

LOW-WAGE WORK PROGRAM | DECEMBER 12, 2023

Civil Service Vacancies in California: 2022–2023

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Summary

In 2022 the Labor Center began to see increasing numbers of reports from news media and stakeholders that excessive job vacancies in local government were a significant challenge. We set out to conduct an exploratory research project to understand if California local government employers were facing obstacles filling vacant positions and what factors could be contributing to high numbers of vacancies. Our research method involved triangulating data from three sources: interviews with subject matter experts, vacant position data from three counties, and publicly available data, reports, and audits on staffing and vacancy issues in local government. We summarize our initial findings here.

We find that job vacancies in local government appear to be a widespread and significant problem for the public sector affecting a wide range of occupations across wage levels and educational requirements. Our interviewees reported that challenges with job vacancies had been building slowly for some time before 2020 and were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent recovery. Interviewees pointed to multiple interlinking factors they felt contributed to local governments' struggles to fill job vacancies, including a tight labor market, increased voluntary turnover, changing labor force demographics, underinvestment in local government, difficulty competing with the private sector and other government agencies on earnings in the context of high costs of living in California, high growth in demand for workers in certain occupations (especially behavioral health and nursing), and long and cumbersome hiring processes. High job vacancies impact not only public service delivery but also the workers who are forced to handle heavier workloads. Understaffing can lead to burnout and increased turnover, further exacerbating staffing challenges.

Our report concludes with suggested policy solutions raised by subject matter experts and other reports and analyses on job vacancy challenges in local government. We discuss and provide examples for the following possible policy goals:

- Systematically and comprehensively gather and publish data on vacancies
- Set up labor-management vacancy committees or task forces
- Investigate compensation rates and raise pay to attract and retain employees
- Improve other aspects of job quality and focus on retention
- Improve pipelines into government jobs
- Improve hiring processes

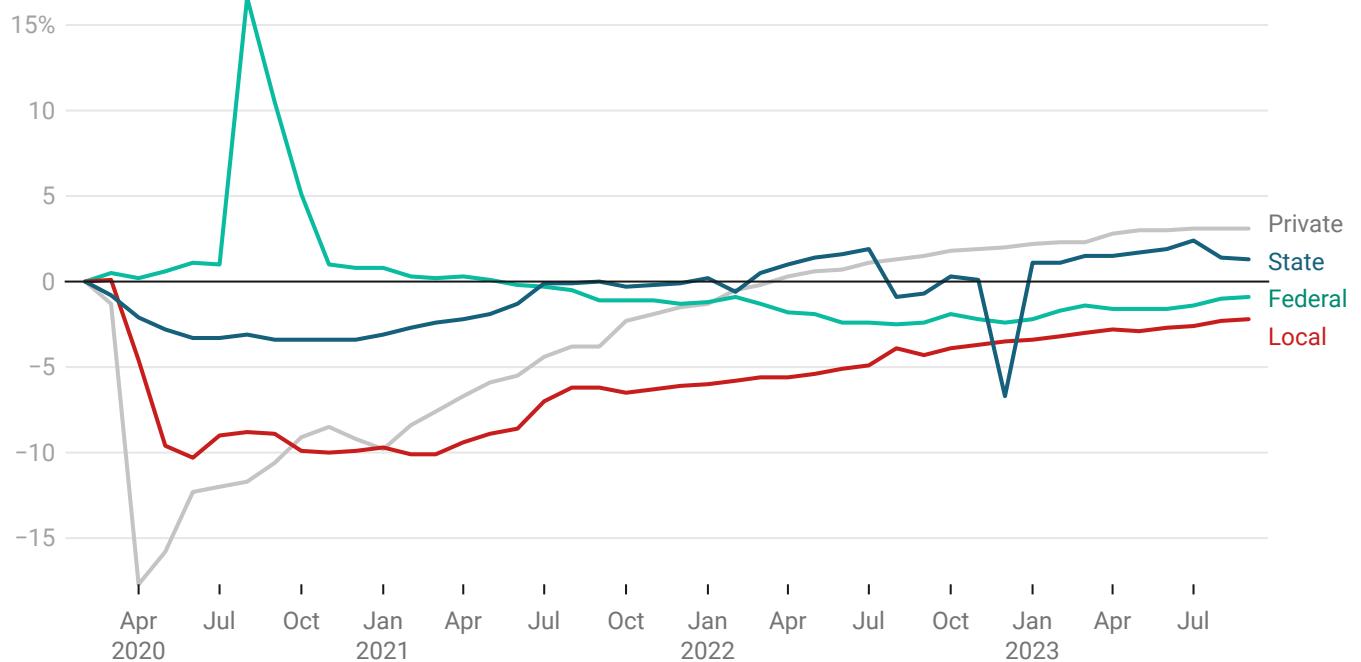
Local Governments Provide Vital Services

We focused our analysis on job vacancies in local government in California, particularly counties, for several reasons. First, previous analysis by the UC Berkeley Labor Center shows that after the economic downturn from the COVID-19 pandemic, local government employment

recovery was lagging behind the private sector and state government (see Exhibit 1).¹ Second, California’s local governments employ almost 10% of the state’s workforce—more than three times the number employed in state government.² In 2022, about 391,000 people worked for a county government, compared to 268,000 for a city, 560,000 for the state, and 904,000 for a school district.³ County employment ranges from tiny (Alpine has fewer than 100 full-time employees) to massive (Los Angeles has over 100,000). And third, counties and cities provide the services that Californians rely on in their daily lives. We specifically focused on counties as they are generally funded differently than cities, typically through federal and state transfers and property taxes, and thus have less control over their ability to raise revenue. And, unique to California, counties deliver many social services and federal programs that are typically run by state governments, such as public health delivery and social welfare programs. Counties also operate courts, sheriff’s departments, jails, public hospitals, elections, and public records. Exhibit 2 provides an overview of the functions performed by county governments, with an estimate of the number of employees working in each function.

Local governments perform a broad range of functions—from legal systems to social welfare to public transportation—so staffing challenges have significant impacts on the ability of individuals and businesses to access goods and services. Although counties’ fiscal structures and functions are unique, we expect their staffing challenges are shared by other types of governments. Our conversations with officials and unions around the state suggest that cities, school districts, and state agencies are experiencing comparable challenges with attracting and retaining staff.

Exhibit 1. California public employment recovery lags private sector
February 2020 to September 2023



Note: Seasonally adjusted, indexed to February 2020 employment
Source: BLS Current Employment Statistics (seasonal)

Exhibit 2. California county employment by function, 2022

Public Welfare	75,640	All other and unallocable	11,434
Hospitals	46,633	Fire Protection	9,345
Health	46,292	Highways	7,244
Education	44,432	Libraries	5,152
Police Protection	41,618	Parks and Recreation	4,775
Corrections	30,472	Utilities	3,546
Judicial and Legal	27,533	Natural Resources	3,492
Financial Administration	16,468	Housing & Community Development	2,238
Other Government Administration	13,852	Airport / Port / Transit	1,050
		Total	391,216

Source: Census of Governments, 2022

Research Questions and Method

In order to address a problem, we need data to understand it. Our goals for this project were exploratory. We sought to learn what data on vacancies is available, how vacancies are measured, and what broader trends in job vacancies we could identify. We wanted to know 1) if job vacancy rates in local government were higher now than in past years, especially for specific occupations, geographic locations, or salary levels; 2) what challenges public employers faced in filling positions; 3) how vacancy challenges impacted existing workers, retention rates, and government services; and 4) any policy recommendations local governments had or were exploring. Our approach involved triangulating data across multiple sources to facilitate uncovering broad trends in civil service job vacancies.⁴ We collected several sources of data including local government vacancy data, conducted interviews with experts, evaluated national-level data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and reviewed local reports and audits. Each data source has its own strengths and limitations. Therefore, we analyzed each data source in relation to others to identify common trends.

To obtain the local government vacancy data, we submitted California Public Records Act Requests (PRA) to several counties/cities including Kern County, the city of Los Angeles, Los Angeles County, San Diego County, San Francisco City/County, and Santa Clara County. We selected these local governments because of their large populations, geographic spread, and potential for having available vacancy data to explore. We requested data to reflect the end of each fiscal year between 2012–2022 for all vacant positions, all positions budgeted, and

employee demographic, tenure, hiring, and turnover information. To date we have received usable data from three counties: Los Angeles County, Santa Clara County, and San Diego County.⁵ The data we received are used for administrative purposes, such as managing the county workforce, and were not designed for research. We attempted to vet the data we received for any data quality issues; however, we cannot fully account for any unknown issues in county record keeping. Where possible we use endnotes to provide additional information related to data quality and our analysis.

Next, we conducted 17 one-hour confidential semi-structured interviews with 20 participants between January and August 2023.⁶ Thirteen participants worked for counties. Of those, eleven worked for county human resource/personnel departments and two were county executives or administrators. We interviewed three participants who were formerly or currently connected to county associations. County associations support high-level county leadership and represent county interests in state government. Finally, four participants were staff of public sector unions. In addition to formal interviews, we held informational conversations with six other participants who were either county employees, connected to county associations, or were staff of public sector unions.⁷ Our participants were able to speak to experiences from 12 counties covering urban and rural regions of California as well as the Northern, Central, and Southern parts of the state.

Interviews were conducted and auto-transcribed using Zoom and corrected for accuracy. We systematically analyzed interviews for key themes using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software.⁸ We analyzed a subset of the interviews inductively identifying key themes and then collaboratively developed a deductive coding system that was applied to all interviews. Interviews were analyzed for key themes including: mentions of vacancy rates, job classifications experiencing challenges, explanations offered by interviewees for high vacancies rates, impacts of job vacancies on workers and county services, and finally policy recommendations offered by interviewees.

Finally, we analyzed public data on trends in job openings and turnover nationally and in California from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, examined reports and audits from local government on staffing issues, and reviewed reporting on job vacancy issues in news media.

Calculating vacancy rates

To analyze vacancies in the PRA data we received from counties, we examined jobs with the highest number of vacant positions and also calculated vacancy rates. Calculating the total number of vacancies can show job classifications with the greatest number of vacancies. However, it skews the analysis towards more highly budgeted positions (e.g., clerks or nurses). Calculating a vacancy rate involves taking the ratio of the number of vacant positions to some underlying number of expected job holders such as the number of budgeted positions. For example, two vacant full-time equivalent (FTE) HR managers divided by four budgeted FTE HR managers results in a vacancy rate of 50%. Vacancy rates allow for understanding the potential

magnitude of vacancies for a particular type of work, especially helpful for jobs with fewer budgeted positions.

