


# Strengthening Public Service:

Workforce Challenges and Opportunities  
for Local Government Entities in Minnesota

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*A Citizens League Report in partnership with  
the Association of Minnesota Counties and the League of Minnesota Cities*

 Association of  
Minnesota Counties

  
Citizens  
League  
*Common ground.  
Common good.*

 **LMC** LEAGUE of  
MINNESOTA  
CITIES



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# Background

The day-to-day lives of Minnesota residents are inextricably linked with our local governments. From parks and land use to elections and auditing, to infrastructure and social services, when it comes to our cities and counties, the work is much more than meets the eye.

Across the State of Minnesota, there are 856 cities, 87 counties, 1781 townships<sup>1</sup> and more than 300 school districts<sup>2</sup>.

For decades, Minnesota has boasted high levels of civic engagement and community involvement<sup>3</sup>, including in public sector staffing – elected, appointed, and hired.

But in recent years, the robust pipeline of local government employees has been dwindling<sup>4</sup>.

Minnesota’s workforce exists within a broader economic context, facing challenges from impending generational retirements and lack of bounce-back from a shrinking and shifting workforce<sup>5</sup> in the last five years. But public service faces unique challenges. Minnesota’s more recent recruitment and retention challenges in local government are consistent with national trends<sup>6</sup>, including a significant sector-wide exodus from 2020 to 2022. The National Association of Counties reported stagnated local government job returns in 2021<sup>7</sup>, and despite steady post-pandemic increases, National League of Cities data from the last two years shows a continued 2% lag in local government employment<sup>8</sup> with particular concern about filling critical skilled and technical public-facing roles, including frontline public health, direct service, etc.

Tracking these challenges in local government workforces, and in direct response to concerns raised by their members, the Association of Minnesota Counties (AMC) and the League of Minnesota Cities (LMC) partnered with the Citizens League to develop a relevant policy project. The determined goal was to research and explore recruitment and

<sup>1</sup> *Municipality, Township & County Maps*. (n.d.). Minnesota Department of Transportation.

<sup>2</sup> *MSBA Member List*. (n.d.) Minnesota School Boards Association.

<sup>3</sup> *Civic engagement*. (n.d.). Minnesota Compass.

<sup>4</sup> Ali et al. (2018). *Attracting and Retaining Employees in Minnesota Local Governments*.


<sup>5</sup> *The state of Minnesota’s workforce in five charts*. Minnesota Chamber of Commerce. (2024, March).

<sup>6</sup> *Inspired to Serve: The Final Report of the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service*. Volcker Alliance. (2020, March).

<sup>7</sup> Shrawder et al. (2021, April). *March employment gains point towards recovery: yet local government jobs remain largely stagnant*. National Association of Counties.

<sup>8</sup> Omeyr, F., & Ai, S. “Alice.” (2023). *State of the Cities 2023*. National League of Cities.





retention challenges and opportunities facing local governments statewide and develop recommendations and solutions to support a robust and thriving public workforce.

Citizens League is pleased to share our methods and findings in this report, which has been shaped by direct feedback from Minnesotans representing hundreds of cities, counties, and other local units of government across the state.

*The Citizens League is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that empowers people to engage in civic life and public policy to make Minnesota a better place to live and work for everyone.*

# Project Overview

In partnership with AMC and LMC, the Citizens League developed a multi-modal approach for data collection in service of the research question: What challenges and opportunities face Minnesota’s local government public service workforce?

This project was primarily qualitative, with quantitative elements, focused on understanding the *how and why* beyond the numbers.

This work is not the first or only of its kind. We hope it will serve as the basis for ongoing study, conversation, and action that inspires innovation to support local units of government in attracting a new generation of talent and advancing and enhancing systems and strategies for serving Minnesota’s communities.

## Scope

‘Public service’ is vast and varied. For this research and report, ‘local government public service’ refers to city and county government work in the State of Minnesota. Minnesota’s public sector workforce spans well beyond these two institutions, and this report includes feedback and insights representing other units of government.

***Direction to survey respondents:*** For this survey, think of “public service” as careers or employment in local government, whether public facing or not, that contribute to the overall running of a city, county or other local jurisdiction.

While this study did not directly center the experiences of elected officials, we understand the many intersections of elected office and public service. Feedback from elected officials is part of what was gathered through this report. Additionally, a Citizens League report about serving in local elected office in Minnesota was released in 2022.<sup>9</sup>

## Methods

Over the course of six months, the methods of this policy project have included:

1. Two online surveys:
  - One for individuals who currently work—or formerly worked—in a local government capacity<sup>10</sup> and
  - A second for members of the public who have not been employed by

<sup>9</sup> Serving in Local Elected Office: *Why people run, decline to run, remain serving, or step down from office, and the impact on local government (2022)*. Citizens League.

<sup>10</sup> Appendix A: Citizens League Public Service Survey – Local Government Employees

a local unit of government, focused on their interactions with—and understanding of—local government roles and responsibilities<sup>11</sup>

Surveys were publicly available on the Citizens League website and distributed statewide through AMC, LMC, and Citizens League networks and public events. The surveys were open for approximately three months, from mid-September through late-December of 2024.

2. Three virtual listening sessions, open to the public and provided at different times of the day
3. Group meetings, conducted across the state, to solicit feedback and gather ideas from city, county, and other local government employees or association groups<sup>12</sup>
4. One-on-one interviews and conversations with individuals holding relevant experience and feedback

**Note:** Quotation throughout this report is anonymous for respondent privacy and protection – quotes and examples represent perspectives from around the state in a range of governance structures, roles, and circumstances.

<sup>11</sup> Appendix B: Citizens League Public Service Survey – Members of the Public

<sup>12</sup> Kian, A. (2024, November 22). *County, city groups look to generate interest in public employment*. MinnPost.



## Project Participants and Representation: Numbers At A Glance

**856**

Surveys completed

**15**

Meetings and interviews

**3**

Virtual public sessions

**79**

MN Counties represented in all data collection methods

**211**

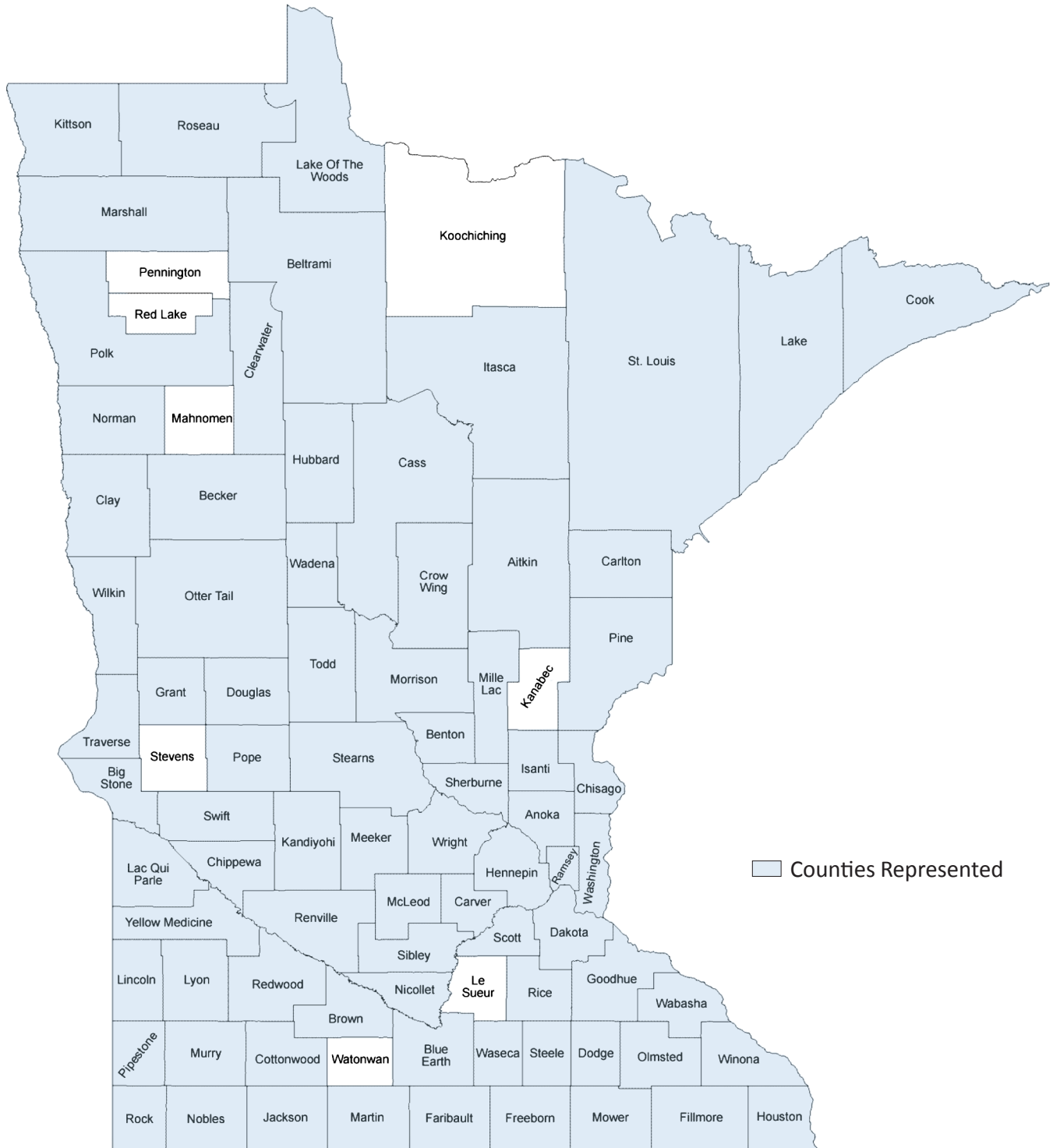
MN Cities represented in all data collection methods

**940+**

Total number of Minnesotans who contributed feedback to inform this report

# PROJECT PARTICIPANTS AND REPRESENTATION:

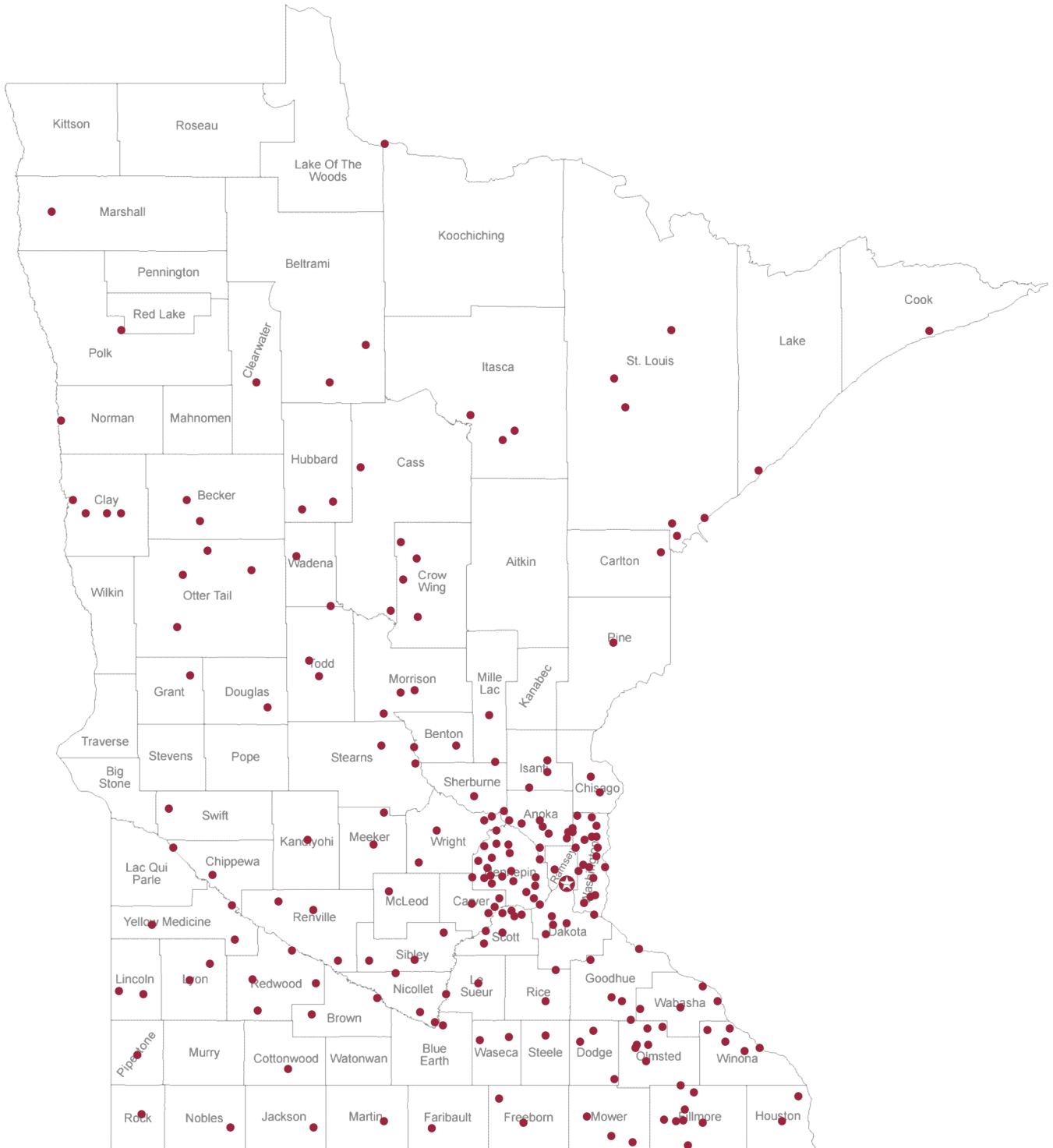
Project participants across all data collection methods represented roughly **91%** of Minnesota counties<sup>13</sup>.



