

# Underpaid and Overworked

*The Impact on  
Norfolk City Employees*



## Introduction

Norfolk's city employees work hard to serve city residents, especially during a pandemic. They ensure access to clean water, provide grab-and-go service at the library, and help struggling residents access aid programs. In "normal" times, they also provide recreational activities for Norfolk's children and staff the museums that help support the local economy. Norfolk's public employees are always "essential."

The departments of Recreation, Parks and Open Space, Cultural Facilities, Arts and Entertainment, as well as Norfolk Public Libraries saw the most employees furloughed or laid off during the pandemic. As the city emerges from the COVID-19 crisis, the ability to hire and retain good employees is critical.

Unfortunately, many city workers are underpaid and overworked, and many lack access to equipment and other resources necessary to do their jobs. Not surprisingly, Norfolk struggled to provide needed services for residents even before the pandemic because of a declining number of workers. There are significantly fewer human services aides, family services workers and benefit program specialists than in 2019.

It is worth noting that low pay in the public sector is a statewide problem. Local government employees earn 12% less than private-sector employees in similar jobs nationally, according to analysis by the Economic Policy Institute. In Virginia, where collective bargaining for public employees was prohibited until 2021, the pay differential between public and private sector workers jumps to 26%.

Financially, Norfolk weathered the COVID-19 crisis better than anticipated and the city can afford to do better by its employees. It must also bring back people furloughed and laid off during the pandemic and restore recreational facilities and other activities upon which residents depend.

The recent 3% salary increase received by most city employees is a start, but they need more than a raise or a one-time "thank you" bonus for working throughout the pandemic. Norfolk city workers need a voice on the job that gives them a say when it comes to those worksite conditions and policies that impact them the most, like health and safety protocols and adequate training.

City leadership has an opportunity to embrace long term, positive change. With collective bargaining for public employees now legal in Virginia, city workers should have the right to form a union to gain a voice on the job.

The American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) is releasing this paper to demonstrate the devastating impact of low wages and overwork on city employees and to highlight opportunities for Norfolk's city government and city

workers to lead the way in Hampton Roads. Key findings include:

- Norfolk emerged from the pandemic in better financial health than expected. Now an additional \$154 million in American Rescue Plan funding has been allocated to the city. One Wall Street ratings agency gives the city a higher bond rating than the United States government itself.
- The city has a chronic turnover problem. The workforce has contracted by 20% since 2010, even as the population has remained steady and demand for services has increased.
- Nearly 4 out of 10 (39%) of the city's regular full-time workers do not make a wage high enough to meet basic needs for a family of four with two full-time workers.
- Health insurance available to Norfolk city workers is too expensive. Out-of-pocket costs are growing faster and completely out of proportion to other expenses. They increased 12% in 2021 alone.
- Many Norfolk city workers work second and even third jobs to make ends meet. Not surprisingly, workforce turnover is a persistent problem under these conditions.
- In other cities where city employees have collective bargaining rights, workers have achieved significant improvements beyond wages and benefits.

These trends are reflected in the narratives of six city employees who helped sustain Norfolk throughout the pandemic while also working second jobs.

Dr. Ingrid Robinson works as a case manager IV/state hospital liaison for Norfolk's Community Services Board (NCSB). She also works for NCSB Emergency Services to supplement her pay. Dr. Robinson has spent the past seven years making sure her clients, the city's truly unseen and unheard, have the quality of life they deserve.

Jennifer Webb is an engineering technician. Her responsibilities include marking water mains and other hidden infrastructure prior to excavation, preventing costly damage.

Velma Owens is a veteran crew leader in Utilities. She is responsible for maintaining Norfolk's fire hydrants. She also codes the water psi in each home so that, in the event of a fire, the Fire Department knows how much water pressure is available.

Nate McNeal is a traffic maintenance technician in the Transit Department. He repairs or replaces damaged traffic signs and establishes work zone patterns by installing safety cones and barricades.

Priscilla Brown is a refuse driver in Waste Management. She is a seven-year city employee currently running the storeroom. Her job ensures Waste Management workers

have access to necessary supplies. Brown is a cancer survivor working part-time jobs to help pay medical debt.

Janal Floyd was an equipment operator before recently leaving the city. Equipment operators maintain city streets. They also install and maintain utility lines, sewer and water mains and house lines. Floyd would still like Norfolk to use American Rescue Plan money to help its employees. He believes Norfolk should provide a more formal training program for employees.