We received data from Santa Clara and Los Angeles Counties that allowed us to calculate our own vacancy rates. San Diego County did not provide data that allowed us to calculate our own vacancy rates. Instead they submitted reports with their own vacancy rate calculations and we reference those in our analysis. For Santa Clara and Los Angeles Counties we calculated job vacancies by taking the ratio of FTE vacant positions to FTE budgeted positions. Our goal was to capture the number of vacancies at a point in time—around the end of each fiscal year to avoid job vacancies that were newly added as part of county budgeting. Santa Clara sent us vacant position data as of the end of May each year. However, Los Angeles County submitted vacancy data at the beginning of the fiscal year, around mid-July, rather than at the end. We adjusted for this by removing newly vacant positions when we calculated the vacancy rates. Los Angeles County also submitted a couple reports in which they calculated their own job vacancy rates by taking the ratio of number of vacancies to vacancies plus incumbents. We reference these in addition to our calculations. Finally, the San Diego County reports calculated vacancy rates by taking the ratio of the number of vacant positions available to be filled by the total number of budgeted positions. San Diego County vacancy data reflect the beginning of June of each year. One challenge for evaluating job vacancies is that departments may leave vacancies in their budgets that they do not plan to fill (e.g., to use to cover overtime, unbudgeted expenses, or temporary hires).⁹ The appendix documents additional methodological considerations for working with vacancy data.

Research Findings

Job vacancies are a significant problem

Overwhelmingly, interview participants agreed that job vacancies were a challenge facing local governments. Some felt these challenges had been developing for several years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, but that the pandemic and obstacles during the ongoing recovery period had exacerbated job vacancies. Interview participants felt that some occupations like social workers, psychiatrists, nurses, and engineers had long been difficult to fill but that they were experiencing county-wide vacancies to a greater degree than pre-pandemic. Interview participants reported county-wide job vacancy rates ranging from 5% to 30%. Most interviewees stated that a vacancy rate of somewhere between 6% to 10% was not unusual for the county as some level of unfilled positions from turnover was to be expected; however, they were experiencing rates 1.5 to 2 times their usual rate (these rates were in reference to fiscal year 2022-2023).

These reports of high job vacancies are borne out in the PRA data we obtained. For example, data from San Diego County show that as of June 2022 the county calculated a vacancy rate of 12%, which was double the average vacancy rate of 6% across the previous nine

years (2013-2021). Los Angeles County provided an analysis showing that at the end of the 2021-2022 fiscal year the county had 16,025 FTE positions vacant for a vacancy rate of 14.8%, which had been around 11% the previous year. Our analysis of Santa Clara County data shows vacancy rates at the end of the 2018-2019 and 2019-2020 fiscal years to be about 13% and 2020-2021 about 10%. However, the vacancy rate increased to around 16% at the end of 2021-2022 fiscal year.¹⁰

Reports from other jurisdictions provide additional evidence that job vacancies are a broader challenge for the public sector. A civil grand jury report from San Francisco City/County found that the vacancy rate for permanent positions has doubled from 6.8% in 2019 to 13.7% in 2023.¹¹ The City of Oakland's Annual Staffing reports in 2022 and 2023 showed a citywide vacancy rate of around 16% (for unencumbered positions) along with high vacancy rates in the surrounding San Francisco Bay Area ranging from 11.3% in Concord to 19.0% in Berkeley and Richmond.¹² At the state level, analysis from the Legislative Analyst's Office of 12 collective bargaining units representing three-fourth of the state workforce showed that job vacancy rates increased significantly over the last 10 years with around 12.9% to 31.5% of positions vacant.¹³

Vacancies are high across occupations and wage levels

A variety of occupations and departments are facing job vacancy challenges. Subject matter experts reported in interviews that they were seeing the highest job vacancies in public health, health care, behavioral health and social work, criminal justice, administration and clerical, public works, and others. Data we received from counties and other reports point to similar challenges.

Exhibit 3 shows the top 20 vacant positions reported in PRA data for Los Angeles, San Diego, and Santa Clara Counties and includes vacancy rates and the county's minimum monthly salary for each position. Several trends become apparent. One, across each of the three counties similar types of jobs appear in the top 20 most vacant, including: office and administrative roles (including those at public hospitals), work supporting applicants applying for social programs (called eligibility workers, community health workers, and human services specialists), social workers including those that work in protective services and with children, positions in sheriff's offices including sheriffs, probation officers, and dispatchers, and health care workers such as nurses, nursing support staff, and some physicians. Second, high vacancies are an issue across the wage distribution, ranging from lower paying custodial, administrative, and social program support work, to mid-range social work and sheriff's roles, to higher paid nurses, physicians, and program managers and analysts. Third, the top 20 vacant positions vary in terms of educational requirements, ranging from no advanced degree requirements for office specialists and eligibility workers, to requirements for a bachelor's or master's degree for social workers, to licensing credentials in the case of nurses and physicians.

Evaluation of job vacancy rates (as opposed to the highest number of vacancies) in the PRA data reveals that many unique job classifications have high vacancy rates. At the end of the 2021-2022 fiscal year, San Diego County had over 80 job titles with vacancy rates greater than 25%, even after restricting the analysis to exclude positions for which only one job classification was budgeted.¹⁴ Santa Clara County at the end of May 2022 had over 140 job classifications with a vacancy rate greater than 25% and Los Angeles County in July of 2021 had over 260 such job classifications. This volume of positions with high vacancy rates makes it challenging to identify meaningful patterns, particularly because the reason so many positions are vacant is not always obvious in the data. For example, positions may have been recently added through temporary funding or through the budgeting process leading to high numbers of vacant positions that departments may not have had time to fill. Or data may show positions vacant that departments do not intend to fill but it is unknown how widespread this practice is.¹⁵

Other publicly available reports suggest local governments are broadly struggling with job vacancies in a variety of positions. San Francisco's civil grand jury report showed vacancy rates were highest in departments that provide critical services including the Department of Public Health, the Department of Public Works, the Police Department, and the Municipal Transit Authority.¹⁶ Other reports showed consistently high vacancy rates at the Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital among many different types of positions but particularly among registered nurses.¹⁷ A City of Oakland staffing report from June 2023 showed high numbers of vacant positions in Public Works, Fire, Transportation, and Human Services departments; however, almost all departments had a vacancy rate higher than 10%.¹⁸ And nationally, in a survey of human resource managers employed in local and state government, over 50% reported having a hard time filling positions in policing and dispatch, corrections, healthcare (physicians and nurses), engineering, the skilled trades including equipment operators, behavioral health, information technology, maintenance and general labor, human and social services, custodial and maintenance, transportation, utilities, automotive maintenance, and building and permitting.¹⁹

Exhibit 3. A snapshot in time: Top 20 job classifications with the greatest number of vacancies, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Santa Clara Counties

LA County (as of July 11, 2021)			San Diego (as of June 1, 2022)			Santa Clara (as of May 30, 2022)		
Job Classification	Number FTE (rate)	Minimum Monthly Salary (\$2023)	Job Classification	Number Vacant (Rate)	Minimum Monthly Salary (\$2023)	Job Classification	Number FTE (Rate)	Minimum Monthly Salary (\$2023)
Custodian	97 (15%)	\$3,080	Office Assistant	101 (13%)	\$3,172	Park Services Attendant - U	59 (NA)	\$4,023
Intermediate Clerk	220 (18%)	\$3,156	Certified Nursing Assistant	16 (9%)	\$3,175	Office Specialist II	29 (23%)	\$4,170
Community Health Worker	170 (17%)	\$3,156	Human Services Specialist	93 (5%)	\$3,656	Office Specialist III	60.5 (19%)	\$4,503
Office Support Assistant	108 (72%)	\$3,156	Child Support Officer	44 (20%)	\$3,983	Hospital Services Assistant II	53.6 (33%)	\$4,532
Nursing Attendant I	128 (14%)	\$3,179	Correctional Deputy Probation Officer I	47 (24%)	\$4,023	Health Services Rep	82.25 (20%)	\$4,784
Intermediate Typist-clerk	869 (15%)	\$3,234	Detentions Processing Technician	26 (17%)	\$4,132	Senior Health Services Rep	35 (15%)	\$5,317
Senior Clerk	128 (15%)	\$3,265	Sheriff's Detention Licensed Vocational Nurse	51 (53%)	\$4,423	Licensed Vocational Nurse	36.7 (13%)	\$6,218
Senior Typist-clerk	195 (14%)	\$3,556	Deputy Sheriff Detentions/Court Services	274 (23%)	\$4,816	Social Worker I	25 (33%)	\$6,378
Clinical Licensed Vocational Nurse I	104 (17%)	\$3,770	Equipment Operator	21 (20%)	\$4,924	Social Worker III	55 (20%)	\$7,750
GAIN Services Worker	200 (20%)	\$4,157	Correctional Deputy Probation Officer II	17 (16%)	\$4,990	Sheriff's Correctional Deputy	129 (18%)	\$7,973
Eligibility Worker II	177 (3%)	\$4,198	Protective Services Worker	103 (16%)	\$5,273	Psychiatric Social Worker II	58.3 (26%)	\$8,091
Medical Case Worker II	98 (16%)	\$4,977	Sheriff's Emergency Services Dispatcher	22 (17%)	\$5,389	Management Analyst	38 (22%)	\$8,735
Physician, Post Graduate (1st Year)	289 (93%)	\$5,835	Deputy Sheriff	95 (8%)	\$5,884	Senior Appraiser	49 (> 100%)	\$8,487
Children's Social Worker III	170 (4%)	\$6,077	Deputy Probation Officer	45 (15%)	\$5,961	Deputy Sheriff	64 (17%)	\$9,034
Deputy Probation Officer II, Field	133 (9%)	\$6,245	Senior Protective Services Worker	41 (25%)	\$6,240	Senior Management Analyst	31 (24%)	\$9,630
Deputy Sheriff	293 (4%)	\$6,625	Admin Analyst II	35 (9%)	\$6,526	Deputy Probation Officer III	30 (13%)	\$9,502
Psychiatric Social Worker II	217 (13%)	\$7,098	Sheriff's Detention Mental Health Clinician	55 (73%)	\$7,247	Program Manager II	49 (29%)	\$10,670
Registered Nurse I	204 (10%)	\$7,678	Admin Analyst III	22 (10%)	\$7,247	Program Manager III	25 (36%)	\$12,058
Registered Nurse II	212 (10%)	\$7,908	Psychiatric Nurse	27 (25%)	\$7,502	Clinical Nurse III & III-U	342 (25%)	\$13,800
Sergeant	140 (10%)	\$8,818	Sheriff's Detentions Nurse	56 (23%)	\$7,542	Physician - VMC	49.7 (12%)	\$9,620

Authors' analysis of public records act data on job vacancies received from Los Angeles, San Diego, and Santa Clara Counties. This table represents the number of positions that were vacant at one particular point in time and thus provides a snapshot of the types of positions counties most needed to recruit. These positions may have been filled at a later time. Working with vacancy data is a moving target as positions become vacant and are filled throughout the fiscal year. The minimum monthly salaries are in 2023 dollars and represent the most up-to-date salaries publicly available on county websites.

