

High demands, long hours and low wages are taking their toll on our New Mexico public employees, especially those working in health, child protective services and correctional facilities. The well-being and safety of our friends, neighbors and fellow New Mexicans, as well as the well-being of those they serve throughout the state, are in jeopardy, and we must heed their cries for help.

The New Mexico Behavioral Health Institute at Las Vegas is the only state-owned and -operated psychiatric hospital in New Mexico. Employees care for more than 300 New Mexico residents with a variety of needs, including adult and adolescent psychiatric care; life-long term care; competency evaluations and treatment for patients who have allegedly committed a felony; and outpatient restorative services. However, position vacancy rates are at nearly 30%, leaving the facility severely understaffed, and turnover is high. To maintain the required staff levels, employees can be mandated to work up to four 16-hour shifts in a week. Many employees work 72 hours a week. Their families suffer, as working parents are present for only eight hours of the day, in which time they must eat, sleep and perform familial duties. Workers run the risk of burnout, emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, all of which can decrease the level of care a worker can provide to a client and reduce productivity in the workforce.

One such employee described a situation in which he ended his third 16-hour shift of the week exhausted, but he still needed to make the drive home. On the way home, he crashed his car and injured himself. Personal and public safety issues aside, there are mountains of research suggesting that an exhausted employee is not an effective employee.

Many other agencies struggle with similar problems. While the national annual caseload average for child protective services investigators is 69, Children, Youth and Families Department investigators handle an average of 89 investigations per worker per year — almost 30% higher than the national average. The pressure from increased caseloads leads to staff burnout and high turnover rates, both of which negatively affect the children and families in a caseworker's care.

Correctional, probation and parole officers have lower turnover rates, thanks in part to a \$7 million special appropriation from the 2015 legislative session. However, our officers still struggle with caseload levels higher than targeted levels, with an average of 99 cases per probation and parole officer in New Mexico.

The Legislative Finance Committee recently heard testimony from representatives of the judicial branch regarding salaries, retention and turnover issues. They correctly pointed out the

significantly increased costs associated with hiring and training new employees. The judicial branch representatives also noted that many public employees simply choose to work elsewhere for similar, or even increased, pay and much less risk of burnout.

Statewide, less than 70% of new hires complete their probationary period, and vacant positions take more than two months to fill. Our public employees earn lower average wages than workers in surrounding western states, and policymakers in both the legislative and executive branches have yet to develop a plan to raise compensation for public employees. As a member of both the Legislative Finance Committee and the Senate Finance Committee, I fully understand just how difficult it is to adequately fund all of the needs of state government. Difficult choices are part of the job, and each year we walk away from the legislative session knowing that there are unmet needs in all areas of state government. This year will be no different.

It seems easy enough to suggest that we simply increase spending on public employees, but doing so means taking money away from some other state government function. The truth is that there is not, and likely will never be, enough money to go around. Period. The solution, then, lies in a careful examination of how we approach public employee compensation. We should look closely at our priorities, measure jobs and salaries with their responsibilities, develop creative ways of rewarding experience and loyalty and insist on effective management.

That said, it is past time to look at reducing the vacancy rates in state government that are beginning to tax remaining employees to the breaking point. To be fair, I know of many state government agencies that really are trying to address their vacancy issues through job fairs and similar employment drives. Hiring good people is certainly a big piece of the puzzle. Keeping them long enough to develop much-needed experience is another critical piece.

Looking forward even further, we must be prepared to handle the imminent retirement of long-time employees, and the resulting drain in institutional knowledge, by recruiting quality and skilled personnel and learning to recognize and capitalize on their potential. We must also be prepared to retain those employees who show promise. Stories of solid employees leaving the public sector for competitive pay and much less stress are becoming far too common.

While we are indeed making progress on this front, there is still much work to be done, and we need to pick up the pace. I believe that public employees, particularly those who tirelessly

serve some of our state's most critical needs, deserve better. For our own health and safety, as well as the health and safety of our friends and neighbors, we must make long-term changes to our public employee compensation system that will ensure New Mexico's well-being in the future.

- 3 -