### ***The City of Norfolk can afford to do better by its employees***

Norfolk's 2021 fiscal year began in July 2020, a few months into the pandemic. The city cut its budget by \$40.5 million at the expense of services that residents depend on—closing facilities and furloughing workers. However, the national and regional economies fared better than expected during the pandemic. In fact, regional economists expect economic growth in Hampton Roads to rebound by 4.4% in 2021.<sup>1</sup> Norfolk city government also weathered the pandemic better than expected. Revised estimates in late 2020 placed revenues \$9.1 million above the initial COVID-19 impact projection.<sup>2</sup>

Under the American Rescue Plan passed by Congress and signed by President Joe Biden, Norfolk will receive \$106 million as a city, and \$47.5 million for fulfilling the functions of a county, for a total of \$154 million. The funds come with fewer spending restrictions than the CARES Act funds passed in 2020.

In addition, the Wall Street bond rating agency Standard & Poor's reaffirmed its AAA rating for Norfolk—the highest possible rating—in June 2021. S&P cited Norfolk's growing economy and expanding tax base, among other positive factors.<sup>3</sup> S&P notoriously gives the U.S. government itself an AA+ rating, meaning that S&P views the city's finances as even more stable than the federal government, which has injected money into the Norfolk city budget via the CARES Act and American Rescue Plan.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this strong financial position, Norfolk still laid off 57 previously furloughed workers weeks before Christmas. It did so while leaving untouched the city's economic downturn reserve fund, which remains at its \$5 million maximum fund balance. Most of these layoffs happened in the Recreation, Parks & Open Space department.

1) Robert M. McNab et al. "The State of the Region: Hampton Roads 2020." Old Dominion University (Dragas Center for Economic Analysis and Policy). October 2020.

2) City of Norfolk FY22 Proposed Budget Presentation. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWiLfVcdvsk&t=819s>. March 30, 2021.

3) "S&P Reaffirms Norfolk's AAA Credit Rating." [Press Release](#). June 3, 2021.

4) "UPDATE 1-S&P affirms U.S. ratings at 'AA+/A-1+' with stable outlook," Reuters, March 16, 2021.

When the FY 2022 budget was first presented to the city council in March 2021, only eight of the 26 recreation centers and six of the 13 libraries were open in a limited capacity, and there was no immediate plan to reopen more. Now, Norfolk's mayor and city council are prioritizing the reopening of recreation facilities. Closing facilities instead of using reserve funds was short-sighted since the city must now replace laid-off workers quickly. Currently, there are only 14 recreational centers and 10 libraries operating in some capacity. The library system's three computer resource centers remain closed.



***"It was a shame they cut services to some of our recreation and library staff. If city employees were able to offer ideas or solutions, we could have kept people employed and when we were ready to reopen, we could do that easily. Now we all have to go with cuts to our vital public services."***  
– **Velma Owens, Utilities crew leader**

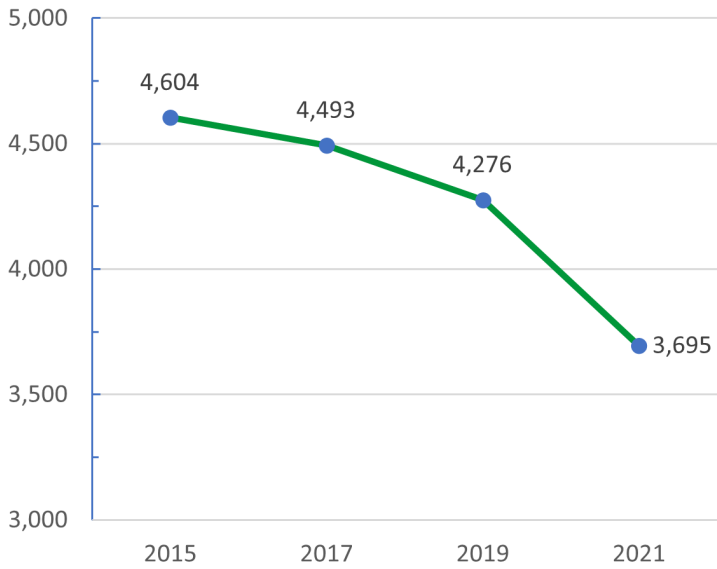
The pandemic furloughs and layoffs exacerbate a chronic decline in the number of workers providing services to city residents. The number of employees in Norfolk's city workforce fell more than 21% since 2013.<sup>5</sup> Between 2015 and 2019, immediately preceding the pandemic, the workforce dropped 7.2% (more than 320 employees) according to city data. Full-time permanent employees alone declined 5% in that time. Between 2015 and 2021, Norfolk lost over 900 full-time, part-time, and temporary employees.

A recent study by the Economic Policy Institute notes that between 2015-2019, local government employees made on average 12.1% less weekly than private-sector workers in similar jobs. In Virginia, where public sector workers had no collective bargaining rights until 2021, the wage gap is even more stark—local government employees make 26.1% less than similar workers employed in the private sector.<sup>6</sup>

5) Norfolk Employee Wage Data, 2010-2021. Obtained via Freedom of Information Act request submitted April 4, 2021. Numbers exclude constitutional, judicial and special project employees.