See additional table notes²⁰

What is driving vacancy challenges in the public sector?

“There’s no singular reason for what’s happening, there’s a multitude of reasons that have sort of compiled together to create the situation...and there’s half a dozen of them.” —County association participant

Interviews revealed that there are likely multiple causes of high job vacancies in local government that interact, overlap, and vary by job classification and geography. We highlight here some of the most common explanations offered by interviewees. While we cannot evaluate all of their claims directly, where possible we provide background information and context based on research. Our interviewees reported that local governments face a number of challenges including a tight labor market and increased voluntary turnover, changing labor force demographics including a shrinking and aging labor force, lingering effects of underinvestment after the Great Recession, difficulty competing with the private sector and other parts of local government on earnings in the context of high costs of living in California, high demand for workers in certain occupations without adequate supply, and a long and cumbersome hiring process.

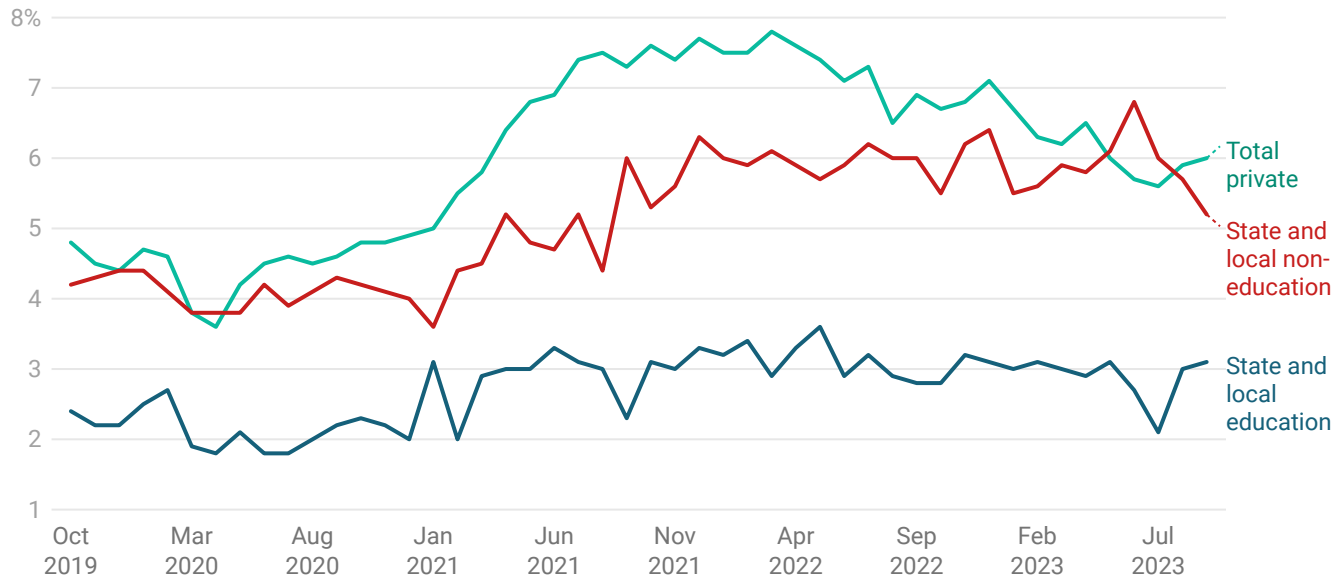
A tight labor market means fewer applicants and increased voluntary turnover

“At its root it’s a supply and demand [problem]. If you had an adequate supply of graduates, then the private sector would have everyone they needed, and then public agencies could hire everybody they needed. And so, when you don’t have that... The same thing that’s happening in law enforcement is happening in behavioral health in terms of entities who have the ability to pay higher compensation, signing bonuses, etc., are able to do so, and also in government we have very fixed compensation systems. [In the] private sector you may have the ability to get bonuses. You may have the ability to get that big signing bonus, all things that traditionally haven’t been available in the public sector. So again, in a tight job market [the] public sector has a hard time competing with some of the tools that the private sector may have available to them. In a recession, that may start to switch the other way because of the stability and the retirement that comes with a public sector job, but at a low unemployment rate this is not unexpected.” —County association participant

Many interviewees reported that counties were struggling to compete with the private sector for workers, some linking this to the tight labor market that California, like the nation as a whole, is experiencing. The unemployment rate hit a record low of 3.8% in July of 2022 and more recently was 4.7% in September 2023.²¹ In tandem, job openings are high, giving workers more choice and opportunity in the labor market. The job openings rate reflects the number of

job openings relative to the number of jobs (both filled and unfilled). At two points since the pandemic began the national job openings rate for state/local non-education jobs surpassed that of the private sector: in April 2020 and in the months since May 2023 (see exhibit 4). In the public sector, a rapid increase in funding for specific programs (such as public and mental health) can contribute to higher vacancy rates as demand surges. The volume of job openings in state and local non-education jobs has been increasing.

Exhibit 4. Job openings rate in U.S., October 2019-September 2023



Note: Job openings rate = job openings / (job openings + jobs)
 Source: BLS JOLTS

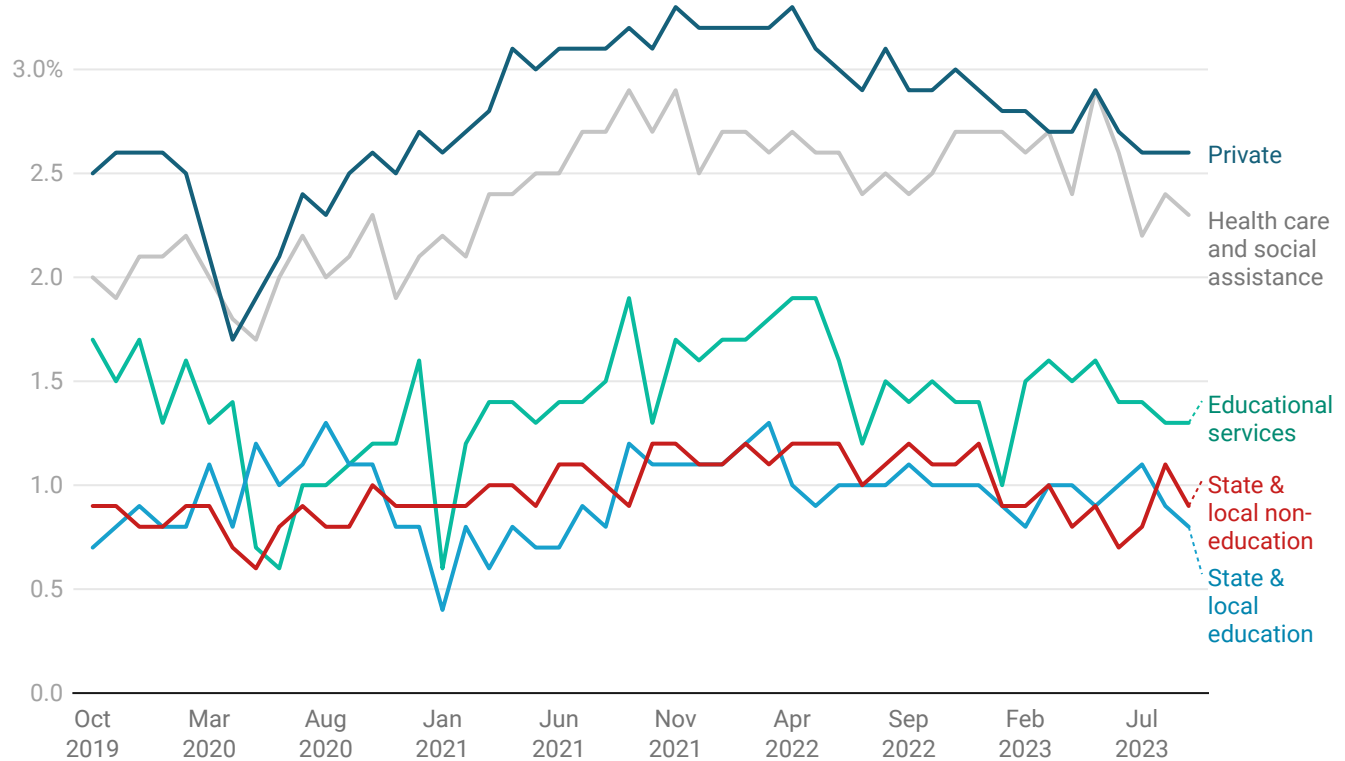
The tight labor market in the United States since the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic has been associated with rapid wage growth, especially among workers under 40 without a college degree.²² As competition among employers for workers grew, job separations increased with workers moving toward higher-paying opportunities. This resulted in real wage growth—especially for the lowest earning workers—and wage compression, meaning a smaller gap between the wage premium a college-educated worker made relative to a worker without a college degree. County interviewees reported seeing this increased competition as a drop in the usual number of job applicants for a posting as well as reports of county workers leaving for higher-paying jobs in the private sector.²³

Some county interviewees felt they were experiencing a recruitment problem, others a retention problem, and some a mixture of both. For example, one county interview participant shared that the number of workers who turned over in a year jumped from around 1,800 on average to over 3,000 in 2022. PRA data we received show that all three counties experienced an increase in voluntary (non-retirement) turnover compared to prior years. Santa Clara County saw on average around 1,302 voluntary separations per year between the 2012-2019 fiscal

years. This increased to around 3,197 at the end of the 2021-2022 fiscal year; however, some of this may be due to temporary workers.²⁴ San Diego County had an average of around 693 workers per year voluntarily turn over between the 2013-2019 fiscal years. This increased to an average of 974 per year between 2020-2022.²⁵ Los Angeles County reported around 1,880 voluntary separations per year at the end of the 2013-2019 fiscal years. The number of voluntary separations in 2020 and 2021 (an average of 2,057 per year) were not outside the county’s usual number of voluntary separations for the previous four years (an average of 2,044 per year); however, Los Angeles County did see an increase in the number of voluntary separations increase to 3,506 in 2022.²⁶

Additionally, reports from the cities of Berkeley,²⁷ San Francisco,²⁸ and Oakland²⁹ show that separation rates outpaced the rate of hiring, and over 60% of local and state government employees surveyed by MissionSquare Research Institute reported experiencing a greater number of people leaving their jobs in 2021 and 2022.³⁰ These local experiences are reflected in broader nationally representative data as well. While rates of quitting (those who left their jobs but did not retire) are much lower in the public sector compared to the private sector overall, the state government and local non-education sector also reported a steady increase in voluntary separations starting in 2021 and into 2022 mirroring trends in other sectors (see exhibit 5).³¹

