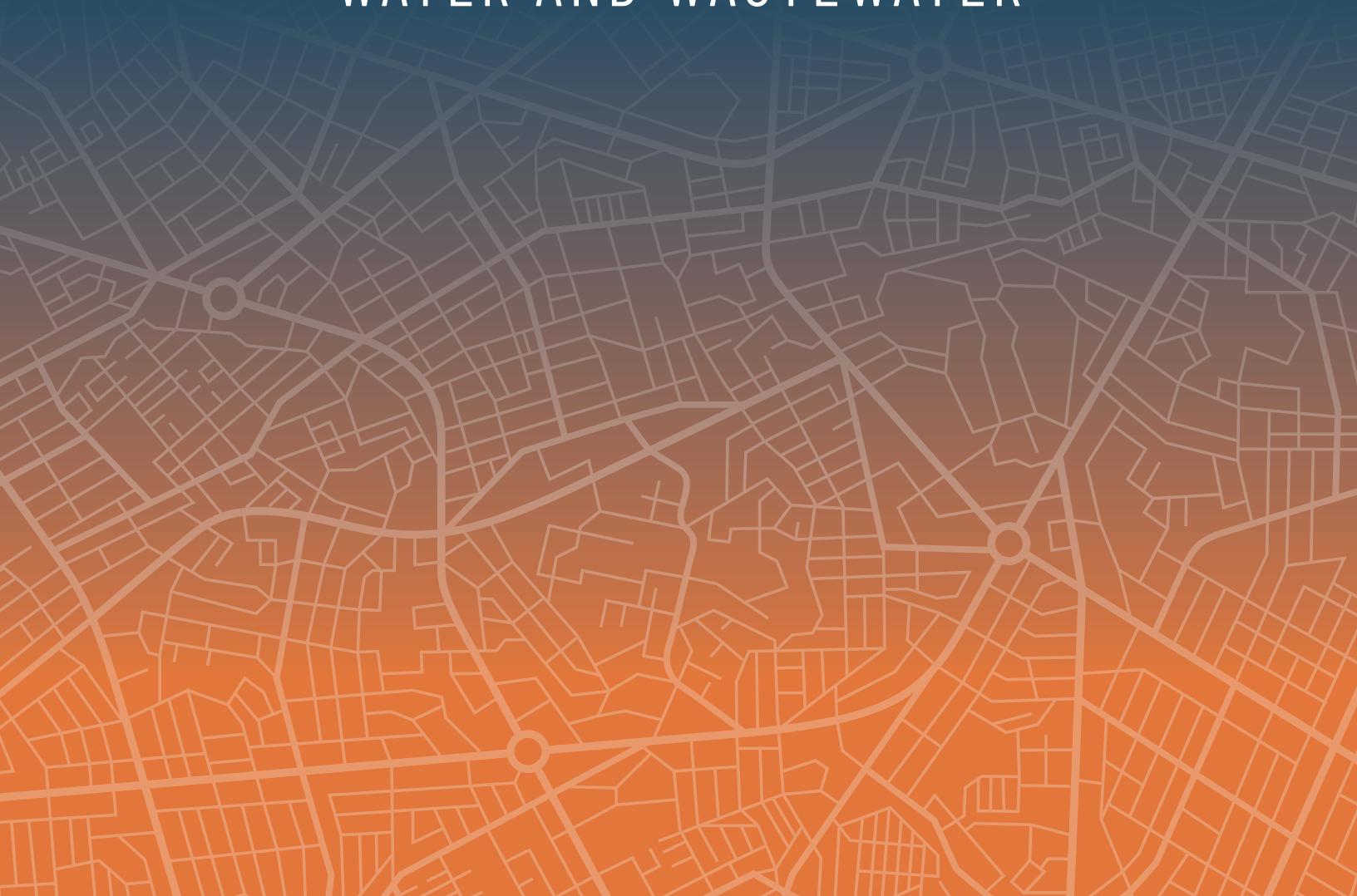
Invite elected officials to appreciation events so staff can share operational realities directly and leaders can see their needs firsthand.

Incorporate Wrap-Around Services

Provide practical supports that reduce nonwork barriers and reinforce organizational commitment. Examples discussed included on-site clinics, assistance programs, and supports for internal education and licensure supports.



WATER AND WASTEWATER





THE WATER AND WASTEWATER SERVICES PERFORMANCE STRATEGY SESSION examined employee retention as an operational issue affecting service continuity, certification coverage, and the sustainability of field and plant operations. Participants defined retention in practical terms, identifying what good and bad retention look like by role, which measures signal retention risk, and which problems most often lead to separations. A consistent theme was that retention improves when employees see credible advancement pathways and when daily working conditions, including on-call demands, remain sustainable.