6) Monique Morrissey. "Unions can reduce the public-sector pay gap: Collective bargaining rights and local government workers." (Data include benefits and controls for race, education, age, ethnicity, gender, and marital status.) [Economic Policy Institute](#). June 17, 2021.

### Total Number of Employees (excluding Constitutional, Executive, Judicial, and Special Project Employees), 2015-2021



Meanwhile, the city’s population remained steady, growing 1.3% over the past decade.<sup>7</sup> So, the city’s reduced workforce continues to provide services to the same number of people.

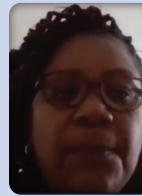
Numbers drop more dramatically among the city’s permanent part-time workers. Since 2015, the city has lost 70% of its part-time workforce.<sup>8</sup> Although part time, these jobs are vital to the services residents rely on. They include recreation specialists in Recreation, Parks & Open Space, library associates, customer service representatives, and licensed practical nurses. The COVID-19 pandemic hit these workers particularly hard.

Recreation, Parks & Open Space, Libraries, General Services, and Cultural Facilities saw the most precipitous loss of employees due to the pandemic. Both Recreation and Cultural Facilities were purportedly understaffed prior to the public health crisis, as were Human Services and Utilities. Currently, there are 36% fewer human services aides than in 2019, 13% fewer family services workers and 11% fewer benefit program specialists.

Human services aides support Norfolk residents by helping them access rent assistance, bus passes, clothing, shelter and emergency food. Family services workers safeguard the physical and emotional well-being of Norfolk’s most vulnerable residents, including children and older adults.

These jobs are even more critical during the pandemic. Dr. Ingrid Robinson is a case manager IV/hospital state liaison for Norfolk’s Community Services Board (NCSB). She also works as a screener for NCSB Emergency Services to supplement her pay. Dr. Robinson has spent the past seven years making sure patients discharged back into the community receive the appropriate placement (e.g., nursing home or supportive housing) and care so they can thrive.

But she is burdened by both turnover among colleagues and chronic understaffing. She wants a voice on the job in part because it would help her clients the most.



*“As a hospital liaison, I am charged with making sure once a patient leaves the hospital they are placed in safe facilities and receive the quality of care they need. There’s a real shortage of care managers in the NCSB. Many of them choose to work someplace where the pay is higher. It’s devastating to the individual, their family, and loved ones when they can’t get the care they deserve. The city of Norfolk needs to do better for its employees and residents.”*  
**– Dr. Ingrid Robinson, case manager IV/state hospital liaison**

Understaffing negatively impacts residents who need ongoing case management and skill building because employees cannot always spend enough time with each client. The pandemic has only intensified the problem.