<sup>13</sup> Appendix C: List of Minnesota Counties Represented Across Data Collection Methods

# PROJECT PARTICIPANTS AND REPRESENTATION:

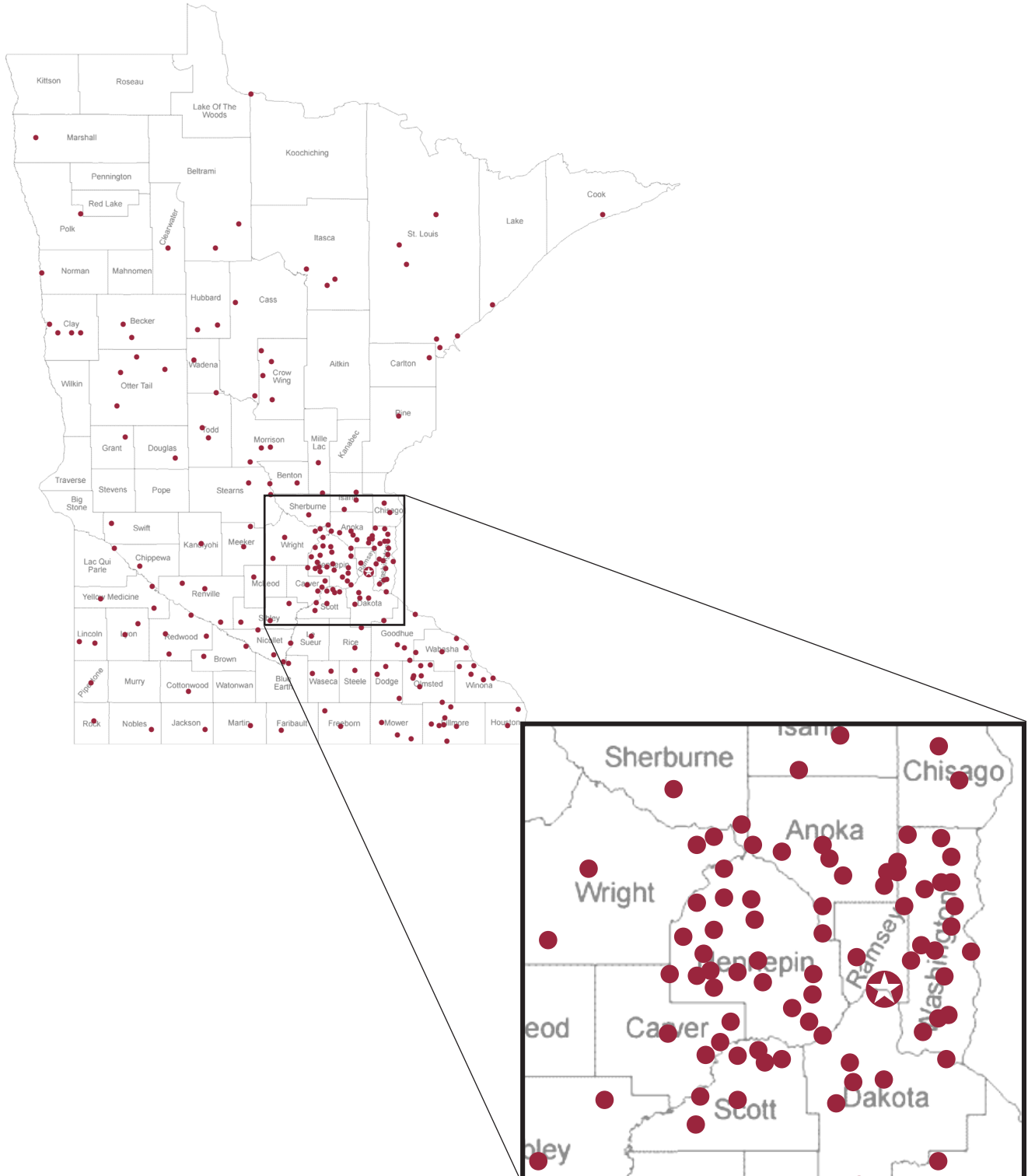
Project participants across all data collection methods represented roughly 25% of Minnesota cities<sup>14</sup>.



<sup>14</sup> Appendix D: List of Minnesota Cities Represented Across Data Collection Methods

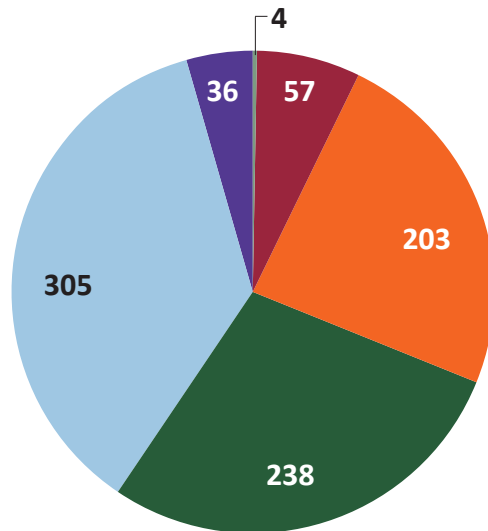
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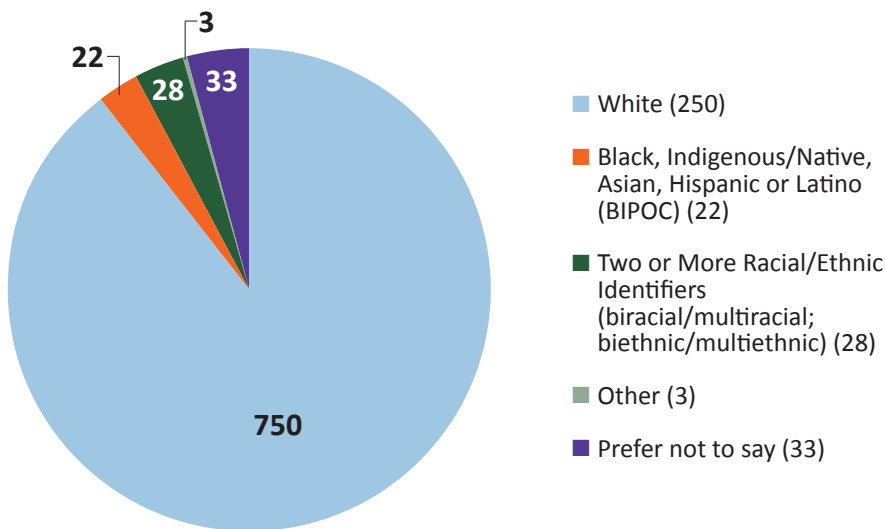
# DATA FOR ALL ONLINE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

Age Range



■ Ages 18-29 ■ Ages 30-39 ■ Ages 40-49 ■ Ages 50-64 ■ Ages 65-74 ■ Ages 75-84

## What is your racial and ethnic identity?



\*Because demographic data was optional to provide and some answers were left blank by some respondents, graph totals may not all equal the number of total survey respondents.



### A Note on Demographic Data

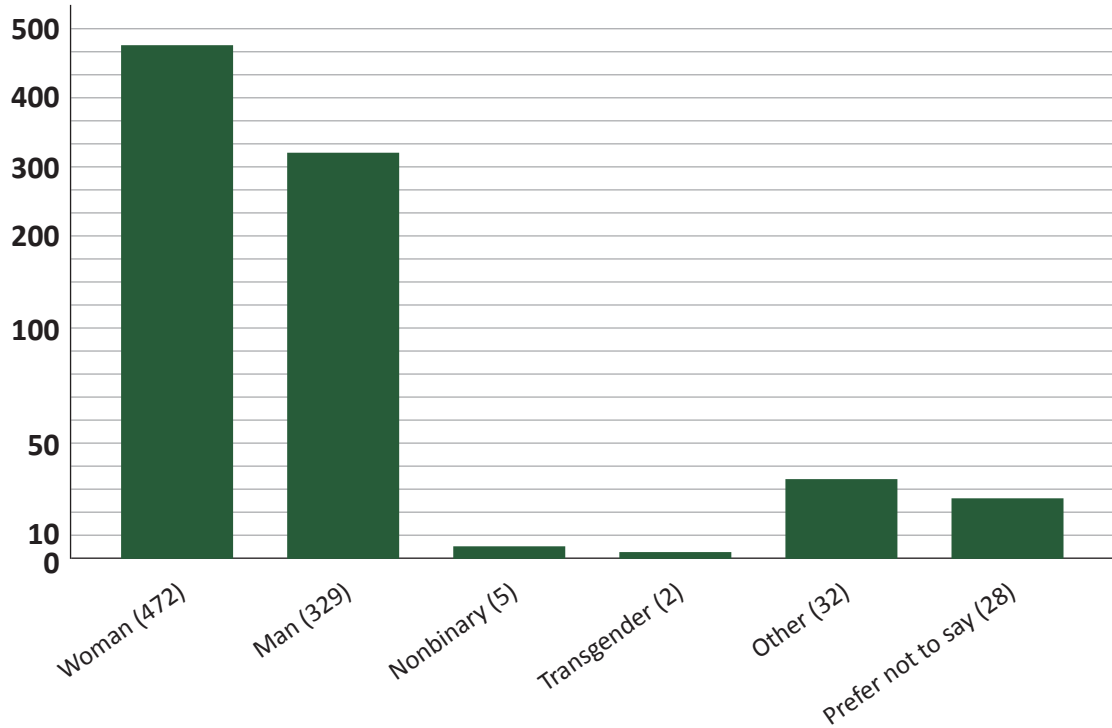
Both online surveys included voluntary demographic disclosure. Questions and categories aligned with U.S. Census Bureau and American Community Survey categories. Rationale for asking for optional demographic data was disclosed on the surveys, along with the assurance that data would only be used in an anonymous, deidentified, aggregate manner. Choosing not to provide demographic information did not limit anyone's ability to complete the survey and provide their feedback.\*

#### Why collect demographic data at all?

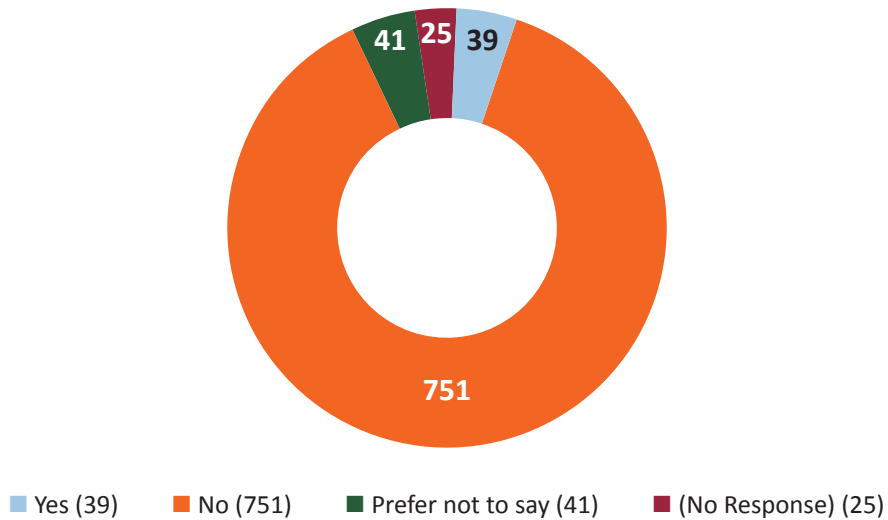
Citizens League seeks to include many voices at the policymaking table. We believe that our research and recommendations are strengthened by an examination of potential patterns among different groups of people.