Three key takeaways emerged from the Water and Wastewater session:

1. Retention expectations vary by role and certification level. Entry-level employees often decide within two years whether to stay. Higher-certification roles require four to five years to realize full return on investment.
2. Retention should be measured using multiple indicators, including years of service, satisfaction, **vacancy rates**, internal versus external hires, and exit-interview data. Participants also distinguished between retention within the utility and retention within the broader organization.
3. Retention strategies are most effective when they address clarity of career progression, competitiveness of compensation, and workload sustainability together.

Defining Retention

Water and wastewater practitioners described retention as keeping employees long enough to justify hiring and training investments while building stable operational capability. Retention expectations vary by role because time to competency and risk of separation vary by position. Entry-level maintenance roles have shorter horizons, with a greater risk of departure when employees do not progress within roughly two years. Operations roles tied to higher certification and operator-in-responsible-charge expectations were described as having longer investment timelines, often four to five years.

Participants also distinguished between retention within the department and retention within the broader organization. Transfers may preserve citywide employment but still represent a loss of training return for the utility. Some organizations use repayment approaches tied to certification stipends when employees leave a division soon after receiving funding for certification.

What Is Good Retention?

Good retention was described as retaining employees who remain productive, engaged, and oriented toward growth. This is often supported by competitive salary and benefits, work-life balance, career-advancement opportunities, and autonomy in decision-making.

Good retention is linked to basic workplace conditions, including whether employees feel respected and whether leadership follows through on development commitments.

What Is Bad Retention?

Bad retention was described as stagnation, loss of talent, and increased turnover, especially when development stalls and strong employees leave while weaker performance persists. Slow accountability processes can reinforce this pattern by demotivating high performers and increasing workload inequities.

Measuring Retention

Retention in water and wastewater departments should be measured using multiple indicators rather than relying on a single metric. Participants said that different measures provide insight into workforce stability, organizational health, and whether departments are retaining employees long enough to build expertise and support ongoing operations.

Practitioner-Identified Indicators

Core measures discussed in the strategy session included the following.

Time with the Organization and in the Current Role

The length of time an employee remains with the department and in a specific position indicates whether that employee is staying long enough to build institutional knowledge and technical expertise.

Data from Exit Interviews

Structured conversations with employees who are leaving the department help leadership understand their reasons for leaving and distinguish between expected transitions and potential organizational concerns.

Indicators of Job Satisfaction

Indicators of satisfaction help departments understand how employees experience the workplace and whether those conditions may affect retention over time.

The Ratio of Internal to External Hiring

Participants noted that this measure helps departments assess whether employees have advancement opportunities and whether the department is retaining talent over time.

Departmental Attrition and Jurisdiction-Wide Attrition

Participants noted that it is important to distinguish whether attrition outcomes are tracked within the department or across the jurisdiction, since each approach can shape how retention patterns are interpreted.

Retention-Related Benchmarking Project Metrics

In addition to the direct measures described above, benchmarking data can provide important context for understanding retention in water and wastewater utilities. While these metrics do not capture retention directly, they can help departments assess workload pressure, operational strain, staffing structure, and the resource conditions that often shape whether employees stay. This is particularly important in utilities, where retention is closely tied to certification coverage, field workload, and the sustainability of plant and distribution operations.

Workload and Staffing Pressure

Metrics that pair service volume or field activity with approved staffing levels can help departments understand whether employees are working under sustainable conditions. The Benchmarking Project's workload metrics for this area include the following:

- finished water treated per approved operations **full-time equivalent** (FTE);
- billed water per approved distribution FTE;
- work orders processed per approved distribution FTE;
- treated wastewater discharged per approved wastewater-operation FTE; and
- total accounts per water- or wastewater-collection FTE.

Infrastructure and Service Burden

The scale of the system relative to available staffing can shape daily work conditions and retention risk. The Benchmarking Project measures system scale using the following metrics:

- miles of pipe per approved distribution FTE,
- miles of gravity and forced sewer-main line per approved wastewater-collection FTE,
- pump stations for treated water,
- pump stations for wastewater, and
- treatment facilities.

Operational Disruption and System Stress

Service interruptions, emergency events, and compliance issues can indicate environments where employees face higher stress and less predictable work. The Benchmarking Project's metrics for operational disruption include

- water-main breaks;
- regulatory, flow, and limit violations;
- sanitary- and combined-sewer overflows;
- wastewater-system complaints; and
- average response time to overflows.