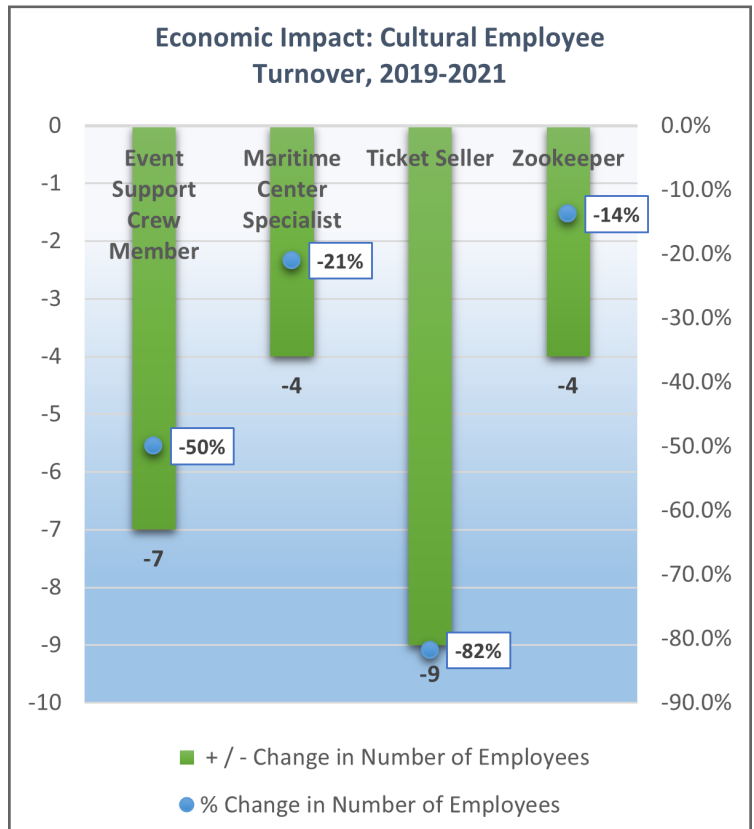
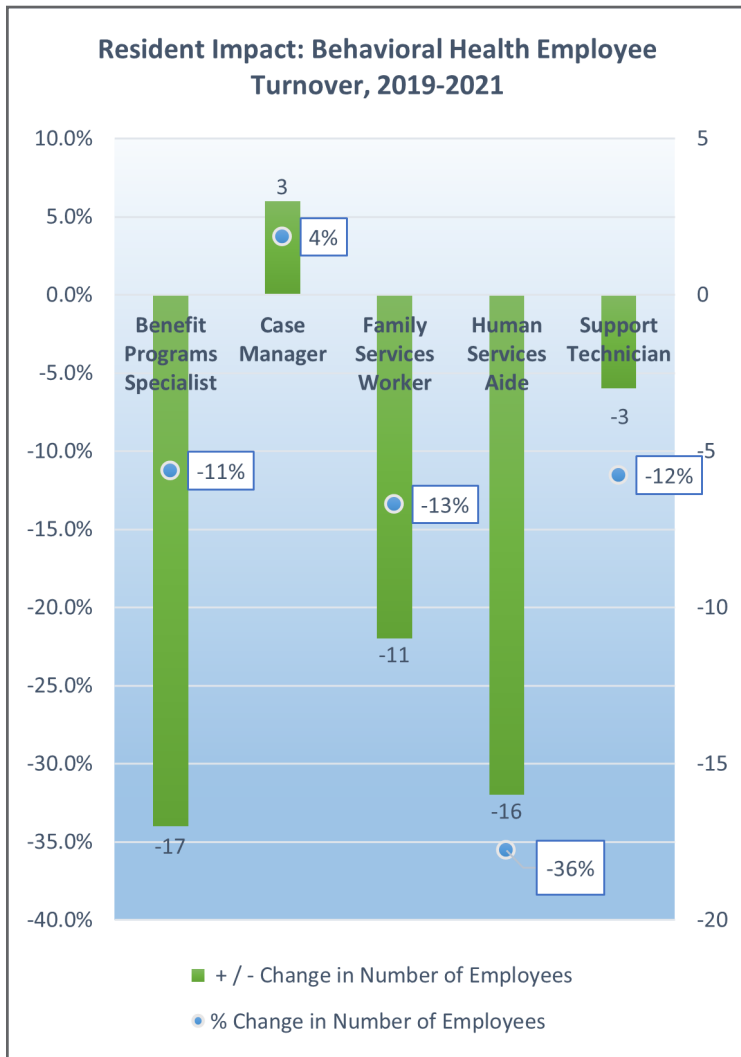
Eastern Virginia Medical School and Sentara’s Healthcare Analytics and Delivery Science Institute recently collaborated on a digital health project, the preliminary results of which indicated that three times as many Virginians are experiencing serious mental health issues now than before the pandemic.<sup>9</sup> The psychological impact of lockdown restrictions, job losses and isolation also led to an increase in substance abuse-related hospitalizations, according to data released by the Virginia Hospital and Healthcare Association (VHHA) in April 2021. In 2020, 3.6% more Virginians were admitted into hospitals for alcohol and drug-related illnesses than in 2019.<sup>10</sup>

7) University of Virginia Weldon Cooper Center, Demographics Research Group. (2020). Virginia Population Estimates. Retrieved from <https://demographics.coopercenter.org/virginia-population-estimates>.

8) Norfolk Employee Wage Data, 2010-2021. Obtained via Freedom of Information Act request submitted April 4, 2021. Numbers exclude constitutional, judicial and special project employees.

9) Elisha Sauers. “3 times as many Virginians have serious mental health issues than before coronavirus, EVMS study indicates.” *The Virginian Pilot*. April 27, 2021.

10) Virginia Hospital and Healthcare Association. “COVID Hospitalization and ED Visit Trends.” VHHA Data Analytics. April 2021.



Understaffing of the city’s cultural facilities has implications for Norfolk’s overall economic health. Norfolk and the Hampton Roads region were slow to recover from the Great Recession of 2008, but Norfolk was showing positive economic growth before the pandemic hit.<sup>11</sup> Museums, the Zoological Park and Nauticus are important tourist destinations that generate money for Norfolk and boost the city’s hotel and restaurant industries. Travel and tourism support about 8,000 private and public sector jobs in Norfolk.<sup>12</sup>

Between 2012 and 2019, the number of Cultural Facilities employees running Norfolk’s local and visitor attractions fell 26%.<sup>13</sup> Between 2019 and 2021, the department lost more than 40 additional employees. Although smaller than other departments, continued understaffing of Cultural Facilities may undermine the city’s ongoing economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

11) Robert M. McNab et al. “The State of the Region: Hampton Roads 2020.” Old Dominion University (Dragas Center for Economic Analysis and Policy). October 2020.

