

Testimony regarding the “Establishment of a “Civil Service Pipeline” statewide in which graduating students are trained for and recruited directly into public sector jobs.”

Presented before the Senate Committee on Civil Service and Pensions

**Friday, February 21, 2020
250 Broadway, New York, New York**

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The Civil Service Employees Association represents 60,000 state employees and nearly 150,000 members employed by local governments. CSEA members perform every job imaginable – child care providers, educators, mechanics, heavy equipment operators, and front line health care professionals. With this diverse membership, we have a unique insight regarding the challenges we face to recruit more students into the civil service.

We have discussed this issue at length with our membership and state officials for years. Our members tell us continuously that their employers are not recruiting enough new employees and are failing to retain the ones that we have. As our civil service workforce is getting older and turnover increases, the need for a comprehensive statewide recruitment plan is clear.

While the hearing today is specific for the creation of a “college civil service pipeline”, we think that we need to take a step back and discuss how to connect high school students with civil sector jobs in addition to college students.

Not every high school student needs or wants to go to college. In fact, a large percentage of jobs in the state and local government, including many of the jobs that are in CSEA bargaining units, do not require a college degree or professional license or certification. Most jobs in CSEA bargaining units are accessible by taking a civil service examination and fulfilling prerequisite requirements, such as having a high school diploma or GED and certain professional experience. However, despite the ability for students to come directly out of high school and enter the civil service, it does not seem that the state is marketing itself to this group in a way that is attracting students into the civil service.

Many jobs in our bargaining units do require a license, certification or other advanced education, but not necessarily a traditional four-year college degree. Specifically, Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN), and Highway Maintenance Workers are jobs in demand by the state, and the private sector, that do not require a college education but are licensed or certified by the state. Each of these jobs face similar challenges in terms of recruitment into the civil service but also have unique solutions.

Certified Nursing Assistants

CNAs work across several state agencies, including the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD), Office of Mental Health (OMH), the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS), State University of New York (SUNY) hospitals and hospitals operated by the state Department of Health (DOH). In addition, CSEA represents CNAs in public and private nursing homes and municipally owned hospitals in the state. Nursing Assistants provide care that ranges from attending to a patient or client's personal hygienic needs to performing a limited number of simple treatments and therapy.

A CNA is a state certified occupation. A person can receive their certification from any number of community colleges, BOCES programs, or for-profit educational institutions. After their training, they must pass a competency examination composed of a clinical skills examination and a written examination and then they can apply for certification from the state.

The New York State Department of Labor (DOL) estimates that there were 88,000 active CNA registrations in 2018. Less than 2% were working for the State. It is not that the state does not need these titles - overtime for state employed CNAs is extremely high and we constantly have a shortage of the titles across most state agencies. However, it is very difficult to recruit these employees when competing against private sector health care providers.

Licensed Practical Nurse

Like CNAs, LPNs work across a variety of state agencies. Hiring LPNs can be even more difficult for the state and local governments than hiring a CNA. To become an LPN, you must participate in a LPN program, pass all examinations required by the State Department of Education and apply for licensure by the State. Licensed Practical Nurses work in hospital or clinical settings where they treat patients for a variety of physical maladies to assist in maintaining patient health, preventing and curing illness and injury and alleviating suffering.

Due to their greater scope of practice and responsibility and earning ability, it is difficult to recruit individuals into the civil service. In fact, since 2009, the number of LPNs employed by the state has decreased from 1,373 to less than 1,100 in 2019. This amounted to less than 2% of all LPNs statewide.

Like Certified Nursing Assistants, we need additional LPNs working for the state and local governments. Agencies such as OPWDD, OMH and the three SUNY hospitals are facing severe shortages of these employees, causing existing staff to have to work long periods of mandated overtime. This has led to decreased morale and a higher turnover amongst staff.

To recruit LPNs, private sector health care providers have been found to offer signing bonus' of over \$5,000 per LPN. The State has attempted to compete with these providers by offering geographical pay differentials, but, with a limited budget and having a staffing deficit across the entire state, they have not been able to offer the competitive salaries necessary to bring in enough of these providers.

Highway Maintenance Worker

Highway Maintenance Workers are mostly utilized by the state Department of Transportation (DOT). They operate snowplows and heavy dump trucks to plow and salt our roads during the winter months and operate heavy equipment for road surface projects and maintaining roadsides during the summer. These jobs require a commercial driver's license (CDL). While not legally required, most holders of a CDL receive training test from private training schools prior to taking their road test.