Staffing Structure and Organizational Capacity

Approved staffing levels across core utility functions can help departments understand whether capacity is balanced across operations, engineering, field service, and administration.

Financial Capacity and Workforce Support

Revenue and expenditure metrics can provide context for the utility's ability to support competitive pay, staffing growth, operational stability, and long-term investment. The Benchmarking Project uses personnel and operational expenses for water services per FTE as metrics for financial capacity and workforce support.

Together, these metrics reflect the indirect but important operating conditions that shape retention in water and wastewater utilities. Direct retention metrics such as time with the organization, time in role, internal advancement, job satisfaction, and exit feedback remain the clearest indicators of retention, while benchmarking metrics help departments understand the workload, system demands, and organizational constraints that influence those outcomes.

Challenges and Strategies Associated with Retention

Rather than focusing on broad structural reforms or large-scale funding increases, participants recommended targeted adjustments that leadership can control, including clarifying progression pathways, refining performance expectations, and using pay studies to inform incremental changes. This approach recognizes that water and wastewater departments often operate within fixed-revenue models and political oversight, requiring retention strategies that are operationally realistic and implementable within existing governance structures.

Compensation and Economic Competitiveness

Participants identified compensation competitiveness as a central retention challenge in water and wastewater utilities, particularly because entry- and mid-level roles often function as training grounds for larger utilities, regional authorities, or private sector employers. As employees gain experience and earn certifications, they become competitive for higher-paying organizations, while local funding constraints limit how quickly pay structures can respond to market pressures.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- employees using local utilities as “training grounds” and then leaving after they gain skills and certifications,
- competition for employees from nearby jurisdictions and private sector employers,
- **pay compression**,
- funding constraints, and
- limited ability to respond to wage pressures due to political reluctance to increase taxes or fees.

Strategies to Mitigate Compensation and Economic-Competitiveness Challenges

Implement Regular Compensation Studies

Compensation studies are a way to document market gaps and build a case for changes that address compression and competitiveness.

Adopt Skill-Based Pay Structures

Jurisdictions can implement **career ladders** (fewer pay ranges that are wider in scale, tied to demonstrated competencies) and project pay for successful innovation, which allow departments to recognize employees who expand capability and deliver measurable improvements.

Clarify Pay Progression

Flex positions can function as full-range classifications that provide a clearer path for movement and pay growth without requiring employees to leave for advancement.

Expand Benefit Options

Offering more variation in benefits such as medical plans is a way to improve total compensation fit across employee life stages without relying solely on base pay.

Hiring and Onboarding

Participants described hiring and onboarding timelines as a retention risk in water and wastewater utilities because municipal processes do not keep up with the pace of the labor market. Delays are especially consequential for technical roles requiring specialized skills, where vacancies can persist longer. When positions remain unfilled, the remaining staff absorb the excess workload, increasing the likelihood of burnout and of additional turnover.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- lengthy posting and selection timelines that allow candidates to accept other offers;
- specialized-skill requirements that reduce candidate pools for technical roles;
- higher operational impact of delays when hard-to-fill positions remain vacant;
- increased workload for existing staff during vacancies, elevating burnout and turnover risk; and
- compounding vacancy pressures when turnover outpaces hiring timelines.

Strategies to Mitigate Hiring and Onboarding Challenges

Streamline Hiring Processes and Practices

Review the internal steps that extend timelines and tighten handoffs to reduce preventable delays.

Recruit with Defined Advancement Pathways

Advertising positions to be promotable beyond entry-level work can improve applicant interest by showing a credible progression path.

Reframe Early Tenure as a Retention Phase

The first year on a job requires active onboarding support, including clear expectations for the job and how an employee can be successful in the organization.

Set Clear Expectations for Operational Realities

Making requirements explicit (including required-overtime expectations) is a way to reduce role surprises and improve fit, especially for new hires.

Career Development and Training

One retention challenge that participants described in career development and training was that certification attainment increases employee mobility faster than jurisdictions can offer advancement opportunities. Employees often join to earn credentials and then leave shortly afterward, particularly when early-career opportunities for progression are limited. Participants also noted that certification requirements can function as a barrier for some employees and that unclear progression pathways across operations and maintenance roles can weaken long-term commitment.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- employees leaving soon after earning certifications that increase external marketability;
- limited early-career progression, reducing retention when employees do not see movement within the first few years;
- certification requirements acting as potential barriers to employee advancement;
- unclear or inconsistent progression pathways across operations and maintenance roles; and
- difficulty retaining skilled employees once credentials and experience expand their job options.