12) Visit Norfolk. <https://www.visitnorfolk.com/about-us/tourism-matters/>. Accessed June 2021.

13) Norfolk Employee Wage Data, 2010-2021. Obtained via Freedom of Information Act request submitted April 4, 2021. Numbers exclude constitutional, judicial and special project employees.

Having a voice on the job means Norfolk workers can be more proactive in raising and resolving the workplace conditions that result in high turnover. Although those concerns are not limited to wages and benefits, low pay is a problem for too many city workers.

### ***Low wages and salaries mean Norfolk City employees work multiple jobs to get by***

Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology produced a living wage calculator demonstrating the income necessary for families to make ends meet in various cities around the country, including Norfolk. The MIT researchers use geographically specific information about a family’s minimum spending needs for food, child care, health insurance, housing, transportation, and other basic needs.

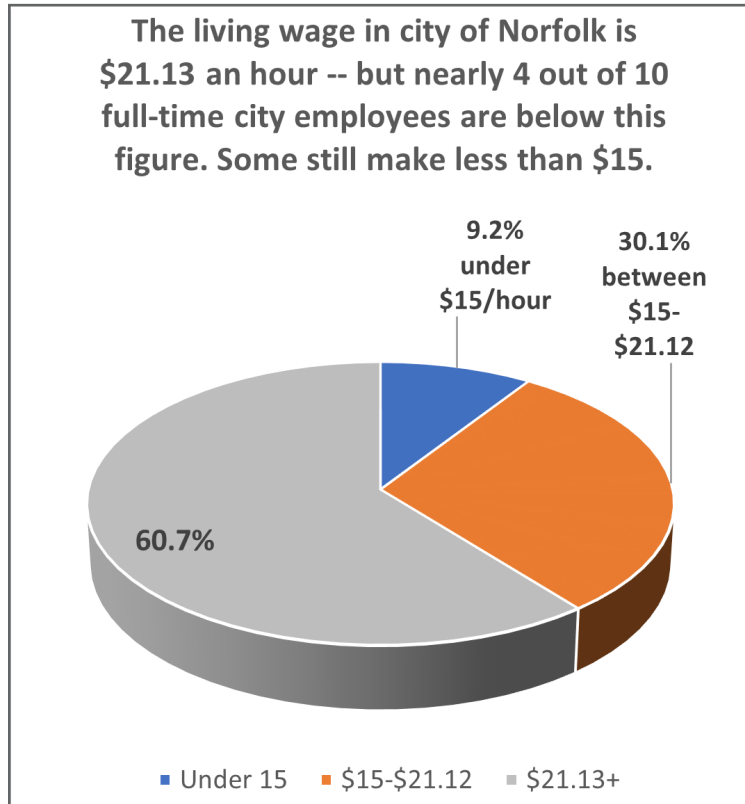
The “family budget” designed by these MIT researchers is not extravagant. For example, it assumes that families buy the lowest-cost food and always prepare meals at home; that their budgets for clothing and personal care items are modest; and that they use the cheapest possible cell phone and broadband plans.<sup>14</sup>

Using this bare-bones family budget, the MIT calculator estimates that in Norfolk as of this year, a family of four with two adults working full time would need for both parents to be making at least \$21.13 per hour to make

14) The technical guide for the MIT living wage calculator can be found at <https://livingwage.mit.edu/resources/Living-Wage-Users-Guide-Technical-Documentation-2021-05-21.pdf>.

ends meet.<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that a single parent could be earning that \$21.13 hourly wage and still not be able to make ends meet in the city, but it is reasonable to expect that the city’s government should at least pay its own employees enough so that a family with two working parents can live a life of dignity.

Instead, among the city’s own full-time workforce, nearly four out of 10 (39%) are paid less than the modest living wage figure of \$21.13 per hour. Among these workers, a further 9% are actually making less than \$15 an hour.



Most city workers have received a 3% wage increase beginning with FY 2022 (July 2021), after having received no raise at all in 2020. But with inflation for the past year nearly reaching 5% by the government’s most recent estimates, the basic economic situation of the city’s workforce has not improved and may even have worsened.<sup>16</sup>

Velma Owens is the first crew leader in her department. She loves serving the community and worked throughout the pandemic. But she must also pay her bills. To do that, she works a second job for 15 to 32 hours a week as a customer service representative—often at the expense of sleep.

