

# A public employees shortage slows government services

BY NED BARNETT

Callers to the Social Security office are put on a seemingly endless hold.

Callers to a state Department of Motor Vehicles office in Raleigh often get the message: “Your called party is temporarily unavailable. Please try again later.”

Cities and towns across the nation have closed city pools for lack of lifeguards, while school systems are canceling bus pickups for lack of drivers.

The COVID pandemic has aggravated a worker shortage across the U.S. economy, but it’s hitting public employees especially hard.

“At the local level, governments are pulling out

all the stops to get people,” said Leisha DeHart-Davis, a professor of public administration and government at the UNC School of Government. “The status quo no longer works for retaining and securing people.”

A UNC survey of local government employees found that 23 percent of them were planning to leave their job, up from 15 percent before the pandemic.

The pandemic’s disruptions and rising private sector wages have accelerated the loss of government workers, but the roots of the problem go deeper. Republicans have been pushing back against the value of public employees at least since President Ronald Reagan fired

11,000 striking air traffic controllers in 1981. Benefits have been pared back, pensions have lost ground to inflation and fewer young people are drawn to public service.

In North Carolina, legislation passed in 2017 eliminated retiree health benefits for state employees and teachers hired after 2020. Meanwhile, retired state employees have received only a 2 percent cost of living increase in the past 10 years, despite a cumulative 30 percent inflation rate over the period.

“Things have just been rolled back,” said Tim O’Connell, executive director of the N.C. Retired Governmental Employees’ Association. “The promise of what a

pension would deliver upon retirement is not there the way it was for folks who retired 20 or 30 years ago.”

As benefits shrink and private sector wages rise, the state government is struggling to attract and keep workers who provide both basic and essential services. State agencies are reporting vacancy rates as high as 20, 30 and 40 percent.

DMV Commissioner Wayne Goodwin has boosted starting salaries for drivers license examiners, but it’s not enough to fill gaps.

Beyond wages, Goodwin said, his employees are burdened by filling in for missing workers and a sense that their public service is not valued. “We

do hear in exit interviews that they don’t feel like they are getting respect from the public,” he said. “It can be a stressful job.”

Even at the federal level, once the gold standard for public employee pay and benefits, eroding pay, short staffing and low morale are inhibiting the delivery of services.

Valerie Langley, a 31-year Social Security Administration employee based in Charlotte, said her office’s traffic has fallen from 78 employees prior to the pandemic to 64 even as the population served has increased sharply. “They can’t keep people,” she said.

The union representing Social Security employees, the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), said the agency nationally has 4,000 fewer field office and teleservice center employees than it did 12 years ago. Meanwhile, the number of Social Security beneficiaries has risen by 21 percent since 2010.

Langley, a union steward, said the public blames employees when the phone isn’t answered or employees are late to appointments. “That’s the stereotype – lazy government workers,” she said. “It’s honestly the exact opposite. We’re overworked and overwhelmed.”

For too long, Republican lawmakers have neglected raising wages for public employees, enhancing benefits or modernizing government workplaces. Now that neglect has converged with the Great Resignation. Elected officials all levels are going to have to answer why taxpayers seeking services are instead getting busy signals, long lines and extended delays.

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# Xi should admit China’s COVID strategy failed

BY HANNAH SAMPSON AND JAMES BIKALES

The Washington Post

China is tumbling into a major COVID-19 crisis without a playbook. After more than two years of lockdowns, testing and quarantines to stamp out infections, the “zero COVID” approach is at a dead end. President Xi Jinping and the party-state leadership that has staked everything on “zero COVID” now face the most difficult of choices for a dictatorship: whether to change, admitting failure, or to stick with a failing policy. Protests erupted in Chinese cities over the weekend, in which ordinary Chinese registered their unhappiness with their country’s strict coronavirus policies – and with the regime itself. A reasonable, responsive government would adjust.

For much of the past two years, China demanded frequent testing for everyone. Those infected were forcibly quarantined, while others deemed close contacts – sometimes whole blocks – were locked down for weeks and months at a time. The approach resulted in low reported infections and deaths. China’s leaders boasted it was superior to the chaotic, decentralized response in the United States, where more than 1 million people have died.

But “zero COVID” has come unglued. The repeated lockdowns have harmed the world’s second-largest economy, shuttering factories, burdening local governments and frustrating workers. China’s economy grew by 3.9 percent in the year’s third quarter, compared with a year earlier, up from 0.4 percent growth in the second quarter.

These are dismal numbers relative to what China is used to. If “zero COVID” is not eased, the economy will slump more.

People are furious and fed up. Twice recently, protests have broken out at the Foxconn plant making iPhones in Zhengzhou over COVID-related restrictions. Then, last week, a fire in a

‘ZERO COVID’ HAS COME UNGLUED. THE REPEATED LOCKDOWNS HAVE HARMED THE WORLD’S SECOND-LARGEST ECONOMY.

high-rise in China’s Xinjiang region killed 10 people, and rumors spread across social media that the building was under lockdown. Street protests broke out across the country, with some demanding political freedom.