# DATA FOR ALL ONLINE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

## What is your gender identity?



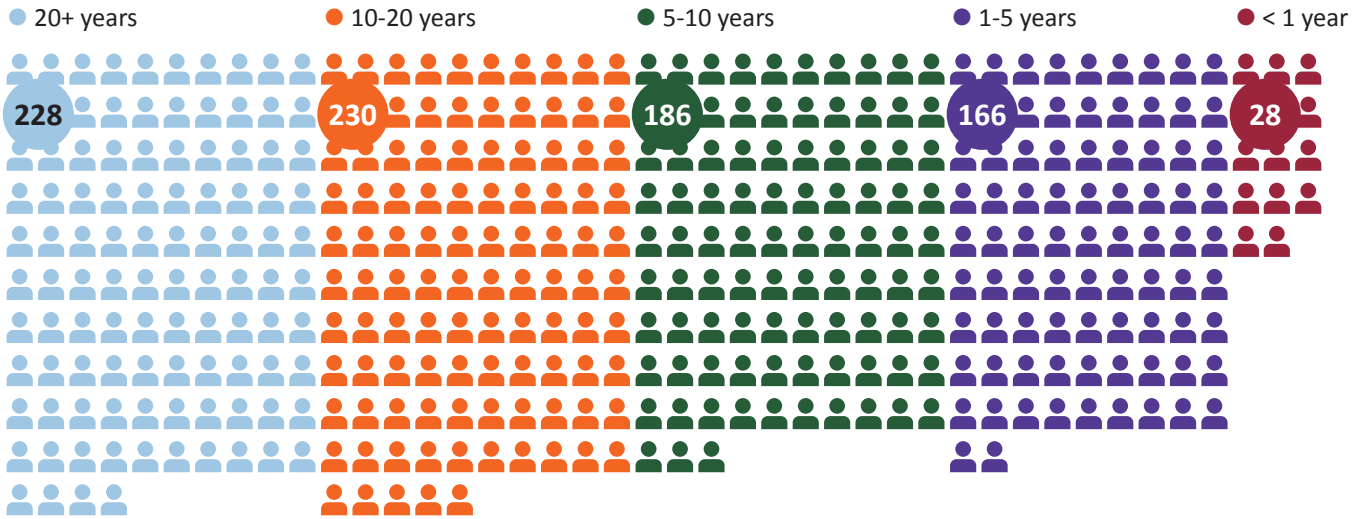
## Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community?



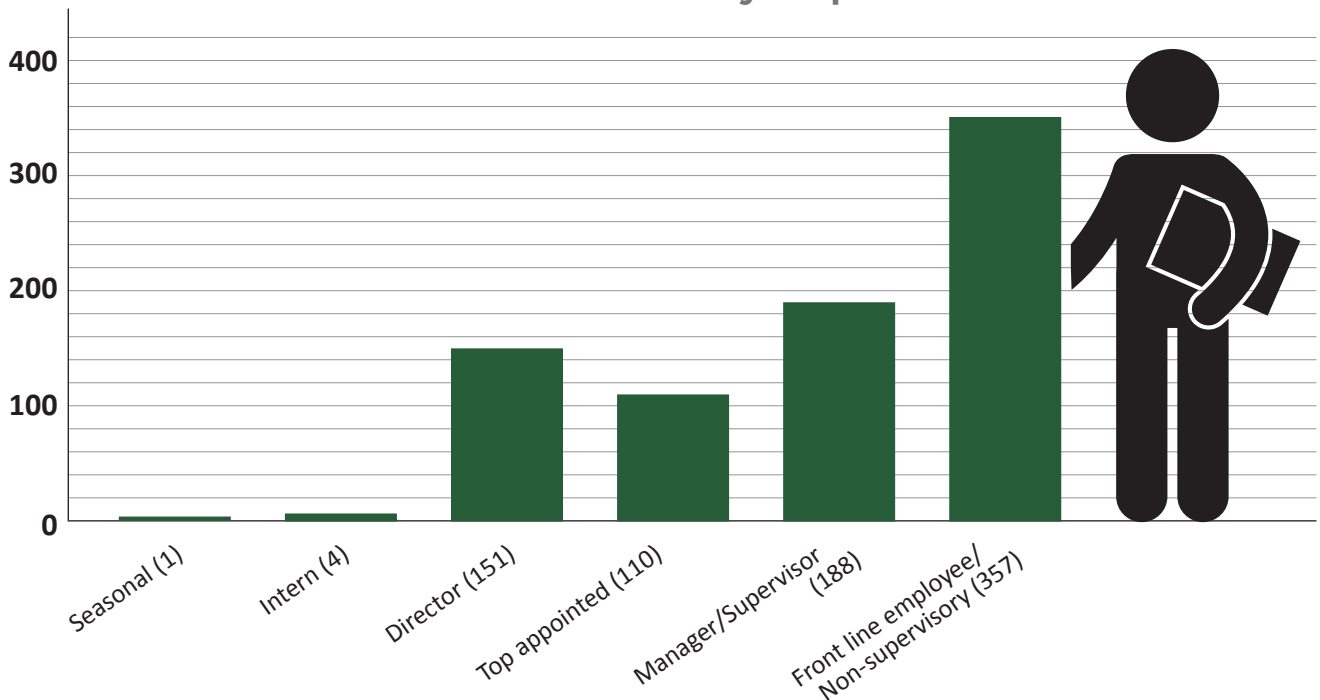


# DATA FOR CURRENT AND FORMER LOCAL GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE ONLINE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

## Length of Time in Public Service

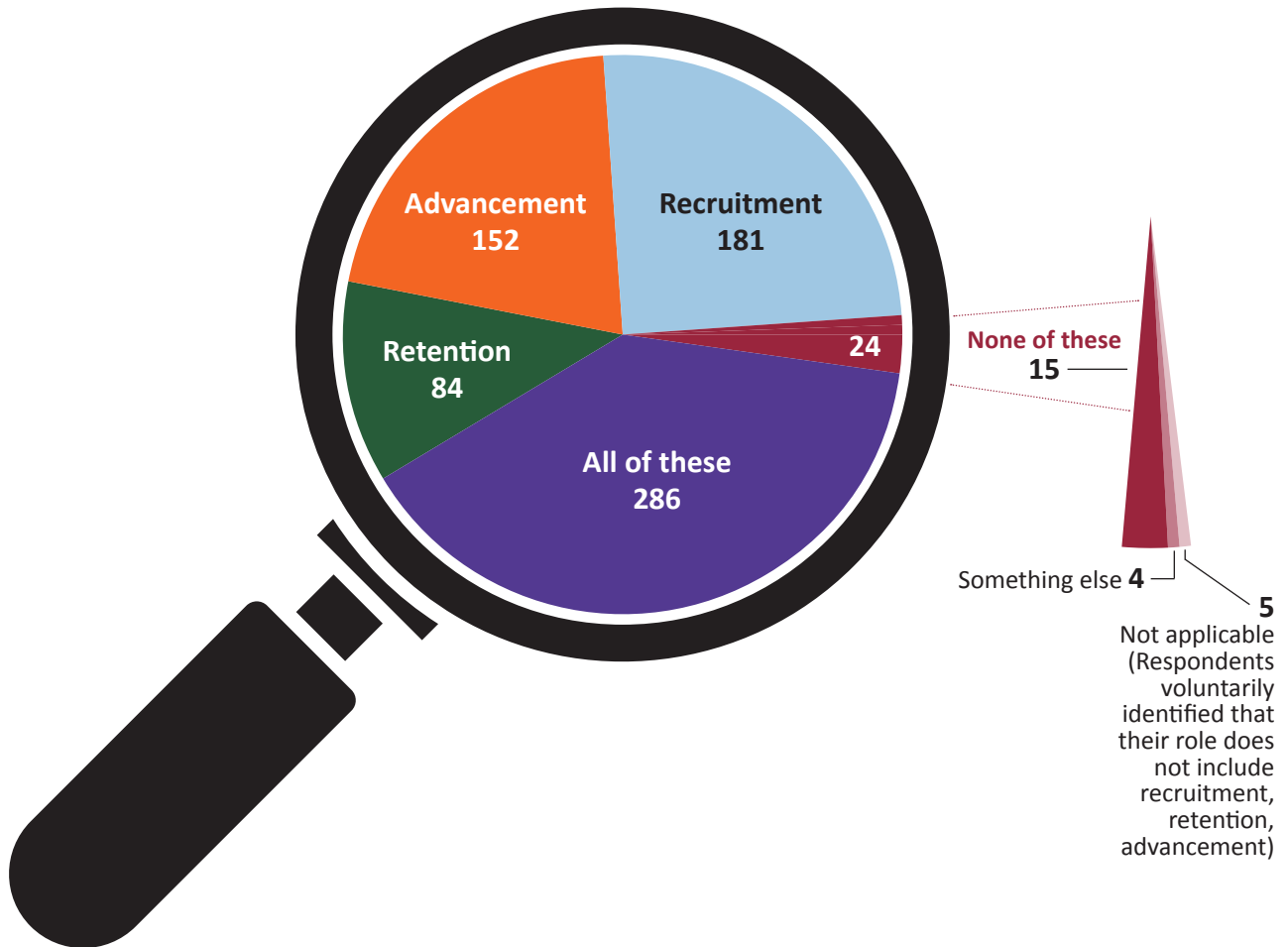


## Which best describes your position?



# CURRENT AND FORMER LOCAL GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEE SURVEY RESPONDENTS

In your experience, which of these is most difficult:



# Key Themes

Throughout the course of our six months of research, conversations and data collection, a few common themes rose as paramount considerations for Minnesota’s local government workforce. These themes are important throughlines that guide the additional content and recommendations in this report, and we encourage readers to keep them top of mind as you consider the varied challenges and opportunities for innovation facing cities and counties.

## NOT ‘ONE AND THE SAME’ – LOCAL GOVERNMENTS ARE DISTINCT



“...All cities are unique. It’s sometimes hard to make big rules that don’t negatively affect somebody...”

Perhaps the single most important takeaway from this report is simply this: that local governments are distinct. Though they may share similar governing structures, regulations, language and underlying commitments to serving their community members, it is critical to remember that not all local governments have the same needs or challenges when considering opportunities to bolster public service.

Local jurisdictions in Minnesota range in density, rurality, tourism rates and mechanisms, topography, climate considerations, human resources, and demographics. These characteristics, among others, play a prominent role in the way local governments make decisions, how local governments ought to be considered in policy shifts and expectations made more broadly, and consequently how Minnesota residents experience quality of life. One meeting participant stated that there is simply “no cookie cutter way – every [local government] is different.”

Some entities run municipal cemeteries, while others partner with local associations and faith communities. Some cities and counties have major private or nonprofit sector workforce competition next door, or are trying to keep their constituents working for them within jurisdiction rather than remotely for another entity. Some face few challenges in recruiting from within their local communities, while others have had to find creative ways to extend their reach further and recruit top talent from other regions of the state, or even look out of state. Some operate emergency response and public safety teams tens to hundreds strong, and others have EMT or fire departments that are fully volunteer.

Housing came up in many conversations and survey responses, but not in the same ways or for the same reasons. While some local government officials maintain that flexible scheduling and hybrid work environments are helping retain staff, others feel the pressure of ensuring a fully staffed City Hall or county office and have struggled to hire and retain employees after the COVID-19 pandemic normalized a widespread shift to remote or hybrid work environments.

Political dynamics have torn the fabric of some local governments, while others report feeling relatively little impact (so far) from broader political conversations. Security concerns also range based on building and team sizes at city and county levels. Further, issues like tax levy differences, local economies, mayor or council systems and oversight, referenda decisions, and administrative supervision were all noted in various conversations as both challenges and opportunities.

One survey respondent wrote that “outstate is in a world of hurt.” Small cities, particularly in Greater Minnesota, struggle with factors like housing and child care costs and availability, lower operational budgets, and tougher competition when recruiting [though we also heard assertions that small cities are not dying]. Some face the balancing act of preserving Minnesota resources beloved by residents statewide but taxed on only a few. Rural communities have seen distinct in-migration in recent years, and despite a disproportionate ratio of service needs to population and rural areas having the highest percentage of total government jobs available, that share has still been on a downward trend and – as identified by the Center for Rural Policy and Development – might be in direct contrast to levy rates and budget constraints in a competitive economic environment.<sup>15</sup>

These are some of many examples that ground our recommendations to policymakers, program leaders, funders, and residents primarily in evidence that one size rarely, if ever, fits all.