Strategies to Mitigate Career-Development and Training Challenges

Implement Structured Progression Models

Flexible job levels and pay ranges (banding) were discussed as ways to connect career growth to defined responsibilities, requirements, and demonstrated ability.

Communicate Advancement Expectations and Requirements

Employees can better assess their fit and plan for career growth if formal and informal promotion expectations are made explicit.

Protect Training Investments

One approach is to use repayment provisions for certification stipends when an employee leaves a role in which the certification is no longer relevant. This approach helps align incentives and reduce losses on short-tenure departures.

Supervision and Employee Accountability

Participants described supervision and accountability challenges in water and wastewater as issues of fit and consistency rather than lack of attention to performance. Organizational employee-appraisal systems do not always align well with operational roles, and that disconnect can reduce credibility and contribute to dissatisfaction. Participants also noted that retention is not strengthened when pay adjustments are broadly applied without connection to performance, particularly when high performers absorb additional workload due to vacancies or uneven performance.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- difficulty applying employee-appraisal systems consistently across diverse operational roles;
- performance-appraisal criteria that do not align well with field and operations work, reducing credibility;
- across-the-board adjustments that are not tied to employee performance or contribution;
- high performers carrying additional workload due to vacancies or uneven performance; and
- perceived inequities when performance expectations and rewards are not clearly differentiated.

Strategies to Mitigate Supervision and Employee–Accountability Challenges

Clarify Role Expectations

Develop clear, position-specific expectations and goals, including work plans built collaboratively between supervisors and employees.

Use Merit Pay Intentionally

Separate **cost-of-living adjustments** from **merit-based raises** to reinforce employee contribution rather than relying on uniform pay increases. Linking raises to employee performance helps incentivize improvement and reward high performers.

Work Environment and Operations

Participants said that retention difficulties were driven partly by workload intensity, understaffing, and scheduling requirements beyond standard shifts. On-call and overtime expectations, combined with limited control over schedules and duties in entry-level roles, can contribute to burnout and accelerate turnover, especially when vacancies create a cycle of increasing workload. Participants also said that wellness and benefit offerings may be perceived differently across field and office roles; what is perfectly adequate for an office position may be unsatisfactory for a physically demanding field-based position.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- on-call and overtime requirements that extend beyond normal shifts;
- concentration of less desirable schedules and duties into entry-level roles with limited autonomy;
- understaffing, which increases workload and burnout risk;
- a vacancy-driven cycle in which turnover increases workload and workload contributes to additional turnover; and
- benefit and wellness offerings that may be perceived as less relevant for field-based roles facing the most physically demanding conditions.

Strategies to Mitigate Work-Environment and Operations Challenges

Plan Multiyear Staffing Increases

A staffing study can justify additional positions, and a long-term staffing plan can reduce chronic workload pressure over time.

Directly Compensate for Operational Burden

Participants suggested callback pay (calling staff in to work after they are off the clock for the day) and codified overtime practices as ways to recognize after-hours demands and reduce perceived inequity. One such practice was allowing adequate rest between shifts while still compensating overtime.

Invest in Practical, Daily Supports

Small but concrete improvements, such as providing coffee, couches in lounge areas, and clean restrooms, can matter in high-demand operational environments.

Culture and Employee Support

For participants, a successful workplace culture fostered a day-to-day experience of respect, inclusion, and confidence that growth opportunities are real and attainable. Retention risks increase when employees feel undervalued, see limited paths for advancement, or believe that their leadership lacks an understanding of field conditions. Participants emphasized that employee support does not have a one-size-fits-all implementation: Approaches that resonate with office staff may not be effective for field crews, and some employees prefer forms of recognition that are private rather than public.

Key challenges in this area include the following:

- employees not feeling respected or meaningfully included in the organization,
- perceptions that leadership does not understand field conditions and operational realities,
- engagement approaches that do not translate well across office-based and field-based roles, and
- recognition strategies that miss employee preferences (including reluctance toward public recognition).

Strategies to Mitigate Culture and Employee-Support Challenges

Build Engagement into Routine Operations

Monthly employee-appreciation events, department-wide gatherings, and low-barrier opportunities to connect outside daily work can strengthen relationships and reinforce respect.

Be Flexible About Employee Recognition

Use a mix of approaches, including innovation awards and informal activities, while adjusting to employee preferences about public recognition.

Prioritize Visible Follow-Through

Making visible improvements to address employee concerns shows the staff that leadership listens to them. Practical examples include funding small quality-of-life items, like an office coffee maker, and engaging with employees to identify issues that otherwise may not be raised through email or formal channels.