Exhibit 5. Quits rate in U.S., October 2019—September 2023



Note: Quits rate includes employees who leave voluntarily, except for retirements and transfers.
Source: BLS JOLTS

California's labor force is growing older and shrinking in number

"Could it be because of a silver tsunami? The number of baby boomers—we knew there was going to be a big wave of retirements and the pandemic, a lot of people kind of stayed on for a few more years, and then there was a cliff. So we've had a lot of retirements. And then some people decided, they were in their sixties, there were other things that they'd rather do with the rest of their life. And so we had some early retirements, too.... There's more millennials coming in and more baby boomers exiting." —Rural county HR manager

"I would say that this was a challenge prior to the pandemic in that there don't seem to be the same incentives for individuals to go into a career in public service. Where I think it had been widely viewed as a kind of a stable job with a pension at the end—that seems to have sort of fallen out of favor with the generation that is much more comfortable changing jobs, kind of shifting focus, at least throughout their young adulthood, and not really sticking at a place and developing a career. I do work a lot with undergraduates...if you say, 'do you want a job in public service?' They start looking like 'what's that? What does that mean?' I just don't think we have done a good job, you know, pitching it as an option to young people. I don't think we have done it. I don't know what's changed. I really haven't understood it, but I've definitely seen a difference. We have not done ourselves any favors by what we tell the public about what it is we do and why it's important. So, I don't think we've done a good job at teaching kids about the value of public service and the benefits that it can provide." —County association personnel

Interviewees pointed to the role of retirements along with an aging and shrinking labor force in California as reasons to be concerned about growing difficulty with staffing. Nationally, the labor force is aging as more baby boomers move closer to retirement.³² California's workforce has aged over the past two decades: the proportion of workers over 64 grew from less than 2% to 5.5%; the share of workers under 40 fell from 56% to 48%.³³ The state's public sector workforce is also slightly older than the private sector: 25% of California's public sector workers are 55 or over, versus 20% in the private sector. Given that public sector workers tend to retire earlier than workers in the private sector, government agencies will likely be affected by a wave of retirements in the next few years.

In line with HR managers' reports, an increase in retirements is evident in the PRA data we received from Los Angeles, Santa Clara, and San Diego Counties.³⁴ Los Angeles County PRA data show 2,605 retirements at the end of the 2019 fiscal year (with an average of 2,364 retirements per year between 2013 and 2019). The number of retirements jumped to 2,818 in 2021 and 3,278 in 2022. Santa Clara County data show at least 198 retirements at the end of the 2019 fiscal year (with an average of 192 retirements per year between 2012 and 2019) which jumped to around 316 in 2021 but returned to 195 in 2022.³⁵ Finally, San Diego County

data show 656 retirements at the end of the 2019 fiscal year (with an average around 617 retirements per year between 2012-2019) which jumped to 872 retirements in 2022.

An aging workforce along with lower rates of population growth has meant that the growth in the labor force in the United States has been slowing.³⁶ Uniquely, California also lost an estimated 529,000 residents from 2020 to 2023 and is projected to experience slow population growth after 2024, and not recover that lost population until 2031.³⁷ Considering these trends, our interviewees expressed significant interest and concern about how to recruit newer generations, Millennials and Gen Z, into the workforce. Interviewees speculated that younger workers might not know what types of work they could perform in the public sector or understand the valuable and meaningful work they might be able to contribute to their communities. They felt the public sector as a whole had not done enough to proactively recruit newer generations into public service. Interviewees also voiced concerns about potential cultural norms of newer generations not expecting to stay with one employer long-term; a feature of the public sector has been longer employment tenures and less turnover in part due to the value of a pension. And finally, interviewees felt expectations of work were changing either due to generational differences or the impact the pandemic had on people's priorities and values. Interviewees felt there were increased demands from applicants and workers for work-life balance, flexibility, the opportunity to do meaningful work, and to have a voice in the workplace.

Local government austerity has had long-term effects

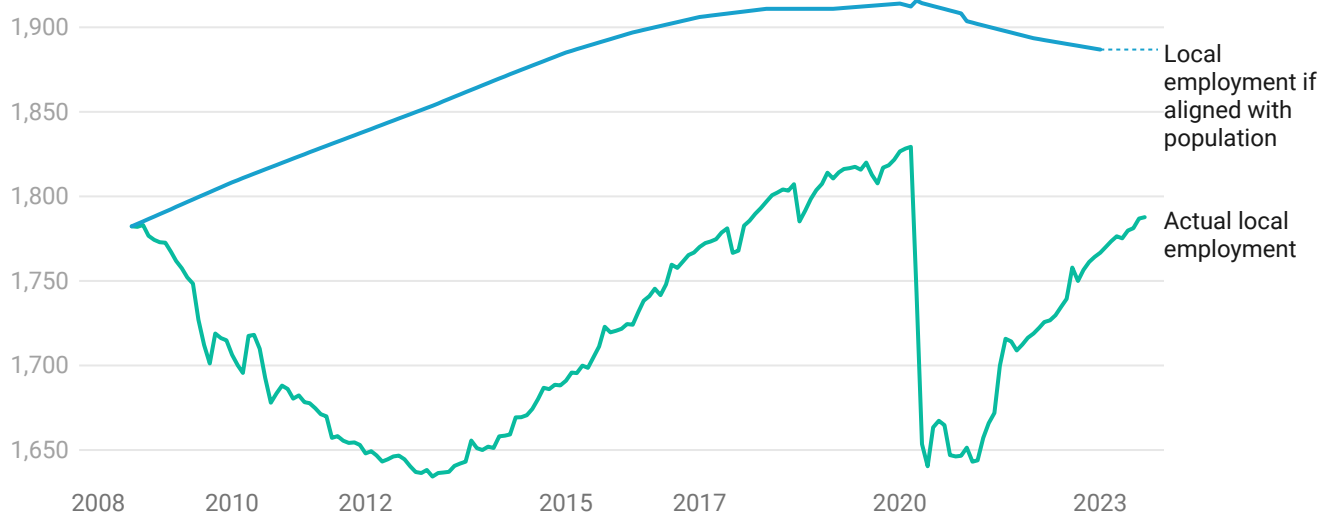
"Revenues in almost every county do not keep up with the pace of economic growth because of the revenue sources that counties get compared to the revenue sources that the state gets. The state's revenue sources are more volatile. But overall, even with the volatility they go up much more quickly, and they basically track with economic growth. County revenues don't. And so, if you go back to the Great Recession, and how revenues have done since then.... There are still something like 40% of counties who had less general fund revenue per capita in real dollars than they had before the Great Recession.... And so, of course...your employee numbers aren't going to rebound as much because...you're dealing with having significantly less revenue compared to a presumed level of service need." —County association personnel

"There were obviously lots of changes to public sector staffing during the Great Recession, a lot of governments deleted vacant positions, started to lay off people in their workforce, started to really downsize. And then, for a number of years after the Great Recession, we had to really fight tooth and nail for any wage increases for our members and during that whole time our workforce was aging...and more of our workforce was getting close to retirement. And the thing is, wages were too low, not growing, not competitive. At the same time, we were relying on this

older workforce that was going to start retiring at some point. But a lot of public agencies just did not plan for that.... But once they're [retired], wages that were in for their job are just not competitive to attract a new person to come in. And we find that, even within certain public agencies, there's a lot of moving around as people try to get more competitive wages, better wages, and some agencies just really fall behind. Then their vacancy problems get really bad.... They reach a crisis point where they try to adjust wages. Maybe there's some willingness to finally take action, but at that point it's usually too late, we already have way too many job vacancies and the departments are in a crisis." —Union staffer

County executives, personnel working for county associations, and labor union staffers saw local government’s vacancy challenges as being a consequence of long-term underinvestment and austerity in the public sector. Counties’ struggles to achieve full staffing may be linked to a history of underinvestment in local government. The slow recovery of the public sector from the Great Recession has been well-documented; local governments in particular have struggled to regain pre-recession employment and revenue levels.³⁸ In July of 2008, shortly before the Great Recession, California’s local governments employed 1.78 million people. It fell sharply during the recession. By February 2020 local employment had recovered to 1.82 million people, but this is below the number of workers there would have been if employment aligned with population growth over the same period (see exhibit 6). The share of California workers employed in state or local government dropped 12% from 2008 until 2020. As local governments sought to “do more with less,” workloads increased and staffing levels stagnated, eroding the job quality that has historically drawn people to work in the public sector.

Exhibit 6. California local government employment, July 2008—September 2023



Notes: Employment data through September 2023; population estimates through January 2023. Employment in thousands.
Source: BLS Current Employment Statistics / California Department of Finance

Despite providing critical services, county governments have very little control over their revenue streams and have almost no authority to raise revenues in response to spending needs. This is tied to the legacy of Proposition 13, which strictly limited the growth of assessed property values and the ability of local governments to increase or adopt taxes based on property values.³⁹ Counties today derive most of their revenue from property taxes and from intergovernmental transfers from the state and federal governments to run social services, housing, legal systems, and other programs. With limited ability to control their revenue streams, less flexibility to raise wages as quickly as the private sector, and a mandate to provide employer-sponsored benefits such as a pension and health insurance, one rural county executive expressed great concern about their ability to compete on wages with other entry-level lower wage jobs (such as in fast food) as minimum wages continue to rise in the state.

Earnings are not competitive with the private sector

“One place that the county is struggling now that we were not struggling in years ago was actually at our landfill. We paid a pretty good wage to work at the landfill with benefits, and as we have seen, fast food and some other private sector, lower-level jobs start competing salary-wise, we haven’t been able to compete with them because of our cost of benefits. So we’ll have people actually say I am leaving the landfill to go work at Starbucks, or leaving the landfill to go and work at McDonald’s. That’s not anything I’ve ever seen since I started working in local government.” —Rural county executive

“Our lower wage workers...are much more highly compensated than lower wage workers in the private sector... So I think the wage gap...is not at the bottom end of our labor pool. It’s more in the...higher or paid higher, compensated folks...like with nurses, we’re competing with Sutter or Kaiser for a nurse, and do they want to choose to work for us, or do they want to choose to work for Sutter or Kaiser? That’s not the only example.” —Urban County HR Director

Some county interviewees felt that they were struggling to compete with the private sector on earnings. While the public sector generally offers better benefits than the private sector—including a pension, health insurance, and union representation (for many positions)—county interviewees felt in the context of high costs of living in California and the tight labor market they were struggling to offer enough take-home pay to attract and retain workers.