## From the Association of Small Cities' Legislative Priorities

### “What We Stand For:

*Our top concerns are to protect the ability of city leaders in all cities to make decisions for their communities and to give them access to needed resources. In the cities they govern, city leaders also call these communities ‘home’ and therefore serve as their community’s closest elected officials. Supporting their authority as elected officials is one of MN Small Cities’ paramount goals. Additionally, we strongly advocate for sufficient resources – from state and federal entities – that will allow our cities to grow in a manner that suits them best.”*

<sup>15</sup> Asche, K., & Werner, M. (2025, January 21). *The State of Rural Minnesota, 2025*. Center for Rural Policy and Development.

## ‘THE TIMES, THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’ ’ – SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND CULTURAL SHIFTS IMPACT LOCAL GOVERNMENTS



“The public sector needs to get with the times...  
We are the people that make the world go ‘round..”

As the world changes, so must our institutions. Local government infrastructure, efficiency, efficacy, service delivery, and personnel have all been impacted by a global pandemic and public health crisis, calls for racial justice with a magnifying glass on Minnesota since 2020, the evolving nature of work and “work-life balance,” and increasing political polarization and partisanship. It is important to recognize that our institutions don’t just exist – they consist of real people, showing up and doing critical jobs every day. At the same time, many people have been struggling with higher costs of living and making tough choices about their families and wellbeing – and the domino effect that can have on our workforce, especially within the governments tasked with caring for and overseeing so many aspects of our local life and communities, makes sense.

Minnesota’s demographics are changing<sup>16</sup>, impacting not only projections for the workforce at large, but our state and local culture. Overall costs of living have been steadily increasing in Minnesota, the Midwest, and nationwide<sup>17</sup>, which has a direct impact not only on residents and families, but also on local governments as they attempt to create balanced budgets for roads, schools, water treatment, conservation, employee wages and benefits, and more.

Minnesota, in line with other states and the nation more broadly, also faces increased levels of anxiety and depression, substance use and overdose, and mental health concerns among residents, including youth.<sup>18</sup> These compounding factors have impacts on service delivery needs externally and no doubt impact the health and wellbeing of employees as well. Local government employees are faced with growing responsibilities, cultural shifts, changing technology and compliance, keeping up with statute and regulations, all with diminishing and competitive resource allocation.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Data by topic: Our Projections*. Minnesota State Demographic Center. (2024, December 14).

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (n.d.). *Minnesota: Midwest Information Office*.

<sup>18</sup> *Mental Health in Minnesota*. (2023, March 20). KFF.

<sup>19</sup> Kian, A. (2024, November 22). *County, city groups look to generate interest in public employment*. MinnPost.

Though government systems have tried and trusted ways, change is also critical. A status quo “back in my day” approach – both intra-locality *and* in the ways that larger government entities consider local governments in funding and policy, may not always be the right answer on its own. A balance is needed between imperative generational, historical, and institutional knowledge and the benefits of creativity, trial and error, and fresh perspective based on community needs. Relevant training and learning opportunities can provide crucial support in a changing world, ensuring employees and local governments have all the right “tools in the toolbox” needed to balance budgets and continue providing essential community services.

Some of the challenges, questions, and recommendations outlined in this report are evergreen as far as the local government ecosystem is concerned. What we heard across the state echoed similar sentiments from local government employee responses in a 2018 study conducted by the Humphrey School of Public Affairs in collaboration with LMC: a desire to be heard and trusted; aspirations of better work-life balance; opportunities to learn, grow, and develop new skills; and feelings of efficacy and making a difference.

However, much of our data reflects concerns and considerations that highlight what we must face as we move forward: our current context and future realities.

## **‘MUST BE THE MONEY’ – RESOURCES MATTER**



“A [very small] percentage of the Minnesota vehicle sales tax goes to Greater Minnesota – the vast majority goes to the metro..”

It will likely come as no surprise that the local communities having the least amount of trouble with recruitment and retention tend to be the ones with more capital and access to resources. Levy differences (and resistance), unequal revenue streams, and competition for capital investment greatly impact city and county workforce considerations.

Though federal funding programs bolstered municipal workforce development and service delivery<sup>20</sup> in recent years, many of our survey participants expressed concerns

<sup>20</sup> Kocis, K., Gottlieb, J., & Anthony, N. (2023). *Building a Municipal Workforce for the Future: Municipal Action Guide*. National League of Cities.

about cuts to federal programs that trickle down to their infrastructure, including to programs that have expanded in the last five to seven years.

Rising costs often mean tough decisions for local leaders: choosing between replacing rusty pipes; improving roads, public transit, or bike/pedestrian access; updating or renovating buildings and facilities; recruiting, retaining and training the right people with the right skills for the right jobs; filling a leadership role using scarce resources on a search firm; and the list goes on. Some surveyed employees expressed frustration seeing large external consultant contracts but limited opportunities for advancement themselves.

Consistent protection for Local Government Aid<sup>21</sup> and funding for resource sharing opportunities among partnering and adjacent organizations and network relationships were among priorities raised in our data collection.

Ultimately, local resource allocation centers the key question: what does our community value? Public health and safety? Recreation and library services? Educational opportunities? Tourism? Current work area competition strains our institutions and communities; our challenge lies in the dance of the broader public ecosystem to fund the pie equitably in service of a growing list of needs.

There is no doubt that securing and allocating adequate resources weaves through each of the recommendations presented in this report.

<sup>21</sup> *LGA & Property Tax Relief*. Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities. (2025, February 19).



# Relevant Topics

**Challenges**  
**Opportunities and Innovations**  
**Recommendations**

## **A Note About Our Recommendations**

Throughout the following pages, we make a series of observations and recommendations that we believe – based on the feedback from more than 940 Minnesotans representing 91% of counties and nearly 25% of cities – will help build and support a robust public sector workforce in our state. We have attempted to identify a broad swath of recommendations, acknowledging that none will apply to every locality or situation. As noted in our Key Themes, cities and counties are unique and there are no one-size-fits-all solutions; local governments need flexibility to meet the distinct needs of their communities and residents.



# Recruitment

Recruitment is a challenge faced by local governments of all sizes and in all areas of the state. National League of Cities data from 2023 showed consistent areas where HR managers are receiving underqualified applicants or cannot staff sufficiently. This mirrors what we heard from survey respondents and interviews across Minnesota, with hiring challenges most prominent in law enforcement and public safety, maintenance (water and wastewater treatment, building inspection, etc.), information technology, and human services providers.<sup>22</sup>

Regarding **recruitment**, here's what we learned:

## What's Not Working – Challenges

- Generational differences may be driving a lack of interest in public service careers. From a lack of mandated civics education that includes information about local government, to enticing advertisement from the private sector to young job seekers, to hesitancy about interacting with members of the public during a divisive political era, interest in local government roles (including running for elected office) appears to be declining.
- Creating and negotiating desirable conditions for a limited pool of qualified candidates to accept higher-level or more public-facing positions is increasingly more difficult than recruiting for early career or more entry-level roles, where there are likely fewer technical requirements and larger candidate pools of applicants seeking a “make a difference job.”
- Remote and hybrid work opportunities – or restrictions – are key considerations for new hires, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. One meeting participant shared that [workplace flexibility] is the “number one question in interviews.”



“We have anecdotal evidence that Millennials and Gen-Z are attracted first to careers where they feel like they can make a difference and wages are a secondary consideration. Work-life balance and work culture are also important to them.”

<sup>22</sup> *The Public Workforce Recruitment Challenge: New Data.* (2023, June 21). National League of Cities.

- Applicants, despite interest in local government roles and careers, are sometimes unable to relocate or accept a job due to lack of affordable housing options, limited child care or transportation, and other ancillary factors.
- Competition amongst neighboring jurisdiction can also be a substantial challenge: with generally low unemployment rates in Minnesota (3.3% as of December 2024 according to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, well under the national average of 4.1%), trainees, graduates, and job seekers often have multiple opportunities and may choose to commute or move for higher wages or other desirable benefits. One meeting participant shared an example of a commutable neighboring jurisdiction offering \$8 more per hour for law enforcement new hires, resulting in several employees leaving.
- Hiring techniques and technologies have not always “kept up with the times,” sometimes putting local governments at a disadvantage. Reliance on status quo hiring practices without staff capacity to modernize or try new things, outdated or excessive “minimum requirements” in job descriptions, limited budgets for recruitment (as well as concern about costly recruitment tactics that are not guaranteed to yield success), and longer hiring timelines were all challenges raised that can place further strain and pressure on existing teams and resources. Further, the time it takes from a candidate accepting an offer to Board or Council approval can take weeks, creating a significant hurdle and sometimes meaning candidates move on to another opportunity.

## **What’s Working – Opportunities and Innovations**

- Recruiting in high schools.
- Updating job descriptions to include “soft skills” and mindset, with plans and support for more technical training.
- The creation of a hiring scorecard with alternative options for hiring managers, with the goal of dismantling bias or barriers in the hiring process.
- Same-day job offers in law enforcement.
- External mentorship programs to encourage roles in local government.
- Tours of facilities and hands-on experiences, including as a part of the interview process.

- Hiring paid interns through local colleges or service cooperatives, who become viable candidates for full-time employment (at least six counties that participated in this research utilize some version of an internship program like this).
- Word-of-mouth from current employees, which can be bolstered by referral programs and bonuses.

## **Recommendations**

- Invest “upstream” in educational partnerships at all levels. Creating opportunities for young people to visit local government buildings, observe meetings and hearings, or participate on local commissions and boards could create early interest in local government careers among future generations.
- “Tell the story” of local government by clearly communicating the financial equivalent of benefits provided and the unique nature of the work (such as HSA accounts, generous sick and vacation time, reliable work-life balance and consistent work hours, flexible work environments, the opportunity to give back to your community and – as one survey participant put it – “pension, pension, pension!”) may help generate interest in local government careers, especially when base salaries may not be as competitive.
- Encourage exploration of new marketing opportunities, both in-person (such as job fairs, trade shows, college and university expositions, or offering office or facility tours) and virtually. Include some budget funds for targeted advertising and promotion on social media and local television, radio and news outlets. Allocate staff time for this exploration.
- Develop a “one stop shop” website for local government job opportunities, which could include searchable features for specific geography, skill sets, or interests.
- Build intentional partnerships with existing pathways and pipeline programs (such as cadet programs, pathways to policing, apprenticeships, internships, and fellowships) or develop new programs geared to your local communities and students.<sup>23</sup>
- Be willing to hire someone who is energized for the role but may not yet possess all of the needed skills or qualifications. Invest in their training and support so they can develop the skill sets, networks and relationships to be successful and see opportunities for advancement in their career.

<sup>23</sup> Appendix E: Minnesota Public Service Educational Partnerships and Pipeline/Pathways Programs

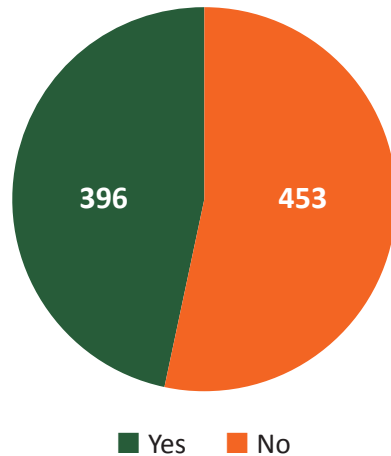
◆ ***“In certain technical roles, hiring the most qualified candidate is necessary, but many positions allow for growth and training. Investing in individuals early in their careers, even if they require some upskilling, results in longer-term retention and a greater sense of value in the workplace.”***

- Institute public administration coursework in undergraduate two- and four- year programs and certificate programs, not just at the graduate level, to foster interest and skill-building across subject areas.
- Understand that many job seekers are considering numerous, interconnected factors in their decision. In the long-term, local governments have a vested interest in advocating for things like affordable housing development, greater access to quality and affordable child care options, and improved transportation and transit options that will make it easier for people to consider and accept job opportunities.
- Continue to advocate for enhanced required civics education in Minnesota schools, with curriculum specific to local government to ensure all Minnesota students develop a deeper understanding of the roles and opportunities in local government.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Larson, K. (2025, February 7). *Schools are prepared for 2024 civics education mandate*. Twin Cities Pioneer Press.

# Salary and Benefits

Do you think jobs in local government provide comparable salaries and/or benefits to private sector roles?



## ***Data from all online survey respondents***

Across the board, compensation was indicated as a challenge for local government entities in Minnesota, but there was no strong consensus or agreement amongst our survey respondents about how salaries and benefits compare to the private sector.