15) Estimates at <https://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/51710>.  
 16) Bureau of Labor Statistics Inflation Calculator. [https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm). (Accessed May 2021). It shows a 5% increase in the Consumer Price Index from May 2020 through May 2021. Statisticians point out that it is difficult to estimate the real impact of inflation over the past year, given that the goods and services people typically buy underwent a drastic change during the pandemic. But it is safe to conclude that a 3% raise for the year is not a raise in real terms; if anything, it may effectively amount to a pay cut.

Owens oversees a team responsible for maintaining the city’s fire hydrants. They work hard in all types of weather. As essential workers, they worked outside their homes during the pandemic. After five years with the city, the 3% increase only bumps her hourly wage up to \$17.84.

Traffic Maintenance Technician Nate McNeal has worked for Norfolk the past five years. He also works two jobs. He works 15-hour days five days a week to make ends meet while sacrificing time with his young daughter. To make matters worse, his 2020 merit increase was postponed due to the pandemic, even though he worked through the duration—including weekends. When he finally received it in March 2021, it did not include back pay. The 3% increase will raise his hourly wage to \$15.69 per hour—still well below the \$21.13 per hour living wage. McNeal still cannot support his family without his second job.

If he could advance in his job with the city, McNeal would love it to become his career. Norfolk offers computer classes to employees, but not training for credentials like his commercial driver’s license. Like other city employees, McNeal may have to leave.

Janal Floyd did leave very recently. In his eight years with the city, he worked his way up from refuse collector to equipment operator III in the Streets & Bridges department—helped by the fact that he earned his commercial driver’s license at his own expense.

Floyd took a financial management class and worked between 12 and 16 hours a week at a second job to save money so his child could attend a good day care center. Even with occasional overtime, his entire city check paid only for rent and transportation. He could not save the 10%-15% necessary for a healthy family budget. He worked so much he missed seeing his son learning to ride a bike.

Because even after eight years with the city he would still only make \$16.31/hour with the 3% increase, he felt he could better support his family by working for himself.



***“My family and I cannot afford for me to stay employed with the city of Norfolk. As a native daughter, my wife was so proud that I worked for the city. But needing to take several jobs outside of my full-time work with the city left no time for me to be the kind of father my three young children deserve. We shouldn’t have to choose between caring for our families and making ends meet.”***  
**– Janal Floyd, former Norfolk city employee**

Norfolk’s salary structure is not set up to adequately reward and retain city employees in any job classification, or any pay grade, eligible for collective bargaining. As

a “white collar” employee with a Ph.D., Dr. Robinson performs two critical jobs for Norfolk residents. Yet she makes just over \$50,000 annually (including the 3% increase). According to the Economic Policy Institute, public sector workers with bachelor’s degrees, let alone Ph.D.s, make 37% less in Virginia than private sector workers with similar jobs.<sup>17</sup>

Norfolk employees across pay grades are also contending with another economic burden: surging health care costs.

### **City workers burdened by out-of-control health care costs**

Per-person spending on medical care in Norfolk and the Hampton Roads region is 17% higher than the national median, according to the Health Care Cost Institute.<sup>18</sup> In part, this is because the price of health care services, and the need for those services, is higher. In 2019, 14.5% of working Norfolk residents had no health insurance. Among the unemployed, the number jumped to 38%.<sup>19</sup>

This particularly affects Norfolk city employees, for whom health insurance costs are increasing dramatically out of proportion to their other expenses. They pay more for health care services, and their monthly medical premiums jumped 12% in 2021.<sup>20</sup>

To understand how this affects workers, consider the example of Jennifer Webb. Webb is a seven-year employee of the city, working as an engineering technician for Norfolk’s Utilities department. Her job duties include marking water mains and other hidden infrastructure prior to excavation. She prevents potentially costly damage to commercial and municipal buildings, as well as residential homes.

Webb is a single working mother paying tuition for a child in college while also earning her bachelor’s at Old Dominion University. To make ends meet, she runs two in-house businesses and works a second job at Applebee’s. Still, she cannot afford the health insurance premiums for any of the health plans offered by the city. She makes so little money working for Norfolk that she qualifies for Medicaid. Her children have asthma, and if not for Medicaid she would not be able to pay for their prescriptions.