Struggles to compete with the private sector were reported across the wage distribution. Some interviewees felt they were experiencing challenges recruiting and retaining workers at the low end of salary distribution, particularly as wage growth grew among workers without a college degree during the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁰ Interviewees felt that workers were trading off better public sector benefits for much-needed higher take-home pay to cope

with high housing costs, childcare expenses, student loan debt, and high inflation. Others felt that challenges were in the middle of the wage distribution, perhaps as a failure on the part of the county to raise wages in the middle, among program analysts with transferable skills for example. And finally, most stated that they were struggling to compete with the private sector for more highly paid credentialed workers such as nurses, social workers, and engineers.

When wages became uncompetitive counties felt they struggled to compete not just with the private sector but with other public sector jurisdictions as well. One interview participant described this phenomenon as “moving the deck chairs around” to illustrate that counties struggle to recruit enough new workers in local government service only to lose workers to other jurisdictions when another county or city or agency raises pay. As one union staffer told us, in some cases switching jobs between local government employers was the only way for a worker to see a meaningful raise.

Public employers pay higher compensation in the form of health and retirement benefits compared to the private sector. Pensions, in particular, are important for recruitment and retention, allowing workers to retire with dignity and reducing wealth inequality.⁴¹ Despite these higher benefits, public sector workers may be losing ground in wage and salary compensation. Two studies on Marin and Sonoma Counties show wage penalties for public sector workers compared to private sector workers, especially for workers with higher levels of education. And despite higher county expenditures on fringe benefits, total compensation for county workers still lagged private sector workers.⁴² Other research shows pay penalties for public sector teachers contributing to recruitment and retention challenges.⁴³ Studies of wage trends in healthcare, education, office, and service industries show that compensation costs in the public sector significantly lagged the private sector from 2019 to 2022 (although only service sector compensation costs outpaced inflation).⁴⁴ Finally, private sector wage and salary growth has outpaced that of state and local government for most of the last 14 years, and significantly in recent years from 2020-2022.⁴⁵

The relative value of fringe benefits has declined but is likely less of an explanation compared to other factors

***HR manager 1:** “People are wanting to leave earlier. The pension isn’t as attractive as it once was. Part of that, I think, is because of pension reform, and part of it is because we’re finding that with the new generation of workforce, that’s not necessarily their priority. It’s also very expensive to live here, and so people value paying their bills now, maybe a little bit more than their future pension benefit. And PEPRA happened in what, 2012? So that’s just been gradual. But we’re really seeing a difference now with 61% of our workforce being in the lowest tier that we offer... It’s less of a rich benefit in order for us to have a fully funded pension.”*

HR manager 2: *“I think it’s twofold.... You know people need to be able to pay their bills now, and so, if they’re not making high enough wages to also put so much money aside then they’re not going to be able to stay. And then, secondly, people aren’t going and working for one employer and staying for 20 years. And so that’s when the pension really becomes worth it.”*

Interviewees in human resources in particular were interested in the role that fringe benefits play in attracting new employees and encouraging employees to stay. Some interviewees felt that changes to pension plans might be part of the reason why local governments were struggling with recruitment and retention. Some felt that with younger generations of workers switching jobs more frequently, perhaps the pension benefit felt less attractive. And finally, similar to themes discussed above, human resource personnel were trying to understand what it would take to attract and retain newer generations of workers, particularly considering what they described as a tradeoff between a high-quality benefit package but lower take pay in the context of high cost of living, inflation, and workers’ goals to be able to save to buy a home, travel, or just make enough to pay the bills.

Public sector jobs have long been associated with higher-quality fringe benefits. Public sector jobs are more likely to offer employer-paid health coverage (and those benefits are of higher quality), defined benefit pension plans, and paid sick and vacation leave. This is especially true in California, where nearly 60% of public sector workers are covered by a union contract.⁴⁶ Newer workers do have less generous pension benefits than those who started working in government before 2013. In 2012, the state’s primary pension systems—CalPERS and CalSTRS—were overhauled to shore up their financial stability in a law called the California Public Employees’ Pension Reform Act (PEPRA).⁴⁷ Workers in those systems hired after 2012 must work longer to earn the same benefits as those hired before the reform, and all workers have had to contribute a portion of their pay into the system since 2013. The legislation also limited the ability of jurisdictions to further degrade pension quality by instituting lower-tier systems for new hires. Some research suggests that pension benefit cuts (like increasing the retirement age, reducing the monthly benefit, or requiring employees to contribute more to their pension fund) have hurt the public sector’s ability to hire and retain workers.⁴⁸ However, because California public pension reform occurred 10 years ago, it seems unlikely that it can explain the steep recent increase in vacancies over the past few years.

Whether fringe benefits are perceived as less valuable to new applicants is harder to decipher. Generally, research has found that pensions increase retention rates.⁴⁹ Some of our interviewees speculated that younger workers were less likely to value or simply understand defined benefit plans as much as applicants in the past. While some research indicates that younger generations lack understanding of their retirement plans, polls have found millennial workers place a greater value on economic security than older workers, perhaps because the Great Recession occurred early in their working lives.⁵⁰ And polling from the National Institute on Retirement Security suggests that millennials currently employed in public sector jobs did see pensions as an attraction to work in government and as a reason to stay to about the

same degree as Generation X or Baby Boomers.⁵¹ Younger workers are also attracted to public sector work for greater work-life balance, flexible work scheduling and remote work, quality of supervisor and coworkers, potential for career advancement, and paid family leave.⁵² Perhaps underlying the concerns raised by HR directors is that with the high cost of living in California and a tight labor market, in addition to great benefit packages, take home pay needs to be great enough to attract and retain workers in local government.

Long and cumbersome hiring processes

“People aren’t gonna [wait], people can’t in a competitive labor market. We aren’t going to be able to capture people who are ready to work at the time that we’re ready to hire. From an equity point of view, lots of people can’t wait around for a job.... People can’t wait for six months before we get around to calling them. And so there are lots of good reasons, both from...an equity policy, point of view, and also from a just operational necessity point of view that we have to get our hiring timelines down so that we can hire, we can fill the roles we need to fill at the right time. And also that people who are really needing a job have an opportunity to work for us when they need that job, not nine months later.... And that’s a big shift.... People talk about it as ‘post and pray,’ the idea that people just are gonna want to work for us so badly that they’ll wait for as long as we take.” —Urban county HR director

Across the board our interviewees felt hiring processes take too long, although many were already working toward streamlining processes where they could. Public sector hiring revolves around a civil service merit-based system that was designed to inhibit favoritism or nepotism. Typically, when departments want to fill a vacancy they request to have the position filled, human resource departments work to recruit the position by creating an eligibility list, and departments may interview qualified applicants from that list. From a candidate’s point of view, they apply for a job, are screened for minimum qualifications, take an exam, get on an eligible list of qualified applicants that is sent to departments for review, are interviewed by the department, undergo a background check or pre-employment medical exam, may be offered the job, and then onboarded. This process can involve dozens of steps (sometimes 50 to 60 steps), varies by local context, and may also be subject to specific rules negotiated with labor unions.

Interviewees felt the merit system was valuable for inhibiting favoritism or nepotism but resulted in a lengthier hiring process, reporting on average it taking two to nine months to hire a worker from the time the job was posted. During the Covid-19 pandemic local governments experienced hiring freezes and were unable to offer in-person exams, stalling hiring. While the cumbersome hiring process is not new for local governments, during a tight labor market workers have more options for work. County interviewees also acknowledged that lower-wage workers and workers who need a job immediately cannot afford to wait many months for a job offer.

County interviewees also raised other concerns about the hiring process. One was applicants' "user experience" of the hiring process; applicants might not know what types of jobs they could be qualified for or might experience difficulty navigating the website and the hiring process generally. Two, some county interviewees thought that minimum qualifications of a college degree might be unnecessary for some jobs and result in excluding potential applicants. Three, they contended that counties are not proactive enough in recruitment and rely on an outdated model of "post and pray," based on the assumption that, because county jobs have been considered good jobs, applicants will proactively seek out county employment and put up with a long and cumbersome hiring process.

High demand for occupations without adequate supply

"The state of California is investing in behavioral health, but not creating capacity in terms of graduates. And so, you have all this demand for employees. But we're not producing [the] supply needed to satisfy the demand, and that hits rural counties particularly acutely." —County association participant

"We just haven't invested resources in ensuring that the safety net is a place where [workers] can have a nice quality of life. And I'm not just talking financially, because we don't have the people (the workforce) to relieve people (existing workers) in time, so that they don't get burned out.... I think there's a lot of challenges that we have—we have not invested appropriately in the workforce development in these sectors (nursing and behavioral health)." —County association participant

Interviewees reported that some occupations, particularly behavioral health workers, nurses, and engineers, were in very high demand but lacked a sufficient training pipeline to fill the need. California's investments in behavioral health were a key focus for many interviewees who were concerned about having enough trained workers to meet statewide behavioral health directives, such as Care Court for example.⁵³ They argued that sending funds to counties to tackle homelessness or behavioral health was not enough without the state doing more to create a pipeline of behavioral health workers to meet demand.⁵⁴

Additionally, county interviewees suggested that social workers and nurses were particularly challenging to recruit and retain due to fierce competition with the private sector. At issue was not just pay but also job quality and burnout. Interviewees felt that understaffing and the emotionally demanding nature of county work serving the most vulnerable and in-need population often led to burnout. At times due to understaffing, county social workers and nurses suffered from high caseloads, mandatory overtime, and an inability to take vacation. Interviewees pointed out that competing with the private sector for a nurse or a social worker was not just about pay but also about workers seeking better work-life balance and job quality.⁵⁵

Consequences of High Job Vacancies

“It’s a spectrum [of impacts] at the department level for the employees working in that department. [High job vacancies] affects morale, it increases burnout. It has a whole host of negative impacts within the department. And then you can start scaling out. If the county can’t fill it with positions in the department like, let’s say, child psychiatrists then they have to contract with a private entity to do that at a much, much higher cost which depletes funding, which reduces the services they can offer, because they’ve got to focus on those mandated things like a child psychiatrist at a much higher cost. Go up one step higher, now we’re at [the] state level.... The legislature wants to do a major shift in how we do criminal justice with a focus on behavioral health investing...with no ability to actually implement that investment because the supply of positions aren’t there. My point being there’s impacts, I think, at all levels using behavioral health as one example.” —County association participant

We did not systematically interview workers as part of this study beyond several public sector union leaders and staff. Interviewing workers is essential to understanding the full impacts of job vacancies as workers have firsthand knowledge of what their work is like when faced with job vacancies, they know what underlying issues in job quality might cause their colleagues to leave, and they can assess how the county is performing in delivering services in their community. We report here impacts and consequences of job vacancies as reported by our interviewees including union staff, and county association, executive, and HR personnel who may have a higher-level view.