On Nov. 11, the State Council, China’s cabinet, announced a slight easing of COVID rules. But infections have soared to a record 40,347 a day. Fresh surges have gripped Guangzhou, Shijiazhuang and Beijing.

Now China is stuck. Last week, authorities were imposing strict lockdowns on districts in each megapolis, but the sudden shift back to closure is creating confusion and seems unsustainable after the protests. A sudden and complete opening would result in widespread deaths and overwhelm the health-care system, especially because China’s elderly population is under-vaccinated. Ideally, China would prepare and launch a mass vaccination campaign, importing the highly effective mRNA vaccines Pfizer and Moderna developed. Over time, China could join the rest of the world in living with the virus, allowing individuals to stay home if sick rather than herding them into quarantine centers and lockdowns.

But after so many months of insisting that the Communist Party and Mr. Xi know best – that rigid “zero COVID” is the only correct approach – changing course would imply they erred. China’s economy and its people’s health depend on whether this authoritarian system can respond to the voices of protest, ditch its own propaganda and show flexibility.

## NC VOICES

Welcome to NC Voices, where leaders, readers and experts from across North Carolina can speak on issues affecting our communities. Send submissions of 350 words or fewer to opinion@newsobserver.com.

### NC Methodist church split

On Nov. 19, the North Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church met to determine if 249 N.C. churches could leave the denomination in a split over same-sex marriage and ordination of gay and lesbian clergy. I’m pastor of two of those churches.

Bishop Leonard Fairley addressed the more than 1,200 people present, urging us to respect each other as both viewpoints continue to work side-by-side to serve God and spread the gospel.

“Friends, this is a burden that breaks my heart to bear,” he said. “But if bearing it means making space for God’s new things to be birthed, then bear it I must.”

He reminded everyone that “Jesus Christ is still the Lord of the Church” and “this is God’s story to write, and not ours.”

“I pray we do not depart

from each other in bitterness or in despair. ...I pray we stop demonizing and spreading vicious rumors about each other, as a means to win people over to our side when the side we should be winning people to is Christ.”

The vote was overwhelmingly in support of allowing churches to disaffiliate. There was silence.

What I found most amazing in all of this is that a group of 1,200 people faced what is one of the most difficult decisions such a body can face – the breakup of the body – with grace and forbearance for one another. No one was threatened, no harsh words exchanged.

Without bitter debate, the people called Methodist in North Carolina acknowledged their deep theological divide and made way for God to work in the lives of those on both sides.

This decision allows N.C. Methodists to end decades of wasteful, debilitating and distracting debate on which viewpoint is right. It allows each side to concentrate on following their deep theological convictions to honor God in the way they best know how. Both sides departed respectfully and lovingly. We will pray for the welfare of each other because that is what people of God do.

Bryan Lassiter, Newport

### Do more to protect NC firefighters

The writer is an Occupational and Environmental Medicine physician.

Being a community hero comes at a cost. Firefighters serve as essential workers across North Carolina, bearing physical demands and health risks to save others from burning buildings.

Recent studies have shown that firefighters have a higher mortality from cancers, such as non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma and testicular cancer. The culprit? The protective equipment they rely on puts them at risk.

Firefighting equipment and extinguishing foams contain PFAS, a “forever chemical” that is resistant to degradation and can build up to high levels in humans and the environment. PFAS from firefighting foams can seep into groundwater and contaminate wells where used frequently, including at firefighting training facilities.

International and U.S. firefighter unions have demanded removal of PFAS from their gear and foam. Already more than 15 states ban use of PFAS in firefighter equipment and foams.

North Carolina has yet to pass any legislation against use of PFAS.

Last year, the N.C. legis-

lature passed the Firefighters Fighting Cancer Act of 2021, which provides supplemental insurance to firefighters diagnosed with cancer on or after Jan. 1, 2022. That’s only a Band-Aid.

Viable PFAS-free alternatives have existed since 2019 and there are more than 100 fluorine-free foams available. As a result, many states have enacted PFAS bans.

The U.S. military has spent over \$1 billion treating PFAS contaminated water near firefighting training facilities. These excess costs prompted the Department of Defense to prohibit PFAS containing substances on military bases around the country in 2022. The FAA ordered hundreds of large airports to cease use of PFAS containing foam.

Despite these national efforts, North Carolina has yet to take action.

While North Carolina’s 2021 Firefighters Fighting Cancer Act will provide much relief to N.C. victim’s families, it doesn’t address the looming threat of PFAS for current and future firefighters. Our firefighters will always face the risk of running into a burning building. By banning use of PFAS, their risk of cancer can at least be extinguished.

Dr. Margaret Murray, Durham