The 3% raise brings her pay to \$39,226 in 2022. While helpful, it is not enough to compensate for the lack of

increase in 2021 and likely not enough to keep up with the increase in the cost of living. It is certainly not enough to sustain a family.<sup>21</sup>



*“I have worked for the city of Norfolk for over seven years and still make only a few dollars more than when I started. I am a single mother and cannot afford to take care of my family on my current city income alone. I can’t even afford the city’s insurance. I have no choice but to use services like food pantries, rec center scholarships and discounted health care and prescriptions while working multiple jobs just to make ends meet. The city of Norfolk must do better for its employees.”*

**– Jennifer Webb, engineering technician**

Velma Owens is also paying tuition for a child in college. She can participate in a point-of-service plan through the city. The premium co-share is a seemingly reasonable \$68 per month in 2021. However, the 12% premium hike in 2021 coincided with only a .4% pay increase—meaning the premium co-share increase consumed 63% of Owens’s \$11.46 per month raise.

The 3% wage increase helps offset the cost of health insurance somewhat, but the percentage of her monthly income consumed by health costs is only reduced by .1%.

And that does not include other out-of-pocket costs. Owens must pay a \$1,000 deductible before her health insurance plan coverage even begins paying out. Additionally, if Owens should become sick with a major illness, her out-of-pocket maximum is \$4,500—12% of her annual gross salary. Costs add up quickly in the dysfunctional U.S. health care system.

It is therefore not surprising that Velma Owens supplements her income with a second job. Her last vacation was 12 years ago.

17) Monique Morrissey. “Unions can reduce the public-sector pay gap: Collective bargaining rights and local government workers.” [Economic Policy Institute](#). June 17, 2021.

18) “Understanding Health Care Spending in Different Markets Around the Country: Virginia Beach-Newport News-Norfolk, VA MSA.” [Healthcare Cost Institute](#). Updated June 2020.

19) U.S. Census. *2019 American Community Survey (5-year ACS estimates)*.

20) Analysis of OptimaHealth plans offered by the City of Norfolk between 2018 and 2020.

21) Assuming 2,088 annual hours of work in 2022.

## Workers with a voice at work win better pay and working conditions in peer cities: Cincinnati, Pittsburgh and Jacksonville

Workers who can form unions and gain a voice on the job are able to improve conditions for themselves and for the people they serve. In Norfolk's peer cities, the more than 1.4 million members of AFSCME have won improvements in health and safety, staffing and work rules, health insurance, pensions, and more.

In Cincinnati, Ohio, local government workers have layoff and recall rights. If the city is in financial trouble, workers will be transferred to a different unit first. In the event of layoffs, displaced employees have first right of return. The city collective bargaining agreement also provides for shift differential pay for employees working night or rotating shifts.

Norfolk compares favorably to Cincinnati in some professional job titles. But workers in representative technical, administrative and trades jobs are paid significantly less in Norfolk.

Average 2020 Pay for Unionized City Workers in Cincinnati v. Average 2020 Pay for City Workers in Norfolk <sup>22</sup>				
Job Title	Norfolk Average Salary	Cincinnati Average Salary	Union Difference (\$)	Union Difference (%)
Public Safety Telecomm	\$37,967	\$52,245	\$14,278	38%
Benefit Programs Specialist	\$41,832	\$42,683	\$851	2%
Accounting Technician	\$31,879	\$43,784	\$11,905	37%
Refuse Collector	\$31,761	\$52,244	\$20,483	64%
Engineering Technician	\$42,401	\$63,205	\$20,804	49%

A union contract in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a city only slightly larger than Norfolk, means a "blue collar" equipment operator can earn on average 37% more annually while a maintenance worker can earn 43% more on average. Average wages for administrative positions such as accounting technicians also fare better.

22) Average salaries for Cincinnati are calculated based on salary schedule wage scales per the city's collective bargaining contracts. The following are equivalent Cincinnati job titles: Emergency 911 Operator; Casework Associate; and Sanitation Specialist.

Average 2020 Pay for Unionized City Workers in Pittsburgh v. Average 2020 Pay for City Workers in Norfolk <sup>23</sup>				
Job Title	Norfolk Average Salary	Pittsburgh Average Salary	Union Difference (\$)	Union Difference (%)
Equipment Operator	\$36,497	\$50,170	\$13,673	37%
Public Safety Telecomm	\$37,967	\$35,812	-\$2,155	-6%
Code Specialist	\$40,834	\$49,841	\$9,007	22%
Maintenance Worker	\$27,852	\$39,811	\$11,959	43%
Recreation Specialist	\$41,253	\$42,089	\$836	2%
Accounting Technician	\$31,879	\$36,909	\$5,030	16%

We can also look at Jacksonville, Florida, a city considered an economic peer by regional economists. The city employees there have a union voice. Jacksonville city employees doing the same work as workers in Norfolk have higher wages in double-digit percentages. The following table shows a representative group of job titles.