In general, understaffing can lead to a compromised ability to deliver services in the county, and our interviewees provided many examples. They reported that at county hospitals this might mean more people being redirected to other hospitals, people leaving the emergency department without being seen, longer wait times for surgeries, and reduced attention and care by nurses juggling too many patients at once. Interviewees reported issues with infrastructure and maintenance such as having to close a landfill, an inability to keep a handle on illegal dumping, neglected road maintenance and paving, and delays in infrastructure and affordable housing projects. In criminal justice it meant longer response times for emergency calls, longer wait times for trials, and workers feeling unsafe in understaffed criminal justice facilities. In less visible administrative, human resources, and analyst roles it can mean taking longer to hire, struggling to buy services or materials such as procuring personal protective equipment, or completing budgets, grants, and contracts thereby slowing government operations. Understaffing can compromise the ability of local government to serve communities effectively and tackle some of our most pressing issues including affordable housing development, homelessness, and behavioral health, and can result in fewer or lower-quality services provided overall.

Both county interviewees and union leaders were concerned about the cycle of burnout among county workers. High vacancies lead to higher workloads for remaining workers. One HR manager expressed frustration that their county turnover rate was higher than their hiring rate, resulting in a constant need to build up the workforce. She felt the county was providing quality service even with higher vacancies but worried that the cost was worker well-being and burnout, reporting that she was “hearing from our employees, ‘we’re tired, we feel overworked, we’re exhausted.’” As one union leader said: “I think one of the most common phrases we hear from our members is that they’re doing the jobs of three people.” In critical positions at county hospitals or jails, insufficient staffing can mean mandatory overtime or restricting vacation time. Workers subject to such demands may become burnt out, have a rise in leaves of absence, or be left to do the work of many due to turnover leaving too few workers to manage the workload.⁵⁶ One union leader referred to this cycle of burnout as a “snowball” effect, another as a “death spiral.” Turnover also generates costs for employers: lower productivity as new workers have to build up knowledge, the direct costs of recruiting and training new workers, and the indirect cost of losing expertise and experience.⁵⁷ These costs vary by occupation and type of employer, the staff time spent on hiring processes, and the gap in experience between new hires and departing employees. Higher turnover rates are also often seen as indicators of lower service quality.⁵⁸

One concern raised by interview participants in labor unions as well as three county participants was the impact of contracting out services when local governments struggle with staffing issues. Concerns were raised that contracting out for nurses, behavioral health workers, and engineers may be more costly than providing services in-house and can leave fewer resources available for other program needs.⁵⁹ Union leaders were also concerned that contracting out and hiring temporary workers to fill vacancies quickly can create inequities. For example, we heard reports that to navigate nursing shortages local governments would hire temporary (and more costly) travel nurses or hire nurses from registries.⁶⁰ Union leaders argued these positions do not provide the same benefits that permanent workers receive creating a tiered dynamic. On the other hand, temporary nurses may be offered more flexibility over their work schedules than permanent nurses and higher take-home pay, undermining local government’s ability to hire a permanent nurse.

Finally, county interviewees expressed concern about what the consequences of job vacancies meant for public perception of local government. Interviewees worried that understaffing, burnout, mandatory overtime, and poor service delivery would undermine interest in future applicants pursuing careers in county employment as well as undermine the public’s trust in the ability of local government to provide critical services.

Strategies for Addressing Job Vacancy Challenges

Overall our interviewees felt it was important for the state and local governments to invest in staffing to ensure public sector workers can thrive and provide services effectively. Investing in staff may require different strategies depending on the challenges governments are facing.

It may also mean building capacity in human resources or other agencies to support efforts to address vacancies. We summarize potential strategies generated by our interviewees, reports, and research and, where possible, provide examples. This list is not exhaustive but may serve as a resource for local governments, labor unions, workers, and policymakers.

Gather and publish data to enable targeted solutions

“Part of the reason why I [have done all this data analysis] is...you can have a generic—‘What’s happening in [our] county?’ Great, but that doesn’t tell you everything. I want to know what’s happening in specific departments which will then give me a better idea of what the issue is. And then even that’s not enough. What’s happening in certain job classes, or potentially, even regionally, in [our] county.... What we could see is that even though maybe in some [departments], generally speaking, we didn’t have a recruitment problem, in certain areas we absolutely did.... Alternatively, we saw some departments that didn’t really see a spike in attrition during the Great Resignation. And so, we started looking [at] what was happening in those places for folks that were, why were people leaving?... I wanted to see who exactly was leaving. And the reason why I want to do that is because the solution may vary depending upon who those folks were.... And that was important to us, because again, back to the way I see the world, I ask two questions: What’s the problem you’re trying to solve? And is it the right one? And then we just really started working with our department heads, county leaders, unions, our labor unions, to try to figure out what are the range of possible solutions.” —County executive

Local governments should collect and maintain transparent data on vacancies and understand the specific challenges they face. This requires looking at data points by job classification, department, and potentially regionally. Analysis should be used to target solutions in partnership with departments, local government leaders, labor unions, and employees.

Examples:

- **Produce and share regular publicly available data on job vacancies.** For example, the City of Oakland publishes a Semi-Annual Staffing Report which includes publicly available data on job vacancies (and distinguishes between positions available to be filled v. encumbered), hiring and turnover, and an evaluation of strategies to support recruitment.⁶¹ Public employers can also share vacancy data through government websites or open data portals as downloadable files or as reports.
- **Conduct a county or city-wide audit or civil grand jury investigation to understand vacancy challenges.** In order to understand local job vacancy challenges the City of Berkeley conducted an audit⁶² and the City and County of San Francisco conducted a civil grand jury investigation.⁶³

- **Conduct workforce-specific analyses on job vacancy challenges.** In addition to broader analyses, public employers and researchers can analyze job vacancy challenges affecting specific workforces. For example, the City of Berkeley analyzed understaffing challenges in 911 dispatch,⁶⁴ San Diego County evaluated their behavioral health workforce shortage,⁶⁵ and researchers analyzed challenges with staffing in the public health workforce.⁶⁶
- **Collect more detailed hiring metrics.** Local governments can measure the number of applications, the number of failed examinations and recruitments, and the amount of time it took to hire, but should also include evaluations of barriers to hiring and if recruitment methods are achieving the desired outcome.⁶⁷
- **Collect turnover metrics and exit surveys to identify why people leave.** In addition to hiring metrics, employee retention is important for addressing job vacancy challenges. Public employers can collect data on jobs or departments experiencing high turnover, the demographics of workers who leave (age, tenure, race, sex, etc.), and detailed reasons for turnover (e.g. the worker moved, wanted higher pay, did not feel supported in the environment, etc.).
- **Document the impact of job vacancies on workers and public services.** It is important to understand the impact of job vacancies on public services and workers. Evaluations can assess worker burnout, well-being, health and safety, turnover, and service delivery.
- **Collect data on the costs and staffing impacts of contracting out services.** Many agencies use contracted staffing arrangements to cover vacancy issues; data is needed to evaluate the volume of staffing being outsourced, the cost of those services compared to internal hiring, and any impacts to service quality.

Set up labor-management vacancy committees or task forces

Committees can work toward understanding the specific challenges for each occupation and brainstorm how to fill hard-to-fill positions and support retention. Local governments will likely need to allocate staffing resources to get a handle on the causes and develop relevant solutions. Many state and local government jobs are represented by labor unions. Governments should work in partnership with labor unions to investigate challenges and develop collaborative solutions.

Examples:

- **Vacancy task forces:** For example, the City of Oakland provided funding for a “Vacancy Strikeforce” which includes hiring human resource analysts specifically to fill vacancies.⁶⁸ The city also budgeted money for compensation studies and job fairs that will focus on

recruiting in areas with higher rates of unemployment and youth unemployment and lower rates of workforce participation.

- **Involve labor unions in recruitment and retention:** For example, AFSCME's Staff the Front Lines campaign included job fairs and a bus tour and listening sessions on understaffing bringing together union members and elected officials.⁶⁹ The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Teacher and School Staff Shortage Task Force developed a report on attracting and retaining public school teachers.⁷⁰ And The Center for American Progress analyzed four successful case studies involving union partnership in building the public sector workforce in child care and teaching, training public sector workers to support the green transition, and educating new employees on the high-quality benefits of public sector employment.⁷¹

Investigate compensation rates and raise pay to attract and retain employees

Governments can adopt wage increases across positions to attract applicants and retain existing staff. Compensation studies can identify areas where wages are especially out of alignment with comparable positions in the public or private sector and should consider what level of compensation may be required to fill vacancies. Governments can also increase overall compensation by covering more health insurance costs, supporting programs that increase childcare access and affordability, providing student loan debt forgiveness programs, and addressing housing availability and affordability. Some agencies offer signing bonuses for new hires or retention bonuses.

Examples:

- **Conduct compensation studies and equity studies.** Compensation and equity studies should consider both what comparable positions earn in other sectors as well as what it will take to fill job vacancies and retain staff. For example, the Legislative Analyst's Office conducted a fiscal analysis for state employee bargaining units and reports that low compensation can be a source of high vacancy rates.⁷²
- **Raise pay to attract and retain workers.** State and local governments have raised pay across the board⁷³ and for positions where competition is high and workers earn lower wages.⁷⁴ For example, in California, SEIU Local 1000 negotiated additional pay increases for state employees earning less than \$20 an hour.⁷⁵
- **Recruitment or retention bonuses.** Some interviewees felt retention bonuses were helpful within the first few years of employment; others felt it was important to simultaneously acknowledge the loyalty of long-term employees. If offering bonuses local governments should consider how they can minimize intergovernmental competition over the same workforce. Finally, measure the effectiveness of using bonuses for filling staffing vacancies and retaining staff.

Improve other aspects of job quality and focus on retention

"I have people demoting from other departments to come be in this department because they know this is a good place to work and a place that will support you as a person versus just a cog in the machine. I think honestly that plays a bigger role than leadership is willing to admit. They jump straight to 'we just gotta pay these people more money,' which absolutely there is a breakpoint there. But I see it, and not just in my department, but in others, where people are willing to take less money to go work somewhere because they'll get the flexibility.... One of the main questions [applicants] asked me: What's your thoughts on telework or remote work? What's the culture like? What does work-life-balance look like? How do you deal with burnout? You know, really letting people know that we support people. Again, I don't know if those conversations come up as much in other areas with people that have that more old school mentality on work.... But you're getting more of a workforce that wants that flexibility in life, and I feel like we're at this like hinge point, where if we don't get on board then we're behind." —Rural county HR director

"From my perspective, it really is about the leadership and creating a culture where individuals want to come to work, they feel heard, they feel that they can contribute, that what they do matters, and that really starts from a leadership perspective. If you make sure that individuals feel that way, they have the tools to do their job and that they're contributing.... Because I'll be honest, where I see some of the highest turnover I know that's not happening. It's just not a nice work environment. And why would I want to work there? So I think it's often environment driven.... It's the respect." —Rural county HR director

"We've been doing a lot of work around retention, and that to me is kind of where it's at, if we just don't lose employees in the first place, and I don't have positions to fill. That and we've been working on our culture. We've been doing some development academies for employees...and trying to figure out ways to help employees connect.... It goes a long way helping people to get to know each other and connect." —Rural county HR director

Government work is generally viewed as providing better job quality, work-life balance, and job security than private sector employment. However, interviewees reported that good job quality can vary by agency, department, or job classification. While evaluating issues with job quality directly was beyond the scope of our research, interviews and discussions with experts suggest that evaluating the qualitative aspects of job quality such as workplace culture, treatment on the job, health and safety, work-life balance, emotional labor, and burnout are important for addressing turnover associated with job vacancies. Interviewees felt that workers value

flexibility, the opportunity to telework, a job with work-life balance, and the opportunity to do work that is meaningful and impactful. In addition to improving compensation, governments can work to support various efforts to improve job quality.