While salary differences may be a primary pain point for competition with some private sector employers, especially in technical fields, they are often the least changeable. Additional benefits and job security that local government are often uniquely able to provide, on the other hand, were described in a mixed fashion in our research.

Regarding **salary and benefits**, here's what we learned:

### **What's Not Working – Challenges**

- Limited abilities, compared with the private sector, to provide incentives such as sign-on bonuses, retention bonuses, and



“Let’s put this into perspective: a CEO running a multimillion-dollar corporation can make millions of dollars/year... A city manager/administrator will never make that kind of money in spite of the comparisons between number of employees, budget size, services provided, and level of education.”

merit increases as part of an overall salary package for new and existing employees.

- ◆ Some interviewees and survey respondents told us that sign-on bonuses are a particular driver for people moving into jurisdictions to work locally, and especially make a difference for entry-level jobs and for New American applicants. If recruits don't have available resources or money immediately available to pay for the costs of relocating (including major expenses like deposits for childcare and housing), it can be a tipping point despite motivation from the candidate.
- ◆ Sign-on bonuses were emphasized as a “make or break” opportunity for getting new recruits to accept a position in law enforcement, per some of our conversations. However, we note that significant uncertainty remains about whether or not sign-on bonuses also help *keep* people in positions for longer.
- Providing competitive salaries is particularly difficult for small cities. As one meeting participant put it, “It’s hard for small cities, [who] can’t compete with nearby and larger cities [and] suburbs...”
- Salary and benefit differences can result in a feeling of “poaching” staff from one local government to another, whether intentional or not. We heard this particularly about (but not limited to) law enforcement recruitment and retention – that, despite providing training opportunities for officers internally, there is a consistent threat of them leaving for nearby opportunities with more competitive wages and benefits.
- There is a real fear and risk of negative public opinion or outcry that has an impact on decisions and votes about salary increases or new benefit offerings. For example, any approved wage increases for elected officials or government employees in leadership positions run the risk of being perceived as an inappropriate use of limited public funds on bureaucratic careers. In addition, decisions to increase salaries are often avoided in certain situations or times (following a new tax levy, for example).
- In the context of rising costs of living and in competition with private sector opportunities, many of our surveyed and interviewed participants highlighted *a shift in the perception of local governments having excellent benefits*, raising remote and hybrid work flexibility in particular. One survey participant wrote, “I think the size plays a bigger role. If I compare a small city to a large corporation, we are not as comparable, but small city to small business - we have excellent benefits, pay, stability, and support.”

- Health insurance is another major issue of concern. It is costly both for entities and for employees – we mostly heard about the difficulty of cost to expand coverage to employee family members and dependents, even if individual coverage by a locality is excellent. Small municipalities may be limited to providing stipends for health care that applicants and employees do not find suitable for their needs.<sup>25</sup>

## **What’s Working – Opportunities and Innovations**

- “There aren’t many places where you can still get a pension.”
- Many survey respondents mentioned that completion of a wage study or compensation assessment, and consequent transparency to employees and adjustments when possible, made a big difference.
- Increased mental health and PTSD supports for public safety, public health, and direct service employees.
- In-role and on-site training for certification, advancement, professional development, or workplace culture improvement.
- Even for teams who work in-person full-time, some employees highlighted intra-team cultures of flexibility where coworkers will help cover tasks and responsibilities as needed and possible for family care or other urgent needs.
- Acknowledging the reality of diverse political perspectives on the topic, we also heard from some participants that student loan forgiveness and tuition reimbursement opportunities have been a major component of their ability and drive to remain working in the public sector.

## **Recommendations**

- Develop creative flexible benefit solutions (such as PTO cash-out or rollover, parking and transit reimbursements, etc.) for public-facing and/or direct service delivery employees who are not able to make equal use of attractive benefits compared with their coworkers, due to role requirements.
- Advocate for continued protection and stabilization of the Public Employees Retirement Account (PERA).

<sup>25</sup> Magan, C. (2024, January 20). *Local governments struggle to afford benefits that draw workers to public jobs*. Star Tribune.

- Provide more thorough and regular education for employees about existing benefits (especially offerings like confidential employee assistance programs) and consider opportunities to create new benefits (such as mental health support programs) that may be especially helpful to employees in high turnover or burnout work areas and positions, including public health and human services.
- Implement a step program for salary adjustments. Some meeting participants understood this could create dissatisfaction or concern from budget committees or the public, but also cited improved morale as a result of the shift. To address this, consider establishing a working group or commission to study the topic and solicit public feedback.



# Training

We heard from concerned leaders that there “just aren’t as many qualified applicants” – a testament, in part, to limited access to training and skill develop for recruits and possible hires.

In addition to being raised as an opportunity to advance qualifications of local government job seekers, participants also centered experiences and expectations for training opportunities for existing employees and electeds.

Regarding **training**, here’s what we learned:

## What’s Not Working – Challenges

- Access to training and certification for specified and technical roles is limited in location, cost, times offered, and feasibility for both new job seekers and people looking to make a career change.
- Certain roles require extensive and often multiyear training, which may be causing unnecessary delays or limiting staff’s ability to advance in their career. Participants felt some training requirements could be truncated or reduced without impacting service outcomes.
- Local government entities cited interest in training employees in-house for specialized roles, but also acknowledged the associated costs, along with the risk of trainees leaving for another jurisdiction once they have the skills and training and could earn a higher salary, better benefits, or for other personal reasons.
- Some survey participants noted that many new, younger employees do not recognize or see the positive impact of the PERA and pension portability, and might even see it as a negative.
- Respondents noted that some individuals within local



“The training aspect and training hours needed to perform certain job functions make it a little difficult and discouraging...”

government who stand to benefit the most from continuing education and training don't want it or take advantage of it, or don't see it as valuable to them.

- Local governments face budget limitations across the board, including identifying money for training for existing staff. This is further compounded by limited capacity and availability to provide development trainings or elective educational opportunities beyond required compliance trainings.

## **What's Working – Opportunities and Innovations**

- Survey respondents noted that trainee programs – especially in areas like public works and firefighting, in which people are hired without necessary certification or licensure and provided with opportunity to gain technical skills and experience on the job – were bolstered with tuition reimbursement or other options to pay for schooling. While this can have the same risks as noted above (employees leaving a role after they've secured the necessary skills and training), certain frameworks cultivated genuine buy-in and skill sharing.
- Evaluating post-graduate requirements and certifications for certain roles, or for unique jobs within departments. One participant noted that removing graduate degree requirements from some roles resulted in a larger – and still strong – candidate pool.
- Tactical and best practices trainings from association groups were heralded as invaluable for local government professionals. One meeting participant “wish[es] there was mandatory attendance” because of the “real knowledge and education” provided.

## **Recommendations**

- Advocate for increased funding opportunities to reduce the cost of post-secondary education specific to local government service careers, as well as dedicated resources for training and education.
- Collaborate with local partners, associations and educational institutions to expand or build low- or no-cost training and certification programs for both external candidates and current employees, keeping in mind the need to offer various opportunities at different times and locations, and prioritizing access to things like transit and childcare where possible.
- Review existing training options and develop intra-locality and intra-employee trainings that may not be offered on various topics, including:

- ◆ Tactical skills and practices for direct service roles like health and human services
  - ◆ Management and mentorship
  - ◆ Conflict resolution, especially focused on interactions with the public to ensure employees feel safe and confident
  - ◆ Intercultural communication, centering education on customs and language, conflict, culture, identity and immigrant communities
  - ◆ Understanding local government pensions and changes or updates to the PERA
- Invest in workshops and activities that enhance workplace culture and belonging to foster positive working relationships and camaraderie. This could help bolster recruitment in the future if current employees feel more connected to their teams and proud of their work, and consequently share opportunities via word-of-mouth.
  - Offer new employee and early career education courses on the benefits of having a pension through PERA.
  - Require city and county orientations, especially for elected leaders, that center local government structure, leadership, budget, projects, commissions, community engagement, and recommended practices.<sup>26</sup>
    - ◆ Regularly evaluate and update existing curriculum for newly elected officials, including conferences and training programs.

<sup>26</sup> *Preparing Incoming Council members for Success*. League of Minnesota Cities. (2024, November 8).

# Turnover and Retention

We heard at *great* length about turnover and retention over the course of this project.

In many cases, turnover – especially in leadership roles – contributes to feelings of distress and instability. Some examples were also shared, however, of turnover resulting in fresh perspectives, effective ideas, new opportunities for collaboration and teamwork, and meaningful culture shifts.

The ability to retain talented and skilled employees in local government is a serious concern on its own as many people from the “Baby Boomer”<sup>27</sup> generation contemplate retirement. This challenge is further compounded as many local governments report trends of decreasing interest and qualified applicant pools at all levels.

Regarding **turnover and retention**, here’s what we learned:

## What’s Not Working – Challenges

- Feedback on this topic focused significantly on an observed lack of succession planning, especially when longtime employees decide to retire:
  - ◆ “We need to plant the seed of succession planning more and earlier.”
  - ◆ “How do we create the succession plan, because people like me won’t be here forever?”
  - ◆ “We have so much talent from our Baby Boomer, Gen X generations, and I don’t think we have a big enough talent pool to fill that...I think we’re already too late but we’re too late in a way that we could plug up the dam for a little while.”
- Turnover in specific technical and leadership roles can prove particularly challenging, often requiring the assistance of search



“The churn for local government is astounding.”

<sup>27</sup> Halter, N. (2023, September 19). *Minnesota’s workforce shortage expected to get worse as boomers retire*. Axios Twin Cities.

firms and longer negotiations to identify a new candidate for the role. It can be difficult for existing employees to see extra efforts made for new hires, while also feeling like advancement opportunities for themselves are limited at best. Concurrently, for many managers, this is difficult. “The hardest thing is not being able to promote,” shared one survey respondent.

- ◆ Similarly, hiring freezes or jobs staying vacant for longer periods of time create added challenges and stress for entire departments and teams who feel the pressure of filling the gap with already-limited capacity and resources. We also heard examples of younger employees feeling hesitant to step into leadership roles, due to a number of concerns, including generational differences, external pressures, or a sense of unpreparedness or lack of necessary management skills.
- ◆ Early or probationary reviews of new hires filling roles vacated by long-term employees (with years or decades of institutional knowledge) are often completed by elected bodies that hold authority to approve pay and longevity. Employees may be unfairly rated or compared to their predecessors. “You can’t learn that all overnight,” shared a meeting participant.
- We also noted patterns of high turnover among clerks, deputy clerks, and law enforcement, with some survey respondents reflecting on pay disparities and uncertainty about whether to encourage younger people to choose these career paths or others in public service.
- Dissatisfaction with salary, benefits, lack of advancement opportunities, and overwhelming workloads can lead to employee-hopping in search of better options in nearby localities.
- Efforts to recruit new talent while overlooking existing talent in the workplace can lead to feelings of resentment and being undervalued. Some employees feel there is little to no opportunity for advancement unless they leave for a different jurisdiction. Local government employees seeking out new opportunities within their current structure may feel frustrated that they have to compete with external candidates, especially if feel that they have been trained and identified as a good internal fit for the role. We also heard the flip side of this: that it can be particularly frustrating for external job seekers to apply for roles, only to find out an internal candidate was hired and may have been preferred all along.

- ◆ One survey respondent shared, “I wish organizations, particularly those scratching their heads about staff retention, would look to their internal talent pool as an investment and as the best choice when a good fit exists for a promotion. Honor staff by not making them jump through hoops on a drawn-out process. Post jobs externally when there is not a clear internal candidate well suited for the position.”
- Local government employees are facing increasing levels of burnout and feeling misunderstood, both by the public and within their local infrastructures. “We haven’t even talked about the workload,” began one meeting participant, implying its major impacts. Small staffs are “doing so much and spread so thin.” Increasing workloads, limited advancement opportunities, and lack of appreciation for work and time all negatively impact morale.
  - ◆ One survey respondent told us that “A lot of it is customer service and that can be emotionally draining. I think there are a lot of areas where we don’t have enough staff to do the work, so that can spiral in stress and job retention.”
- Safety concerns are also top of mind for local government employees at all levels. This was evident even during the data collection process for this report, in which we encountered some hesitation around providing any identifying information, despite assurances of anonymity.
  - ◆ Physical safety can be a risk and concern for employees who predominantly work alone or as one of only a handful of employees staffing a government building in smaller jurisdictions. Some project participants spoke about their experiences with visitors entering buildings more frequently, with political motives, often filming government employees. Elected and administrative officials alike are under heightened scrutiny and surveillance. Some service delivery centers display signs discouraging abusive behaviors from members of the public, and some local government leaders have considered developing a “bill of rights” to protect public-facing and direct-service employees from workplace harassment. Also apparent from our conversations, however, is that local government employees remain committed to serving their communities and constituents professionally and with respect; they simply ask for the same in return.