Average 2020 Pay for Unionized City Workers in Jacksonville v. Average 2020 Pay for City Workers in Norfolk <sup>24</sup>				
Job Title	Norfolk Average Salary	Jacksonville Average Salary	Union Difference (\$)	Union Difference (%)
Equipment Operator	\$36,497	\$43,885	\$7,387	20%
Public Safety Telecomm	\$37,967	\$40,378	\$2,412	6%
Code Specialist	\$40,834	\$48,851	\$8,017	20%
Library Assistant	\$31,383	\$39,152	\$7,770	25%
Maintenance Worker	\$27,852	\$35,139	\$7,287	26%
Recreation Specialist	\$41,253	\$41,939	\$685	2%
Benefit Programs Specialist	\$41,832	\$48,653	\$6,821	16%

Even this underestimates how much better Jacksonville city employees are paid. Although larger than Norfolk in population, Jacksonville has a slightly lower cost of living.

23) Average salaries for Pittsburgh are calculated based on salary schedule wage scales per the city's collective bargaining contracts. The following are equivalent Pittsburgh job titles: Heavy Equipment Operator; Radio Dispatcher; Code Specialist; Recreation Coordinator; Laborer and Accounting Technician.

24) Average salaries for Jacksonville are calculated based on salary schedule wage scales per the city's collective bargaining contracts. The following are equivalent Jacksonville job titles: Social Services Specialist; Heavy Equipment Operator; Recreation Activities Coordinator; Police Emergency Communication Officer; and Code Compliance Officer. Job descriptions can be found here <https://is.gd/7tcBvb>.



A Jacksonville city employee's dollar goes further than a Norfolk employee's dollar. The hypothetical family of four with two full-time wage-earners would need both parents making at least \$21.13 an hour to meet basic needs in Norfolk, but \$20.13 an hour in Jacksonville.<sup>25</sup>

City workers benefiting from union contracts in Jacksonville also enjoy cheaper health insurance. An individual Jacksonville employee enrolled in the city's point-of-service plan (with a \$750 deductible) pays \$33.96 per month—\$34 less than Velma Owens pays for her POS plan (with a \$1,000 deductible) in Norfolk.<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, in Jacksonville and cities throughout the U.S., AFSCME contracts ensure public employees working outside of their job classification can have their duties reviewed and their compensation adjusted. Priscilla Brown, a refuse driver for the Waste Management department in Norfolk, no longer drives a refuse truck. She makes \$18.42 per hour. She runs a storeroom for the department, yet her job classification and salary remain that of a refuse driver.

Worse, she frequently performs work she is no longer credentialed to do when residents drop off hazardous waste despite the city ending its household recycling program. In Jacksonville, employees participate in workplace safety committees and provide input into matters like adequate personal protective equipment and safety training.<sup>27</sup>

Access to training and educational assistance necessary for career advancement is perhaps the most important employee right stipulated by public sector union contracts in Jacksonville, Pittsburgh and elsewhere. Too many Norfolk employees live from paycheck to paycheck, with no realistic prospect for advancement. Offering tuition expense reimbursement and skills training benefits both the city of Jacksonville and its employees. It helps the city attract and retain employees, and it helps employees move up the career ladder.

## Conclusion

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High employee turnover occurs when employers do not meet the needs of their employees, according to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). Low pay, lack of career advancement, being overworked and feeling undervalued are common factors driving turnover.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, this is precisely what many Norfolk city workers experience every day. To them,

financial security and a measure of control over their livelihood seem completely out of reach.

Fortunately, Norfolk's city government is in a great position to make the city a place everyone wants to work. As it emerges from the pandemic, Norfolk can look forward to a growing economy, healthy finances and an influx of American Rescue Plan money. These funds can be used to make up for revenue lost during the pandemic, which will help the city's economic recovery. Moreover, the American Rescue Plan encourages local governments to reward public sector workers for their service to residents throughout the pandemic.

Norfolk can also forge a new path in Hampton Roads by passing an ordinance making their city employees the first to secure a voice on the job by forming their union. Collective bargaining would give Norfolk employees a say in their working conditions—that measure of control in their livelihoods they currently lack. It would also narrow the pay gap between local government and private sector workers.

Priscilla Brown is a cancer survivor and is buried under a mountain of medical debt. She should be spending time with her grandchildren. Instead, she works part-time jobs at places like Instacart to make ends meet. With a union contract, Brown may just obtain a job title and compensation commensurate with her actual job duties. This may not solve every struggle for Brown, but it would certainly solve a big one.

25) [MIT Living Wage Calculation for Jacksonville, Florida.](#)

26) City of Jacksonville Health Insurance Rates for Full-Time Employees. Effective January 1, 2021.

27) Agreement between the City of Jacksonville and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, Florida Council 79. October 1, 2017–September 30, 2020.

28) Mark Tarallo. "How to Reduce Employee Turnover Through Robust Retention Strategies." SHRM. September 17, 2018.