

Opinion: The solution to our state's staffing crisis? A secure retirement for our public employees.

Heidi Drygas : 4-6 minutes



The Alaska State Capitol in Juneau. (Loren Holmes / ADN)

I am a lifelong Alaskan, the daughter of two proud public servants, and former Alaska commissioner of labor and workforce development. I have witnessed the state succeed when it prioritizes its duty to serve the public and drastically decline when it does not. State employees now leave for better prospects, those who stay are exhausted and overextended, and a [yearlong hiring freeze](#) adds insult to injury for state services and the Alaskans who count on them.

As executive director of the Alaska State Employees Association, I have a front-row seat to the negative impact policy failures have on public employees and the public. ASEA represents nearly 9,000 hard-working state and municipal employees. With members in every single state department, we represent the largest bargaining unit of state employees, the general government unit — Alaska's rank-and-file workers.

Our members are wildland firefighters who brave dangerous forest fires, nurses who keep Alaskans healthy, eligibility technicians who ensure Alaskans everywhere have food on the table, public works employees who maintain our infrastructure, biologists, foresters

and many more. They make living and working in Alaska possible through their public service.

Right now, our members' work — our state — is in crisis.

Currently, [nearly 16% — or 3,000 — of Alaska's public service jobs](#) are vacant. The state is losing workers faster than we can replace them, and it is costing us. We are bleeding cash on consulting contracts, hiring bonuses, overtime, and continually replacing and retraining workers for the same position.

This crisis has been building for two decades. In 2006, the state [eliminated defined-benefit pensions](#) for new public employees, and we have seen the rapid deterioration of state services since then. Our public employees and those reliant on state services are not just watching it — they experience the turmoil firsthand every single day.

A persistent, years-long [backlog in processing SNAP and Medicaid applications](#) resulted in Alaskans going hungry and without health care and \$16 million in fines to the state from the U.S. Department of Health. Massive errors in the annual [Statewide Transportation Improvement Program submission](#) caused a disruption in construction season and the loss of millions of dollars in federal funding into our struggling state economy. A [staffing crisis in the state's payroll office](#) resulted in state employees not being paid on time. The trend is alarming, with serious consequences for our local businesses and communities.

Additionally, we have heard of employees doing the work of two, three, sometimes more employees with no change in salary, benefits or title. In 2025, a statewide salary study showed that [83% of state salaries are below market](#). State employees are constantly asked to do more while receiving less. It is no surprise we are hemorrhaging talent.

This failure should not only be measured in dollars, cents and vacancy rates. It is impossible to quantify the toll that teacher turnover takes on children and their education, or the family that does not receive timely benefits because the workers delivering them face insurmountable backlogs, or the burden on Alaska's state and municipal workers who serve the public despite being burned out and exhausted after doing multiple people's work.

I believe it is possible for Alaska to be a premier place to live and work again. But public employees deserve better than this. The state must do better by its workforce. It must enact [HB 78](#), the bill that creates a modest, shared-risk pension for public employees. HB 78 is fiscally responsible. It is a long overdue, necessary step toward stabilizing our state's workforce and services again. It is what Alaska needs.

Heidi Drygas is the executive director of the 9,000-member Alaska State Employees Association/AFSCME Local 52. She previously served as commissioner of labor and workforce development for Bill Walker and was a candidate for lieutenant governor in 2022.

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