- ◆ Psychological safety is also a concern, especially among employees from marginalized identities and backgrounds, who report encounters of bias, misunderstanding, and abuse at higher volumes. Employees may feel unable to freely be or express themselves in the workplace: “It can be very isolating,” shared one participant. Particularly at a time when diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and efforts are under increased scrutiny and being questioned, many employees may be at an even higher risk of feeling alone, leaving local government, or never starting in public service at all – potentially creating more division, safety concerns and “othering” when our elected and administrative bodies lack representation from the increasingly diverse communities they serve.
- Employees reported that while they may be surveyed for job satisfaction, they do not always see their responses taken into consideration for action, which may limit their interest in providing feedback in the future or lead to feelings of discontentment.
- One survey respondent shared, “My experience has been that employees are expected to work very hard from day one with little consideration for overall wellness and balance. There is such an emphasis on the altruistic side of public service that, as an employer, I don’t get the sense that there is a strong incentive to change because many people working for the city are mission driven. I’ve seen similar challenges in the non-profit space, contributing to burn out and turnover.”
  - ◆ This sentiment was understood and echoed by some managers, who feel they lack opportunities to provide incentives for their employees. In one example shared, a supervisor expressed frustration that they cannot even take their team to lunch to express appreciation for their hard work. Balancing the restrictions and public perceptions of the budget with opportunities to thank staff and boost morale and longevity was mentioned.

## **What’s Working – Opportunities and Innovations**

- Despite some project participants naming benefit changes as a challenge to their retention, many also report that the benefits are why they stay in local government. Also mentioned were: the people they work with, the mission, and ongoing continued development opportunities.
- Department- and role-specific benefit enhancements, particularly for mental and behavioral health resources, are increasingly necessary and appreciated by employees.



- Policies and initiatives to assist and support employees in their jobs (e.g. clothing allowance, work vehicles, cell phone reimbursements, and availability of tablets and technology for remote work) can be very helpful and sometimes counteract limitations in salary increases.
- Exit surveys, interviews, and memos prepared and delivered thoughtfully, with transparency and opportunity for genuine employee participation, have offered valuable insights for managers and human resource leaders to improve their overall culture and team environments.
- Phased retirements, when planned and supported, have allowed for bridging between roles and can go far in helping to alleviate stress on existing teams and employees.

## **Recommendations**

- Exercise creativity in efforts to retain employees, including seeking direct feedback from employees in the process. Local government teams are proud of their work, and they are eager to be included in creating effective and enjoyable workplaces for themselves and their colleagues.
- Implement flexible options for partial retirements that can help fill a void after a departure and ensure knowledge transfer to new or promoted employees. This could include, for example, temporary work assignments or allow part-time schedule allowance. Partially-retired employees with necessary skillsets can help fill statutorily mandated roles in low-recruitment times.
- Build transition and succession planning into job duties and expectations from the beginning. Coordinate with Human Resources and association groups to create supporting memos or brief explainer videos for employees, and integrate succession plans into annual reviews as a way to preserve and share institutional knowledge. Begin conversations about retirement options early, particularly with seasoned employees who may have unique historical knowledge to share, or who are balancing multiple roles and responsibilities. Note: While succession planning is vitally important, it must also be done in a sensitive and respectful way that does not contribute to ageism or feelings of being “pushed out” of the workplace.
- Develop clear practices for assessing and evaluating current compensation and benefit structures.
- Express gratitude and ensure regular opportunities to recognize and thank employees



for their hard work. Kind words and simple gestures can go a long way in efforts to ensure that employees feel supported and heard. We encourage local government leaders to seek authorization for modest funds for public service employee recognition or awards.

- Offer regular feedback opportunities – such as entry, exit, and satisfaction surveys – that protect employee identities with anonymity and, most importantly, ensure that this feedback is actively considered by leaders and human resources teams to validate employees’ thoughts, ideas, and concerns.
- Create flexible service delivery innovations to “meet people where they are.” Examples shared include allowing some government service roles to be performed virtually when possible, and offering expanded time windows for residents to access services outside of “normal” daytime business hours.

## Silos of Administrative and Elected Work Areas

We would be remiss to not include information about one of the patterns that became apparent in our research: dynamics between elected officials and administrative local government personnel.<sup>28</sup>

On the administrative side, we heard concerns about misunderstanding, communication breakdown, and a disconnect between employees and elected officials, but also an interest in improving these relationships. Additionally, some feedback from elected officials themselves highlighted examples of confusion and mistrust, as well as celebrating successful opportunities for collaboration.

Regarding **silos of administrative and elected work areas**, here's what we learned:

### What's Not Working – Challenges

- Misunderstanding – and/or – misinformation about the differences between administrative and elected sides of local government puts a strain on important working relationships. In particular, we heard from some human services staff who are struggling with burnout and feel misunderstood. Administrative personnel expressed a wish for elected officials to cultivate a deeper understanding of their work and responsibilities, while assumptions made by employees about elected officials' goals, motives, ideology, experience, and affiliations can hinder effective teamwork. Employees' experiences feeling siloed can negatively impact morale and efficacy.
- Post-election onboarding and adjustment time, both on the elected side and in the case of office turnovers or staffing adjustments, can challenge capacity and efficiency during an already steep learning curve.



“The political landscape, including how the public interacts with their council, and how the council interacts with the public, manager, and each other are extremely important to me as these items will significantly affect my effectiveness in the position, my reputation in the community, my reputation for future positions, and my stress levels in the position.”

<sup>28</sup> Duggan, K., & Hilvert, C. A. (2020, June 18). *In times like these, good elected official and staff relationships are even more important*. ICMA.

- Belabored approval of minutiae related to employees’ work becomes a “logistical headache” for administrative staff, who expressed a desire to be trusted to do their jobs well but feel the strain of “every little thing approved” being required.
- Partisan endorsements in traditionally nonpartisan local government roles can create a sense of divisiveness and mistrust at the local government level. This impacts public opinion and can have a “trickle down” effect on internal working relationships.
- Likewise, a lack of understanding or respect for administrative leaders’ nonpartisan commitment and responsibility can further exacerbate tensions. Some study participants underscored that they feel wrongfully perceived, including one who shared, “Electeds think we as staff can talk to them in a [certain] style of way, but we can’t.”
- Some meeting and interview participants shared that it feels increasingly difficult to work with elected leaders and bodies overall, expressing concerns that some people may run for local office with limited community involvement and “think they can do whatever and turn things upside down.” As is the case for anyone taking a new job, there is a learning curve and it can take time – often the duration of a full term – for elected officials to learn the issues and ins-and-outs of local government operations. One employee shared that they feel elected officials “don’t want to take advice” and “don’t care what you think or say,” which can leave employees feeling dismissed and undervalued.

### **What’s Working – Opportunities and Innovations**

- Arrangements wherein elected bodies and leaders oversee major decisions but allow administrative staff and other internal leaders to handle smaller, day-to-day details contribute to stronger worker relationships and an atmosphere of humility, trust, and collaboration.
- Establishing collaborative work groups to address topics, such as restructuring and salary steps, provides important opportunities for resource sharing, learning, and a collective sense of ownership on impactful projects.
- Intentionally creating opportunities for deeper understanding of the many facets of local government work is noticed and appreciated. One administrative employee reflected that elected officials who engage more directly with staff better understand that staff “are not so wasteful after all, [sometimes] things are just expensive.”
- Agreement and bipartisan support, at all levels, for critical needs- a particular example

being around emergency services and transportation.<sup>29</sup> This has showcased an ability to collaborate for resource disbursement to care for community in a timely manner.

## **Recommendations**

- Discourage partisan endorsements in local government elections.
- Provide robust onboarding opportunities, training about roles and responsibilities, and clear expectations of administrative nonpartisanship among elected leaders and staff at the beginning of elected tenures and hiring.
- Consider additional and regular opportunities for elected officials to develop a shared understanding of various departments and work, perhaps including presentations, shadow days, or ride-alongs. These opportunities provide critical context for effective collaboration, relationship building and decision making, and can also contribute to an improved sense of morale, trust, and support, particularly among non-elected staff and employees.

<sup>29</sup> *Emergency Ambulance Service Aid. Emergency Ambulance Service Aid* | Minnesota Department of Revenue. (n.d.).

# Public Understanding and Civic Education

There is a noted lack of knowledge and understanding about the many roles, functions, and responsibilities of local governments in Minnesota indicating a related lack of civic education in schools and in the general public. Residents of all ages need civic education – including, as noted in a prior section, elected and administrative local leaders themselves. We heard numerous accounts of the need for greater awareness about the importance of local government in our day-to-day life.

Feedback from survey respondents and interviewees indicated a strong desire for more efforts to increase public awareness. One survey participant wrote, “I think about interfacing with my local government only when something is wrong or I’m in trouble.”

Regarding **public understanding and civic education**, here’s what we learned:

## What’s Not Working – Challenges

- Public misunderstanding about the work, breadth, structure and roles of local government, including topics such as elected and appointed roles and their purview, strong vs. weak mayor systems, the myriad of services local governments provide, and a lack of literacy around property taxes and “who does what.” The public image of local government may also be skewed or misrepresented by news highlighting more contentious or dramatic situations at the local level.
  - ◆ “There is a general lack of understanding and education about government, how it works, how things get funded, who we are and what we do. This includes basic, elementary school knowledge of what is representative government and what that means.”
- Beyond simple misunderstanding of local government roles, outright hostility from the public was mentioned by several project participants.



“...public service/local government is overlooked by many but is a pillar in the viability of a community. More people need to recognize that.”

- ◆ One meeting participant recalled an instance when someone they hired to do work at their home inquired about the jobs of the family, and when told that both adults work for local government replied, “What a waste of our taxpayer dollars.”
- Some residents have a “not in my backyard” attitude about human services issues like housing, homelessness and substance use – in other words, they may hold misguided views about the need or value for certain services, or their support for some issues is conditional insofar as they do not want it to impact their own life, commute, property value, etc. Public perceptions about critical health and human services provided by local governments can both cloud judgement and lead to a deep feeling of being misunderstood among local government employees. One survey respondent wrote, “Lack of public support and public oversight that doesn’t understand the needs of the various roles is devastating.”
- Public service functions – and career opportunities – are not always effectively modeled or taught in our K-12 education system. Survey respondents felt that public service is “an overlooked or ignored or [misunderstood] career path” and that “you have to know someone who works in the public sector or stumble upon it to realize that there are jobs in the public sector (not just politicians)...”
  - ◆ Meeting participants inquired whether local government structures, roles, and opportunities are being promoted in schools: “Do kids and young people realize it’s a job that exists? With benefits? Giving back? You could do the job and career path that you want to but for [a locality] rather than for another entity.”

## **What’s Working – Opportunities and Innovations**

- Intentional partnerships with schools and learning cohorts<sup>30</sup> that invite young people into local civic life, from luncheons and poster contests to facilities tours and shadowing opportunities. These opportunities provide young people with the chance to understand their local governance better, try out new skills, and envision themselves in local government roles in the future.
- Public awareness campaigns that seek out new audiences (through art and social media, on public transit, etc.) to showcase the wide array of services, opportunities, and benefits that local governments provide – not just elections and taxes but park and library services, auditing and compliance, and recycling<sup>31</sup> and composting, to name a few.

<sup>30</sup> Appendix E: Minnesota Public Service Educational Partnerships and Pipeline/Pathways Programs

## Recommendations

- Emphasize and amplify local Boards and Commissions recruitment, and expand opportunities for youth to serve. Offering first-hand experience generates interest, provides education, and may inspire further involvement.
- Support and advocate for continued efforts to expand civics education<sup>32</sup> with a local focus in Minnesota schools, including opportunities to learn about local governance and public administration in two- and four-year college programs and certificates.
  - ◆ Consider having local government employee and local government association group representation on commissions to recommend learning goals and curricula development.
- Provide handouts, postcards, and other educational materials in local government buildings, service delivery centers, and at community outreach events to share simple civic facts about government roles and services. Ensure that these materials are available in multiple formats, including QR codes to access the information online, and translated into common languages spoken in your community or region.
- Invest in existing educational partnerships and pipeline programs with schools and learning groups, or explore opportunities to develop new relationships and models if they do not yet exist in your region. This could include career days and field trips, short-term internships, a “day in the life of a [county administrator]” tour, or even arranging regular visits to local schools.
  - ◆ Equally as important as introducing young people and job seekers to the wide range of rewarding career opportunities in public service is underscoring to youth (and the public broadly) that our representative model of government serves people best when it includes *all* types of people with *all* types of educational backgrounds and experiences, not just those who may have a more traditional career or educational path to public service.
- Recognize that *every* employee and elected official - council and board members, management and front-line staff, firefighters, police officers, HR, public works, etc. – plays an important role as an ambassador for public service and local government.