Examples:

- **Evaluate job quality in positions and departments with high job vacancies.** This involves listening to employees and partnering with labor unions to understand and address any issues of job quality and treatment on the job. This includes identifying and implementing actionable steps to improve diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging so all workers feel welcome and supported. Public employers can conduct employee engagement surveys or “stay interviews” to understand underlying issues with job quality and course correct as needed.
- **Offer telework and flexible work scheduling.** While not all public sector jobs are conducive to telework, interviewees felt providing work-from-home flexibility was greatly valued by employees. Polling also supports that flexible work policies are valued by public sector workers.⁷⁶
- **Assess staffing ratios to provide adequate services and protect workers from overwork, mandatory overtime, and burnout.** For example, SEIU Local 721 and Los Angeles County have a joint labor-management Caseload Accountability Panel for children’s social workers which is tasked with reviewing case load data, set case load goals, and prepare reports.⁷⁷ Additionally, SEIU Local 521 in Santa Clara County negotiated stipends for social workers with high caseloads.⁷⁸
- **Avoid overreliance on temporary workers and negotiate clear pathways to convert temporary and part-time workers to full-time permanent jobs.** For example, SEIU Local 521 and Santa Clara County negotiated pathways to permanency for “extra help” employees.⁷⁹
- **Support leadership and employee development.** Public employers can develop and support supervisors through leadership academies and managerial training to foster job quality and workplace culture improvements. Additionally, they can offer professional development, skill-building, and career development opportunities to all employees.⁸⁰

Improve pipelines into government jobs

“People who are being hired today are not thinking, ‘I want a career where I’m going to stay for 30 years and collect my pension.’ That is not of interest.... What’s interesting is: ‘What is the work? Who am I working with? What’s that environment going to be like?’ I just think there is probably work that the public sector can keep

doing on making the case to people about what it is. What are we all about? What does it mean to serve? What kinds of work can you do? So we're trying to humanize who is doing this work. Because I think that's part of what it takes to recruit the next generation of public sector workers." —Urban county HR director

Governments can engage in partnerships to build pipelines into good public sector jobs, especially for hard-to-fill occupations. The California state government can play a critical role in workforce development, particularly in building up California's supply of workers for credentialed positions like social workers, nurses, psychiatrists, and engineers. Pipelines into public sector work can include developing high-road training partnerships, apprenticeships, recruiting in partnership with labor unions, tapping into existing social networks of government employees, partnering with educational institutions to support internships or career paths for high school and community college students, and developing pathways into good jobs for veterans, people with disabilities, justice-impacted people, workers without advanced degrees, and demographic groups experiencing high unemployment in their local communities.

Examples:

- **Create employee referral programs.** For example, San Diego County⁸¹ has a Hard to Recruit Referral Reward Program and Alameda County⁸² has an Employee Referral Incentive Program. The programs provide \$1,000 rewards to employees who refer candidates for hard-to-fill positions.
- **Develop high-road training partnerships.** For example, the Worker Education Resource Center provides quality workforce development programs in Los Angeles County and was formed through a partnership between Los Angeles County and SEIU Local 721.⁸³ Their PLACE program supports justice-involved individuals, homeless individuals, transitional aged youth and foster care youth, individuals receiving county services, and underrepresented populations in finding quality employment with Los Angeles County.⁸⁴ Additionally, the UC Berkeley Labor Center's High-Road Training Partnerships program supports the California Workforce Development Board's H RTP Initiative and provides information and resources about the high-road training partnerships model.⁸⁵
- **Support pipelines from educational institutions including high school and community colleges.** For example, the City of Alameda has paid summer internships for high school students.⁸⁶ Los Angeles County's Appraiser Assistant Training Program partners with Rio Hondo College to provide four tuition-free courses leading to a certificate in California Property Taxation and Appraisal as well as opportunities to apply for a position as an assistant appraiser.⁸⁷ The California legislature considered AB 366 to provide a stipend program for community college students interested in public child welfare employment.⁸⁸

- **Develop local hiring programs to support underserved populations.** Public employers can evaluate local unemployment and labor force participation rates to identify if certain geographic regions or demographic groups are being left behind. For example, the City of Los Angeles Bridge to Jobs Program provides an alternative pathway into civil service for persons with disabilities, older workers, the unhoused, people from designed zip codes, the formerly incarcerated, and other groups.⁸⁹ Additionally, The California Department of Rehabilitation supports vocational rehabilitation programs for people with disabilities.⁹⁰ The Department of Defense's Skillbridge Program connects transitioning service members to find job training opportunities.⁹¹
- **Expand public sector apprenticeships.** For example, the California Department of Industrial Relations released an action plan to increase apprenticeship opportunities, including into the public sector.⁹²
- **Evaluate and remove barriers to public sector jobs.** Evaluate background check criteria that are used and may be artificially limiting access to jobs in the public sector, such as for justice-impacted individuals.
- **Engage in workforce planning.** This includes succession planning for an aging workforce and identifying growing occupations that may need new investments or strategies to grow the workforce.
- **Support new employees.** To avoid losing new employees, public employers can support employees as they learn their jobs, in particular they can focus on helping to increase the percentage who pass the probationary period.
- **Recall retirees.** In the short-term public employers can bring back retirees to fill in gaps and pass on institutional knowledge.
- **Explore and evaluate civil service registries (as alternatives to contracting out).** Contracting out may be more expensive than providing services in-house. Public employers might explore and evaluate public sector registries. Los Angeles County has a physician registry staffed by civil servant physicians who fill in for vacancies. AB 775 considered a similar pilot program.⁹³

Improve hiring processes

"I do have a multi-step, too many people involved [hiring] process...that right now is a little too long. I need to go through a process improvement exercise...where we really just map out every step that is taken in this process and figure out what is no longer needed, so that we can shorten it because when you have that lengthy [of]

a process your candidates get cold. They get cold. They get another job, somebody else moves faster than you, and they're gone.” —Rural county HR director

Improving the hiring process requires a balance between identifying obstacles that can be streamlined to reduce time to hire while maintaining the protections embedded in the civil service process, including hiring based on merit and ability to perform the job rather than characteristics of identity (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, political party affiliation) and personal relationships (e.g., favoritism and nepotism).⁹⁴ Strategies for streamlining hiring could vary greatly depending on the local government and department, and will need to conform to civil service merit rules, collective bargaining agreements, and other regulations.

Examples:

- **Identify obstacles in the local government hiring process through systematic audits and reports.** In addition to evaluating length of time to hire, analyses might consider civil service exam content, failed recruitments, qualifications mismatches, and on-boarding length. For examples see: City of Los Angeles “A Hire Calling: Modernizing Recruitment & Hiring in Los Angeles”⁹⁵; City of San Diego “Performance Audit of City’s Classified and Employee Hiring Process”⁹⁶; Los Angeles County “Improving the County Hiring Process”⁹⁷; Santa Clara “Management Audit of Countywide Hiring Process”⁹⁸; San Francisco “Time to Get to Work”⁹⁹; and Monterey County “Human Resources Help Wanted: A Speedier Way to Hire”¹⁰⁰.
- **Examine any obstacles where the state supports hiring for local governments.** The California Department of Human Resources (CalHR) provides merit system services for some counties in social services and child support.¹⁰¹ AB 366 sought to establish vacancy thresholds at which agencies subject to CalHR would be permitted to use alternate qualifications and processes (allowing greater local discretion).¹⁰²
- **Consider skills-based hiring.** Government positions are more likely to require a bachelor’s degree; skill-based hiring assesses applicants for their transferable and applicable skills rather than strict credentialing which can support recruitment and more equitable hiring.¹⁰³
- **Conduct proactive hiring.** Proactive hiring can include attending job fairs, utilizing social media, updating job descriptions to be more attractive, and improving user experience on government websites rather than continuing to rely on the “post and pray” model.¹⁰⁴ See, for example, the State of California “Work for California” Campaign.¹⁰⁵

Appendix - Data Considerations for Working with Job Vacancy Data

Collecting and analyzing data on job vacancies can be challenging for researchers. Counties appear to have reports on job vacancies that they use for internal tracking but the data are not publicly available unless requested, and the format (often pdfs) and types of information contained (the number of vacancies as FTE or number of positions, vacancy rates, if the positions are frozen or intended to be filled, etc.) will vary. For consistency, we submitted a PRA request to counties to try to get a snapshot of all vacant positions as of the end of each fiscal year (around June) between 2012 and 2022 as well as all budgeted positions to calculate our own vacancy rate.

We encountered specific data quality issues for each county. For example, in Santa Clara County, the budgeted data we were pointed to on the county's website did not include any positions added later in the fiscal year, resulting in our being unable to calculate a vacancy rate for some job classifications and likely slightly overestimating vacancy rates. San Diego County sent us very detailed data but the vacancy data were all in PDF formats creating difficulties in doing a detailed analysis of vacancies. And Los Angeles County provided vacancy data at the beginning of the fiscal year rather than at the end, resulting in the data containing positions that were newly added at the beginning of the fiscal year that the county had yet to have time to fill. Those requesting vacancy data from counties may want to start with requesting the county's own vacancy reports first for expediency and to get a sense of what is available. We include below some additional considerations for requesting and working with job vacancy data.

Calculating job vacancies is a moving target. Job vacancy rates will change over time as positions are added or deleted or as employees turn over. Thus, calculating job vacancies is a moving target. If comparing across years or across jurisdictions it's important to try to collect data around the same time point. If calculating a job vacancy rate both the job vacancy data and the data on number of positions budgeted should be from the same time point. If comparing across years, calculating a job vacancy rate for each time point as opposed to only showing the number of vacant positions may be important. Over time the number of budgeted public jobs may grow and any increase in the number of job vacancies could be related to growth in the number of jobs as opposed to a true growth in vacancies. On the other hand, governments may delete vacant positions they are not going to fill, thus decreasing the vacancy rate.