The recruitment of these employees is difficult. While we don't have hard numbers, we know from our membership that we are severely understaffed at DOT sites throughout the state. This has created high levels of overtime. According to the New York State Department of Civil Service, the number of highway maintenance workers employed by the state has decreased from 2,360 in 2009 to 2,139 in 2019.

The State is competing against private sector companies, including one which announced last year that they would pay CDL employees upwards of \$90,000 a year. A need exists for these workers in the State. The snow won't stop just because we do not have enough plow drivers. However, we need to find a way to be able to compete with the private sector for these employees.

Creation of a Public-Sector Employee Pipeline

Career Paths

Many students, including those leaving high school or college, may want to enter a public-sector job but do not see the opportunity to make a career out of it. They view it as a job that doesn't offer much in terms of growth. To attract candidates into the civil service, we need to develop more robust career paths and better market them to students.

CSEA represents thousands of employees that provide direct care to individuals with a mental illness or developmental disability. In recent years, we have found that it is extremely difficult to recruit and retain workers in these titles. One reason is that there is a very limited path for these workers to grow. There is no clear path for employees in entry-level titles to become a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) or Registered Nurse in the future. This leaves many people to not even consider the state workforce because they don't see growth opportunities.

The creation of better defined career paths will help serve two purposes. The first is that it brings workers into entry-level jobs that can be difficult to fill. Secondly, it allows the state to foster and grow its own workforce to fill more technical and complex jobs in the future. The creation of career paths is critical to recruit the people that we need now and for the higher-level jobs we need to fill in the future.

Program Accessibility

For civil service jobs that require a license or certification, we must examine what educational programs exist and how accessible they are for students. CSEA does not view this as something that should begin with college, rather, we must ensure that these programs are in place for high school students and adults that want to go back to school.

New York is lucky to have such a robust BOCES system throughout our state. Many of these BOCES programs offer career-related tracks for high school students, including health care specific programs. If a high school student knows that they want to enter health care, they can take classes during high school, at no charge, that leads to their certification or licensure in a certain field which allows them to enter the workforce immediately after high school.

However, if a student doesn't decide to pursue this avenue until after high school, they can no longer take this program free of charge. Whether it is at a BOCES or community college, they are required to pay out of pocket for the program, which could amount to thousands of dollars in fees and serve as a barrier to entering the field. While most of us would consider programs like this as secondary education, they are traditionally not considered so by the state or federal government. Due to this, students are rarely eligible for financial aid or subsidized loans.

In addition to making these programs more accessible, the State and local governments need to find a way to better connect with these programs. Students are entering these programs, yet, the public sector is unable to recruit these students. While the State has attempted to market jobs to program participants, we must do more. We need the creation of a comprehensive recruitment plan that can incorporate the hiring needs of state agencies and local governments with the programs educating these students.

Civil Service Pay Grades & Benefits

Most people that enter the civil service do not do so for the high salaries. They take a job because they value the service that they provide. While salary is not everything, it is not something that we can ignore.

Civil Service paygrades are determined by the Civil Service Commission and are not subject to collective bargaining. Many times, the paygrade send a clear message regarding the value that the employer places on certain jobs. For example:

- The salary grade of workers that provide direct care to the developmentally disabled and the mentally ill make just over \$15 per hour, just above the state minimum wage.
- Highway Maintenance Workers, who help make sure New York stays open during snow storms, are hired at Grade 8 under the CSEA state contract, which amounts to an annual salary of \$35,500, far below the average amount for CDLs in New York State of \$50,000 to \$65,000.
- LPNs are hired as Grade 10 and start just under \$40,000 per year, compared to \$45,000 to \$60,000 in the private sector.
- CNAs are hired at Grade 8 and make just over \$35,000 annually with the state.

The salary grade of a position can be interpreted as to equate to the value that an employer places on that job. Based on the current salary grades, it is easy to argue that the state undervalues the work that direct care workers perform. This work is critical and helps residents who may have no one else to care for them live their lives as independently as possible. However, under the current pay scale structure, the State is sending a clear message that this work is not as valuable as other jobs. This does not help recruit new employees nor does it help retain the employees that we currently have.

In previous generations, New Yorkers would enter public service knowing that they would make less money than the private sector but receive a fair pension and pay less for health insurance. However, in recent years it has become harder to make this argument to prospective employees. Since 2009 we have created two new pension tiers, which has required public employees to work longer and contribute more to receive less of a pension compared to previous generations of workers.

If we are going to recruit the next generation of civil servants, we need to ensure that we are truly valuing the work that they perform and are offering compensation that shows that.

I truly appreciate the opportunity to testify and discuss this important topic with you today. Millions of New Yorkers rely on the services of the State and local governments and we can only deliver them if we have the staff to deliver them.

Thank you.