



City of Norfolk Employees are Overworked and Underpaid: Executive Summary

City employee turnover in the City of Norfolk is a problem that predates the COVID-19 crisis. In part, it is driven by low pay for much of the city's public sector workforce and is exacerbated by pandemic-related furloughs and layoffs.

Since 2015, Norfolk has lost more than 900 employees who provide vital services to residents. Although the recent 3% raise is welcome, it does not compensate for the wage freeze in 2021 – or for years of chronic low pay. Health insurance premiums jumped 12% in 2021, creating even more economic hardship for employees. The city's workforce shrank by 20% between 2010 and 2021.

Nearly 40% of Norfolk's permanent, full-time city workers do not earn enough to meet basic needs for a family of four with two working adults. Many work additional jobs to make ends meet. It is therefore not surprising that turnover is a persistent problem for the city.

Norfolk withstood the pandemic better than expected, emerging with a \$9.1 million surplus. The city reduced its 2021 budget by \$40 million, shuttering recreational facilities and libraries. In fall 2020, 57 previously furloughed employees were laid off – primarily from the Department of Recreation, Parks and Open Space. Now Norfolk is set to receive \$154 million in American Rescue Plan funds. S&P Global even reaffirmed the city's AAA bond rating. With a growing economy, Norfolk can afford to be a better employer.

Last year, Virginia's General Assembly passed a bill allowing local government workers to collectively bargain for the first time in 40 years. City workers can form a union and gain a voice in their workplace. Norfolk is in a great position to lead the way in Hampton Roads.

The American Federation of State, County, Municipal Employees (AFSCME) presents this paper to highlight the terrible impact of low wages and overwork on city employees. Ultimately, the struggles of city workers hurt other residents and the local economy. Wage and turnover analysis are derived from city employee wage data for 2010 through 2021. The data was obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request in April 2021.

More importantly, this paper focuses on the narratives of six Norfolk city employees, all of whom continued to provide critical services throughout the pandemic. They are Jennifer Webb, Nathan McNeal, Velma Owens, Janal Floyd, Priscilla Brown and Dr. Ingrid Robinson. They represent Norfolk's Utilities, Transit, Human Services and Waste Management departments.

Like all Norfolk workers, they need more than a 3% raise; they need a voice on the job and a say in their working conditions.