CONCLUSION



CONCLUSION

THIS REPORT SUMMARIZES THE THEMES THAT EMERGED in practitioners' discussion sessions, identifies some of the tools they have used to improve retention, and highlights how retention challenges often appear as interacting conditions rather than isolated issues.

Participants in all sessions acknowledged that no single metric captures retention adequately. Direct workforce measures (such as turnover patterns, tenure distribution, vacancy duration, internal mobility, and employee feedback) remain the clearest indicators of retention outcomes. Benchmarking 2.0 metrics can add value by providing operational context that helps explain why retention outcomes may be improving or worsening. In general, the benchmarking categories that can support retention analysis include

- staffing capacity and structure (e.g., approved staffing levels, role mix, and the ability to cover vacancies);
- workload and service demand (e.g., volume indicators that can be examined relative to staffing);
- training investment and development activity (e.g., training hours or training-related resource metrics);
- service performance and operational strain (e.g., timeliness metrics or other indicators that may reflect staffing pressure); and
- resource conditions and operating support (e.g., expense categories or resource metrics that can contextualize capacity constraints).

Participants also acknowledged that there are tradeoffs associated with tracking additional metrics. Some metrics can be costly to collect and maintain, and some may not achieve their intended purpose if definitions are inconsistent, if data-collection capacity is limited, or if results are not actionable. This report therefore emphasizes metrics and strategies that participants described as practical within typical operating constraints for local governments. They are no substitute for rigorous diagnostic tools, like workplace-climate studies, but they can address some of the common issues in public service in ways that mitigate retention risk.

GLOSSARY

broadbanding. A method of job classification that preserves formal job grading and collapses the numbered job classes that have similar duties into broader occupational categories.

career ladder. A set of vertically linked positions within the same occupation, which allows employees to progress into higher positions in an organization. Organizations often create minimum qualifications for each higher position on the ladder.

compensation study. A study assessing whether employees are paid equitably and competitively based on internal and external comparisons. Compensation studies often compare the pay for each organizational role with pay in similar public and private sector roles.

cost-of-living adjustment. Abbreviated *COLA*. A pay increase granted periodically to all employees in an organization, based on the Consumer Price Index or similar estimates of the cost of living.

flex time. An employee benefit that allows employees in eligible roles to work outside the traditional hours of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., if they complete their contracted number of weekly hours and their necessary duties. Some popular forms of this alternative scheduling include four ten-hour workdays and early shifts, such as 6:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

full-time equivalent. Abbreviated *FTE*. Use of FTEs is a method of counting employees based on a standard schedule of 40 hours per week. An employee who works 40 hours per week equals 1 FTE; two employees who each work 20 hours per week equal 1 FTE.

longevity pay. A compensation increase whose distribution is based on how many years the recipient has worked for the organization.

merit-based raise. An increase in an employee's pay based on the employee's performance, which is typically quantified in performance-evaluation ratings. These increases are often applied in regimented increments (for example, 1%, 1.5%, or 3%). Also called a *pay-for-performance raise*.

pay compression. Pay compression occurs when there is little-to-no difference in pay between employees, regardless of their experience, skills, or level of seniority. Also called *salary compression*.

pay equity. Pay equity is achieved when employees who perform similar duties and have similar tenure are paid comparable salaries.

seasonal-return rate. The proportion of temporary, seasonal employees who return to their positions in the following season.

stay interview. An interview conducted with an employee who is about to leave the organization. During stay interviews, managers or HR representatives ask employees about their time in the organization. Typical topics include what was meaningful in the employee's job, what problems the position might have, and what the employee wanted in the organization long-term.

step program. Programs that schedule promotions and incremental pay increases for employees ahead of time. Step programs may begin with interns, fellows, or part-time employees, who will eventually take on full-time responsibilities.

succession planning. A strategy to prepare for upcoming vacancies by using internal talent to sustain organizational performance. Succession plans may include designating key positions, identifying high-potential employees, setting out important job competencies for top positions, and providing opportunities to prepare employees for future roles through training and development.

turnover rate. A measure of organizational turnover that is calculated by determining the number of permanent departures from a department (T) in comparison with the number of employees in the department during a specified period (E). Turnover rates can also be calculated for departmental divisions or specific roles. The formula is $T/E \times 100 = \text{turnover rate}$.

vacancy rate. A measure of organizational vacancies that is calculated by determining the number of vacant positions in a department (V) in comparison with the number of approved employees for a department during a specified period (E). Vacancy rates can also be calculated for departmental divisions or specific roles. The formula is $V/E \times 100 = \text{vacancy rate}$.

workforce planning. The process of identifying positions, skills, and competencies that will be required for the services and functions of a jurisdiction.

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