Newly created positions. Another data challenge is that vacant positions may also be recently added, such as those created by the influx of federal stimulus funding and the expansion of state programs (such as mental health) which can exaggerate issues with vacancies that counties may not have had time to fill. These surges in demand for specific positions can be hard to identify in the data and separate out from other types of vacancies. Requesting job vacancy data in the middle or the end of the fiscal year might help to avoid catching too many newly available positions added at the beginning of the fiscal year.

Analyzing the number of vacancies versus vacancies FTE. It is important to distinguish if the data are all positions vacant or all positions FTE or full-time equivalent. For example, imagine the data reports 12 positions vacant. If all of the positions are full-time then that is equivalent to 12 FTEs. However, if some of those 12 positions are part-time positions that number of equivalent FTEs will be lower. It's important to understand which type of data you are working with. Additionally, knowing if you have vacant positions v. vacant FTEs is necessary for calculating a vacancy rate, as budgeted data are typically recorded as FTEs. It's important to make sure that the vacant and budgeted data are in the same scale.

Analyzing job vacancy rates versus number of vacant positions. There may be differences in examining occupations with high numbers of vacant positions versus high vacancy rates (the share of budgeted jobs that are not filled). Examining positions with high numbers of vacant positions can sway your analysis towards positions that are more highly budgeted in the county. This might be valuable for understanding where the greatest need is. Examining high vacancy rates may or may not overlap with the job classifications experiencing the highest number of vacancies. Some job classifications may have high vacancy rates with fewer positions budgeted. For example, San Diego County in June 2022 had 95 Deputy Sheriff vacancies but because they had 1,167 budgeted positions the vacancy rate was 8%. In contrast, dispatchers had 22 vacancies but only 127 positions budgeted, resulting in a vacancy rate almost double that of Deputy Sheriffs. Evaluating both high numbers of vacancies and high vacancy rates is important. For job classifications where there are fewer budgeted positions and high vacancy rates it might be important to consider the impact of having even one or two vacancies in that job classification. How does it affect local government functioning? And how does it affect the remaining workers in that job?

Identifying "real" job vacancies. One challenge of obtaining and analyzing job vacancy data is understanding why the position is vacant, in particular if the job vacancy is "real" and is intended to be filled or if the position is being kept vacant for salary savings. Analysis from the California Budget Project in 2002 identified that having vacant positions allowed state agencies to offset unbudgeted expenses, cover extra costs of filled positions, cover overtime costs, and compensate for revenue shortfalls. It is not clear how widespread this practice is; however, recent LAO analysis acknowledged that these practices at the state level may contribute to higher vacancy rates.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, two interview participants stated that departments will leave positions on the books to cover additional expenses and have no incentive to remove budgeted positions they do not have the funding to fill out of fear that if they eliminate the position they will not be able to get that position back in the future if a workforce need arises. Additional context may be needed to understand why positions are vacant.

Endnotes

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- 6 We received approval for our study from the UC Berkeley Institutional Review Board (protocol number is 2022-09-15636).
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- 10 Our job vacancy rate calculations may differ from county calculations and may slightly overestimate the rate due to data quality. As part of our data request we asked for budgeted and vacant position data for the end of each fiscal year. However, the budgeted data we were pointed to by the county is found in their adopted budgets which are finalized around the beginning of the fiscal year and will not reflect any newly budgeted positions throughout the fiscal year. For this reason, some of the vacant positions in our data had no corresponding budgeted information. When we adjusted the calculation to assume that each vacant position missing budgeted information had a corresponding budgeted position we calculated a vacancy rate of 15.5%. Other reporting from SEIU 521 using county data in October 2022 shows a vacancy rate around 15%. And reporting from June 2023 showed a vacancy rate in Santa Clara County of almost 17%. Per communication with the county, they calculate their vacancy rates on a rolling basis and include newly added budgeted positions. See Kadah, Jana. "San Jose Workers Demand More Money amid Hundreds of Vacancies." *San José Spotlight*, June 9, 2023. <https://sanjosespotlight.com/san-jose-workers-demand-more-money-amid-hundreds-of-vacancies/>.
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14 If only one job classification is budgeted for and that position is vacant that results in a vacancy rate of 100%. We did not include job classifications with only one budgeted position in our count of the number of job classifications with vacancies greater than 25%.

15 See the appendix for further discussion of the complexities of working with job vacancy data.

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20 **Table Notes:** Los Angeles County data represent vacancies as of July 11, 2021, the latest data we received from the county. However, many of these vacant positions mirror analysis the county shared with us showing the top 10 positions vacant in July of 2022. The Los Angeles County data included positions that were newly added in July 2021 with the start of the new fiscal year. To avoid including positions in our analysis that the county would not have had time to fill we removed any vacant positions newly added in July 2021. Removing newly added positions results in fewer vacant positions and slightly smaller vacancy rates but substantively the results in the table are the same. The vacancy data also include both permanent and temporary positions. The following job classifications include temporary positions (in parentheses is the share of vacant positions that were temporary): Nursing Attendant I (10%), Office Support Assistant (100%), Intermediate Clerk (<1%), Community Health Worker (3%), Clinical Licensed Vocational Nurse I (3%), Physician Post Graduate (1st Year) (100%), Children's Social Worker III (17%), Psychiatric Social Worker II (3%), Registered Nurse I (11%), Registered Nurse II (7%). In the case of the Children's Social Worker III, 30 of the vacant positions were temporary and all but one of them had not been filled as of March 2023. However, most of the permanent positions for this job classification that were vacant during the same time period were eventually filled. The Physician Post Graduate (1st Year) positions are all temporary positions and most of them became vacant in June-Sept 2020. Most of these positions remained vacant until March 2023.

San Diego County provided data calculating their own vacancy rates for each job classification by department. Because some job classifications serve in multiple departments we recalculated the vacancy rate for Office Assistant, Admin Analyst II, and Admin Analyst III in the table by taking the ratio of all vacant positions (available to be filled) to all budgeted positions for the county as of June 1, 2022. In San Diego County, Sheriff's Detention Mental Health Clinician shows a very high vacancy rate of 73%. According to the data we received these positions were added in July of 2021 and remained vacant at least until June 2022 (when our data ends).

The data we received from Santa Clara County appear to represent only permanent positions. For Santa Clara County we could not calculate a vacancy rate for Park Services Attendant–Unclassified and Clinical Nurse III–Unclassified (the total number vacant was merged with Clinical Nurse III) as we did not have

any budgeted data on these positions. According to correspondence with the county, unclassified positions are subject to [Section 701 \(a\)](#) of the Charter of the County of Santa Clara and generally represent positions that are based on temporary funding. These positions will not have been budgeted in the county's adopted budget and may be added later in the fiscal year. Senior Appraiser shows a vacancy rate greater than 100% as the data we received showed 49 positions vacant (most of them newly added in May 2022) but only 37 positions were budgeted in the county's 2021-2022 adopted budget. The county calculates vacancies on a rolling basis for approved/budgeted positions whereas we have budgeted position data from the county's original adopted budgets. The minimum monthly salary for Physicians according to the data received from Santa Clara includes a wide range (\$7254 - \$37,664) and was moved to the end of the table to acknowledge that physicians typically earn more than nurses.

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24 Santa Clara County data show a large increase in voluntary turnover in 2019-2020, 2020-2021, and 2021-2022 compared to prior years. This increase in voluntary turnover is in part attributable to turnover among temporary workers including "extra help," student interns, and per diem employees (additional workers may have been employed on a temporary basis but are not identifiable in the data). Workers in these job classifications pre-pandemic made up between 17-36% of all voluntary turnover. At the end of fiscal years 2019-2020, 2020-2021, and 2021-2022 the county saw an average of 3,140 employees turn over each year. However, temporary workers made up 68%, 65%, and 47% of voluntary turnover respectively. Particularly in 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 many of these workers were temporary elections workers. Excluding elections workers, the number of workers who voluntarily turned over in Santa Clara County and the turnover rate in the county relative to total employees for 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 does not seem too unusual compared to pre-pandemic years. However, in 2021-2022 the number of workers who voluntarily turned over was still high despite elections workers making up a smaller share of overall turnover. The county lost at least 3,197 workers to voluntary turnover, and of those at least 1,512 were temporary workers (about one-third were elections workers), leaving a voluntary turnover rate (excluding elections workers) of around 9.6%. In contrast, in 2020-2021 the county lost at least 2,852 workers to voluntary turnover and at least 1,850 were temporary workers (about two-thirds were elections workers), with a voluntary turnover rate (excluding elections workers) of around 6.4%. In general, the county's voluntary turnover rate between 2012-2021 taking the ratio of all voluntary turnover to total employees (excluding elections workers) was around 6.3% each year. While temporary workers make up just under half of voluntary turnover in 2021-2022, many of these workers perform vital functions for the county. Of the temporary workers assigned as voluntarily turned over, around 43% were nurses. Our data may slightly underestimate turnover as the county removed data for job classifications with turnover among five or fewer employees to protect employee privacy.

25 Unlike Santa Clara County, San Diego County appears to classify elections workers and other temporary workers as involuntary turnover, rather than voluntary. While it is possible that some of the increase in voluntary turnover could be among temporary workers, analysis of the job codes suggests otherwise. The job classifications with the greatest voluntary turnover (not due to retirement) included: human services specialists, protective services workers, deputy sheriffs, office assistants, nurses and nursing assistants, probation officers, dispatchers, public defenders, residential care workers, child support officers, and social workers. Additionally, calculating a voluntary turnover rate taking the ratio

of voluntary turnover at the end of the fiscal year to the total number of employees shows a voluntary turnover rate of around 3.8% pre-pandemic compared to 4.9% in 2020-2021 and 6.4% in 2021-2022.

26 Unlike Santa Clara County, Los Angeles County appears to classify elections workers and temporary workers as involuntary, rather than voluntary turnover. It is possible that some voluntary turnover includes temporary workers as we cannot distinguish temporary and permanent workers in the data. Similar to San Diego County, Los Angeles County saw the greatest voluntary turnover among nurses and nursing attendants and assistants, eligibility workers, sheriffs, detention services officers, children's social workers, clerks, library workers, and psychiatric social workers among many other titles. Analysis of a voluntary turnover rate, taking the ratio of voluntary turnover to total employees at the end of the fiscal year, shows a voluntary turnover rate around 3.5% in 2021-2022 compared to around 2% across previous years. Los Angeles County also sent us an analysis of turnover they conducted showing an increase in annual countywide turnover rates for 2021-2022 (calculated as turnover for any reason / the average headcount in each year). In 2021-2022 their countywide turnover rate was 7.3% compared to around 5.2% between 2018-2021.

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