<sup>31</sup> *Recycling in the Twin Cities is real and it works*. Recycling Exists. (n.d.).

<sup>32</sup> *Minnesota Civic Education Coalition*. (n.d.). Teaching Civics.







## Networks

Networks of support are critical to the success of local government staff at all levels. In this context, “networks” do not refer primarily to networking opportunities for political or professional gain. Rather, we heard from many participants about the deep value in building relationships and sharing resources with other government employees through connections such as:

- Membership-based association groups and organizations advocating on behalf of localities at state and federal levels, and providing learning opportunities;
- Partner and adjacent organizations – such as regional development commissions, joint powers agreements, service districts, and intergovernmental collaboratives – offering regional and specific shared resources and contracting opportunities;
- National peer connections and conferences; and
- State and regional peer groups, often even informally, that provide opportunities to share information and best practices, commiserate about challenges, brainstorm ideas, and provide feedback to others in similar roles who “get it”.

Regarding **networks**, here’s what we learned:

### What’s Not Working – Challenges

- The diversified nature of Minnesota’s local government jurisdictions means that not all individuals work in a bustling city hall or county facility every day. Some may work remotely for all or most of their time, others have limited interactions with colleagues or the public, and some may be working in new roles or with new technologies with few peers who share the same responsibilities. Individuals may experience isolation, frustration, and loneliness.



“...people show up for each other in [our community] – you’re each other’s 3am call, you’re in the foxhole together...”

- As identified in other areas of this report, lack of nuanced civics knowledge, onboarding/orientation procedures, and training opportunities can leave local government employees and elected officials feeling unprepared or “out of their element.”
- Budget realities and limited capacities can restrict employees’ ability to participate in dues-based associations, peer groups, or other rewarding network-building opportunities. Further, disproportionate resourcing, funding and hierarchies may mean some employees are able to access these groups relatively often and easily, while others who would strongly benefit from the opportunity may rarely get the chance to participate, build their networks, and engage with peers in similar roles.

### **What’s Working – Opportunities and Innovations**

- Network spaces can offer a validating space to “vent” and be understood by peer government employees with similar roles and challenges, whereas others in one’s personal life may not be able to relate or advise. Pairing tactical knowledge with relationship-building and support can improve morale and underscore the idea that employees are not alone.
- Especially for smaller localities in Minnesota, membership in an association group or network can provide access to shared resources such as counsel, internship placements, implementation and compliance, and streamlined and simplified contracts, all of which might otherwise not be feasible due to budget or capacity.
- Training is especially helpful through partnerships with regional service cooperatives and networks, statewide association groups, and national, sector-, or work-area-specific coalitions.
  - ◆ We heard that opportunities for external training and relationship-building can be highly beneficial (sometimes more so than intra-system ones) for feedback sharing and support without fear of internal retaliation or response.

### **Recommendations**

- Seek out networks and aligned groups within the sector supporting roles and functions at various levels of government, and ensure employees are aware of the opportunities and are encouraged to participate.
- Endorse and promote opportunities for local government leaders and employees to

participate in advocacy days at higher levels of government to practice new skills and collectively tell regional and communal stories.

- Create opportunities for small localities to fully participate in network groups – through sliding-scale membership, selected free or reduced-fee programming, or open network groups.
- Inform employees through regular communications about shared learning and network opportunities that are affordable and accessible, including from educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, foundations, and associations.

# Closing

The wealth and breadth of insights and experiences found in these pages likely represent just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the myriad of workforce challenges and opportunities facing local governments in Minnesota.

It bears repeating: one-size-fits-all solutions are not the answer; local government is nuanced, complex and unique. The diverse communities across our state should be viewed as a point of pride and an important asset worthy of our time and investment, not an insurmountable challenge.

We hope this report also illustrates the deep passion, pride and care that so many local government employees and elected officials bring to their work every day – with a focus on working together to serve their communities well, innovating to address the challenges of our time, and leaning into the hard but rewarding work.

Local governments across Minnesota certainly face real and significant challenges that require long-term, cross-sector collaboration and teamwork. The good news is – for all of us fortunate to call Minnesota “home” – we have thousands of tireless public servants working in our local government institutions who show up every day with a commitment to better their communities and the services they provide.

## But don't take our word for it:

**“Public service jobs can be so incredibly rewarding AND deserve to be compensated fairly, not just with high praise and gratitude. The work we do keeps society not just surviving but thriving!”**

**“Public service is very rewarding and a worthwhile mission. I feel good about serving the community and I know my coworkers do too.”**

**“The benefits are superior. It's a noble calling.”**

**“It has been my experience that individuals in local government jobs tend to like what they do and get a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction by helping others and improving the community they work in. I also feel that job seekers do not realize the variety of positions that are available at the local level.”**

**“I find work in local government as a public servant rewarding with ample opportunity to help improve human relationships, strengthen community, and unite around shared human values. How one approaches their work has a great impact on overall work experience, job satisfaction and personal growth.”**

**“The main reason I chose this profession is my deep appreciation for history and politics. And I thrive for public service. You need a good sense of what public service means in order to enjoy and succeed in local government.”**

**“Proud to have a career in public service, especially here in MN.”**

**“I love our work! It does wear on me, sometimes, though.”**

**“It has served me well for over 25 years. I wish more people would consider it.”**

A truly gratifying part of this research has been the opportunity to bear witness to the depth of dedication of local government employees in Minnesota. Participants engaged out of deep care for the sector and the importance of its work, and we owe them our gratitude and partnership.

It has been a privilege for the Citizens League to be trusted with insights from hundreds of local government leaders, employees and elected officials. We look forward to the future with optimism and a renewed sense of trust in our state’s ability to ensure a robust and thriving public sector for generations to come.

With questions, feedback, ideas, additional research opportunities or to request a presentation of our findings, please contact [policy@citizensleague.org](mailto:policy@citizensleague.org).

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*listed alphabetically*

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# Special Thanks To

*listed alphabetically*

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City of Chatfield  
City of Duluth  
City of Fergus Falls  
City of Walker  
Detroit Lakes Regional Chamber of Commerce  
Fargo Moorhead West Fargo (FMWF) Chamber of Commerce  
Fergus Falls Public Schools  
Lakes County Service Cooperative  
League of Minnesota Cities  
Metro Cities  
Minnesota Association of Small Cities (MAOSC)  
Otter Tail County  
Sourcewell  
Southeastern Minnesota League of Municipalities (SEMLM)  
Walker Public Library  
West Central Initiative Foundation

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# Appendix A:

## Public Service Survey – Local Government Employees



### Public Service Survey

Thank you for your time and willingness to share your experiences in local public service in Minnesota! Citizens League is proud to be working with the League of Minnesota Cities and Association of Minnesota Counties on this research project.

**This survey is intended to collect feedback from individuals who are currently employed – or have previously been employed by – a local unit of government in Minnesota.** For this survey, please think of the following description for “public service:” *careers or employment in local government, whether public facing or not, that contribute to the overall running of a city, county or other local jurisdiction.*

**If you have never been a public service employee, [please fill out this survey instead.](#)**

Most questions are optional and some may not apply to you; please feel free to complete only portions that are relevant to you and your own experiences and leave others blank.

Alternatively, if you would prefer to send an email with your thoughts or feedback instead of completing this survey, you may contact us anytime at [info@citizensleague.org](mailto:info@citizensleague.org).

*Please note: By completing this survey, you authorize Citizens League to use or share your comments, **anonymously and de-identified.** If*

# Appendix A:

## Public Service Survey – Local Government Employees

*Citizens League has further questions about your answers to this survey, we may use your email to contact you for clarification or additional information. We will never attribute your name or any personal information to any comments without your explicit consent.*

First Name \*

Last Name \*

Email \*

What county do you work/serve in? \*

What city do you work/serve in? \*

What is your role in local government or public service? (check all that apply) *Note: For this survey, think of “public service” as careers or employment in local government, whether public facing or not, that contribute to the overall running of a city, county or other local jurisdiction.*

- City administrator/leadership
- County administrator/leadership

# Appendix A:

## Public Service Survey – Local Government Employees

- Current elected official
- Former elected official
- Currently employed in a public service career
- Previously - but not currently - working in a public service role
- Retired from public service
- Other (please explain)

What area(s) do you (or did you) work in? (please check all that apply)

- Public Safety (Police, Fire, EMS, Emergency Management, Dispatch, Corrections)
- Public Works (Water, Sewer, Solid Waste, Transportation)
- Parks & Recreation
- Community Development, Planning and Land Use
- Finance, Admin, HR, Comms or Technology
- Elections, Records or Assessor
- Library Services
- Public Health
- Human Services
- Veteran Services
- Legal (City or County Attorney and staff)
- Elected Official
- Other (please explain)

Which best describes your position?

- Top appointed

# Appendix A:

## Public Service Survey – Local Government Employees

- Director
- Manager/Supervisor
- Front line employee/Non-supervisory
- Seasonal
- Intern/Fellow
- Contractor

What is your job title?

If you are currently working or have worked in public service, for how long?

- Less than 1 year
- 1-5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10-20 years
- 20+ years

Do you think jobs in local government provide comparable salaries and/or benefits to private sector roles?

- Yes
- No

Whether you answered yes or no to the question above, we'd love to understand more about your perspective or experiences: why did you

# Appendix A:

## Public Service Survey – Local Government Employees

answer yes/no? Can you tell us more about what you feel is or is not comparable between public and private sector jobs?

Do you consider the political landscape when applying for jobs? (for example: political affiliations of current elected leaders, political statements made by elected or company leaders, political partisanship/dysfunction, public pressure, etc.?)

- Yes
- No

If you answered “yes” above, can you share more? What do you consider, and how important is it to you?

If hiring new employees is a part of your job/position description, what have been some of the most challenging aspects of trying to fill jobs or hire?

In your experience, which of these is most difficult:

- Recruiting potential employees to apply for jobs
- Retaining employees in their positions
- Providing opportunities for advancement to current employees
- All are equally difficult

# Appendix A:

## Public Service Survey – Local Government Employees

- None of these are difficult
- Something else (please explain)

Have you or your employer attempted any new approaches to recruit employees? Tell us about it – what has or has not worked?

Have you or your employer provided any incentives to recruit or retain employees? If so, how? (What was the incentive, did it work, etc.)

Are there any current state laws or local requirements that you believe complicate or make it difficult to recruit and retain employees? Please be as detailed as possible.

Is there anything else you'd like to share or additional thoughts you have about public service/local government in Minnesota? Please share those here.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographic information is encouraged but voluntary to provide. We are collecting demographic data for the purpose of disaggregation for



# Appendix A:

## Public Service Survey – Local Government Employees

our report research, meaning we will look for patterns across answers and demographics. All information will be anonymized and deidentified.

Age range

- Under 18
- 18-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-64
- 65-74
- 75-84
- 85+

What is your racial & ethnic identity? If more than one apply, please check all. *(Note: Identity categories are based on US Census Bureau/ American Community Survey Data. Please use the 'say more' option to include additional information as you see fit.)*

- American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
- White/Not Hispanic or Latino
- Some Other Race
- Two or More Races



# Appendix A:

## Public Service Survey – Local Government Employees

Prefer Not to Say

Say more

Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community?

Yes

No

Prefer not to say

What is your gender identity? (if more than one apply to you, check all)

Woman

Man

Transgender

Nonbinary

Other

Prefer not to say

If there is anything else about your personal identify, status or background that you believe is relevant to your experience (gender, race, age, ability, language, political affiliation, parental or caregiving status, career, etc.), please tell us more about it here.

Submit

# Appendix B:

## Public Service Survey – Members of the Public



### Public Service Survey

---

Thank you for your interest in Citizens League’s research on public service in Minnesota!

**This survey is intended to collect feedback from residents of Minnesota who have not (currently or previously) been employed by a local unit of government.** For this survey, please think of the following description for “public service:” *careers or employment in local government, whether public facing or not, that contribute to the overall running of a city, county or other local jurisdiction.*

**If you are a current or previous employee of any local government jurisdiction in Minnesota, [please fill out this survey instead.](#)**

Most questions are optional and some may not apply to you; please feel free to complete only portions that are relevant to you and your own experiences and leave others blank.

Alternatively, if you would prefer to send an email with your thoughts or feedback instead of completing this survey, you may contact us anytime at [info@citizensleague.org](mailto:info@citizensleague.org).

*Please note: By completing this survey, you authorize Citizens League to use or share your comments, **anonymously and de-identified.** If Citizens League has further questions about your answers to this survey, we may use your email to contact you for clarification or*

# Appendix B:

## Public Service Survey – Members of the Public

*additional information. We will never attribute your name or any personal information to any comments without your explicit consent.*

First Name \*

Last Name \*

Email \*

What county do you live in? \*

What city do you live in? \*

When you think about public service roles, what job titles come to mind first? *Reminder: think about careers or employment in local government, whether public facing or not, that contribute to the overall running of a city, county or other local jurisdiction. Please separate your responses with a comma.*

## Appendix B: Public Service Survey – Members of the Public

What are the primary ways you interact with your city and/or county government? *(examples could include but not limited to: visiting parks and libraries, enrolling in Parks & Recreation programming, paying utility bills or taxes, receiving direct services, attending community events, engaging with elected officials, etc.)*

Have you ever considered a job in public service?

- Yes, and I have applied for a job
- Yes, but never applied for a job
- No
- Other (please explain)

What aspects or parts of working in public service would **appeal** most to you?

What aspects or parts of working in public service would **dissuade or discourage** you from applying for or accepting a job?

Do you think jobs in local government provide comparable salaries and/or benefits to private sector roles?

- Yes

## Appendix B: Public Service Survey – Members of the Public

No

Whether you answered yes or no above, we'd love to understand more about your perspective or experiences: why did you answer yes/no? Can you tell us more about what is or is not comparable between public and private sector jobs?

Do you consider the political landscape when applying for jobs? (for example: political affiliations of current elected leaders, political statements made by elected or company leaders, political partisanship/dysfunction, concern about partisanship impacting your role, public pressure, etc?)

Yes

No

If you answered "yes" above, can you share more? What do you consider, and how important is it to you?

Is there anything else you'd like to share or additional thoughts you have about public service/local government in Minnesota? Please share those here.

### DEMOGRAPHICS

## Appendix B: Public Service Survey – Members of the Public

Demographic information is encouraged but voluntary to provide. We are collecting demographic data for the purpose of disaggregation for our report research, meaning we will look for patterns across answers and demographics. All information will be anonymized and deidentified.

Age range

- Under 18
- 18-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-64
- 65-74
- 75-84
- 85+

What is your racial & ethnic identity? If more than one apply, please check all. *(Note: Identity categories are based on US Census Bureau/ American Community Survey Data. Please use the 'say more' option to include additional information as you see fit.)*

- American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
- White/Not Hispanic or Latino
- Some Other Race

## Appendix B: Public Service Survey – Members of the Public

Two or More Races

Prefer Not to Say

Say more

Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community?

Yes

No

Prefer not to say

What is your gender identity? (if more than one apply to you, check all)

Woman

Man

Transgender

Nonbinary

Other

Prefer not to say

If there is anything else about your personal identify, status or background that you believe is relevant to your experience (gender, race, age, ability, language, political affiliation, parental or caregiving status, career, etc.), please tell us more about it here.

Submit

# Appendix C:

## List of Minnesota Counties Represented Across Data Collection Methods

*listed alphabetically*

- |                |                          |                 |                        |
|----------------|--------------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| 1. Aitkin      | 26. Grant                | 50. Norman      | 75. Washington         |
| 2. Anoka       | 27. Hennepin             | 51. Olmstead    | 76. Wilkin             |
| 3. Becker      | 28. Houston              | 52. Otter Tail  | 77. Winona             |
| 4. Beltrami    | 29. Hubbard              | 53. Pine        | 78. Wright             |
| 5. Benton      | 30. Isanti               | 54. Pipestone   | 79. Yellow<br>Medicine |
| 6. Big Stone   | 31. Itasca               | 55. Polk        |                        |
| 7. Blue Earth  | 32. Jackson              | 56. Pope        |                        |
| 8. Brown       | 33. Kandiyohi            | 57. Ramsey      |                        |
| 9. Carlton     | 34. Kittson              | 58. Redwood     |                        |
| 10. Carver     | 35. Lac Qui Parle        | 59. Renville    |                        |
| 11. Cass       | 36. Lake                 | 60. Rice        |                        |
| 12. Chippewa   | 37. Lake of the<br>Woods | 61. Rock        |                        |
| 13. Chisago    | 38. Lincoln              | 62. Roseau      |                        |
| 14. Clay       | 39. Lyon                 | 63. Saint Louis |                        |
| 15. Clearwater | 40. Marshall             | 64. Scott       |                        |
| 16. Cook       | 41. Martin               | 65. Sherburne   |                        |
| 17. Cottonwood | 42. McLeod               | 66. Sibley      |                        |
| 18. Crow Wing  | 43. Meeker               | 67. Stearns     |                        |
| 19. Dakota     | 44. Mille Lacs           | 68. Steele      |                        |
| 20. Dodge      | 45. Morisson             | 69. Swift       |                        |
| 21. Douglas    | 46. Mower                | 70. Todd        |                        |
| 22. Faribault  | 47. Murray               | 71. Traverse    |                        |
| 23. Fillmore   | 48. Nicollet             | 72. Wabasha     |                        |
| 24. Freeborn   | 49. Nobles               | 73. Wadena      |                        |
| 25. Goodhue    |                          | 74. Waseca      |                        |



## Appendix D:

### List of Minnesota Cities Represented Across Data Collection Methods *listed alphabetically*

- |                      |                      |                    |                    |
|----------------------|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Akeley            | 27. Caledonia        | 54. Eagan          | 82. Hanover        |
| 2. Albert Lea        | 28. Callaway         | 55. East Gull Lake | 83. Hastings       |
| 3. Albertville       | 29. Cambridge        | 56. Eden Prairie   | 84. Hawley         |
| 4. Annandale         | 30. Canby            | 57. Edina          | 85. Hermantown     |
| 5. Apple Valley      | 31. Cannon Falls     | 58. Elbow Lake     | 86. Hokah          |
| 6. Appleton          | 32. Carlton          | 59. Elk River      | 87. Hopkins        |
| 7. Argyle            | 33. Carver           | 60. Eveleth        | 88. Hutchinson     |
| 8. Arlington         | 34. Center City      | 61. Excelsior      | 89. Isanti         |
| 9. Austin            | 35. Centerville      | 62. Eyota          | 90. Jackson        |
| 10. Bagley           | 36. Chanhassen       | 63. Fairmont       | 91. Janesville     |
| 11. Baudette         | 37. Chaska           | 64. Faribault      | 92. Jenkins        |
| 12. Bayport          | 38. Chatfield        | 65. Farmington     | 93. Jordan         |
| 13. Belle Plaine     | 39. Circle Pines     | 66. Fergus Falls   | 94. Kasson         |
| 14. Bemidji          | 40. Claremont        | 67. Foley          | 95. Kellogg        |
| 15. Big Lake         | 41. Clarissa         | 68. Franklin       | 96. Lafayette      |
| 16. Blackduck        | 42. Coleraine        | 69. Freeborn       | 97. Lake Benton    |
| 17. Blaine           | 43. Columbia Heights | 70. Freeport       | 98. Lakeville      |
| 18. Blooming Prairie | 44. Coon Rapids      | 71. Fridley        | 99. Lamberton      |
| 19. Bloomington      | 45. Corcoran         | 72. Gaylord        | 100. Lanesboro     |
| 20. Blue Earth       | 46. Cottage Grove    | 73. Gibbon         | 101. Lauderdale    |
| 21. Brainerd         | 47. Crookston        | 74. Glyndon        | 102. Le Center     |
| 22. Breezy Point     | 48. Crystal          | 75. Golden Valley  | 103. LeRoy         |
| 23. Brooklyn Center  | 49. Dayton           | 76. Goodview       | 104. Lewiston      |
| 24. Browerville      | 50. Deer River       | 77. Grand Marais   | 105. Lexington     |
| 25. Burnsville       | 51. Detroit Lakes    | 78. Grand Rapids   | 106. Litchfield    |
| 26. Byron            | 52. Dilworth         | 79. Granite Falls  | 107. Little Canada |
|                      | 53. Duluth           | 80. Greenfield     | 108. Little Falls  |
|                      |                      | 81. Halstad        | 109. Luverne       |

## Appendix D:

### List of Minnesota Cities Represented Across Data Collection Methods *listed alphabetically*

110. Lynd	136. North Oaks	163. Rogers	188. Tyler
111. Mabel	137. North St. Paul	164. Rose Creek	189. Upsala
112. Mankato	138. Northfield	165. Roseville	190. Vadnais Heights
113. Maple Grove	139. Oakdale	166. Rushford	191. Vergas
114. Maple Plain	140. Olivia	167. Saint Charles	192. Victoria
115. Maplewood	141. Orono	168. Saint Cloud	193. Wabasha
116. Marshall	142. Oronoco	169. Saint Francis	194. Walker
117. Mazeppa	143. Otsego	170. Saint Louis Park	195. Walnut Grove
118. Mendota Heights	144. Owatonna	171. Saint Mary's Point	196. Wanamingo
119. Milaca	145. Park Rapids	172. Saint Paul	197. Waseca
120. Milan	146. Pelican Rapids	173. Saint Peter	198. Watkins
121. Minneapolis	147. Perham	174. Sartell	199. West Concord
122. Minnetonka	148. Pierz	175. Savage	200. West St. Paul
123. Montevideo	149. Pine Island	176. Sebeka	201. Whalan
124. Monticello	150. Pipestone	177. Shakopee	202. White Bear Lake
125. Moorhead	151. Plainview	178. Shoreview	203. Willmar
126. Morgan	152. Plymouth	179. South St. Paul	204. Willow River
127. Mounds View	153. Preston	180. Spring Lake Park	205. Windom
128. Mountain Iron	154. Princeton	181. Spring Valley	206. Winona
129. Nerstrand	155. Prior Lake	182. Springfield	207. Wood Lake
130. New Brighton	156. Proctor	183. Staples	208. Woodbury
131. New Ulm	157. Ramsey	184. Stewartville	209. Worthington
132. Nicollet	158. Red Wing	185. Stockton	210. Wykoff
133. Nisswa	159. Redwood Falls	186. Tower	211. Zumbrota
134. North Branch	160. Renville	187. Two Harbors	
135. North Mankato	161. Richfield		
	162. Rochester		

## **Appendix E:**

# **Minnesota Public Service Educational Partnerships and Pipeline/ Pathways Programs**

*This list is not exhaustive, but represents some existing educational partnerships and pipeline/ pathways programs centering public service career readiness and civic engagement in Minnesota.*

*List appears in alphabetical order.*

Boards & Commissions Leadership Institute (Nexus Community Partners)

Capitol Pathways Program (Citizens League)

City of Duluth Workforce Development Youth Employment Services (YES) and Career Pathways Training

College and Career Fair (Morrison County)

Community Equity Program (Wilder Foundation)

Election Judge Trainee Program (Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State)

Executive Pathways Internship Program (Minnesota Department of Human Services)

Hennepin-University Partnership (Hennepin County; University of Minnesota Center for Urban and Regional Affairs [CURA])

High School Page Program (Minnesota House of Representatives)

Job Shadowing Opportunities (Olmsted County)

Law Enforcement Skills Training Program (Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College)

League of Minnesota Cities (LMC) Youth Outreach

Minnesota Rural Water Association (MRWA) Water Week Poster Contest

Minnesota Valley Action Council (MVAC) / Waseca County Internship Program

Minnesota Youth in Government (YMCA of the North Center for Youth Voice)

Model United Nations (YMCA of the North Center for Youth Voice)

Murray County Summer Internship Program (Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council)

Pathways to Policing Program (Various)

Right Track (Saint Paul Center for Youth Employment)

## **Appendix E:**

# **Minnesota Public Service Educational Partnerships and Pipeline/ Pathways Programs**

Sourcewell Internship Reimbursement Program (Cass, Crow Wing, Morrison, Todd, and Wadena Counties)

Step Up Youth Employment Program (Achieve Twin Cities)

Urban Scholars Program (City of Minneapolis)

Youth Day @ City Hall (City of Minneapolis)

Youth Day at the Capitol (Minnesota Alliance With Youth; Various)

Youth in Action (YWCA Minneapolis)

Youth Pathways to Civic Education and Careers (The Inner Hero)