

# Modernizing Retention Strategies for State Government



Celebrating Alabama's Progress  
Certified Public Manager® Program  
CPM Solutions Alabama 2024



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*The research, findings, and recommendations presented in this white paper do not represent the views of any agency or organization, but rather the collective educational research and analysis from a diverse group of participants in the Certified Public Manager® Training Program.*

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# INTRODUCTION

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## GOVERNOR'S STUDY GROUP REPORT

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In January 2023, Governor Kay Ivey established the *Governor's Study Group on Efficiency in State Government* as part of Executive Order 727 ([www.governor.alabama.gov](http://www.governor.alabama.gov), 2023). This group was tasked with examining ways to increase recruitment and retention among state employees. Current state policies were reviewed and compared to those utilized by private sector entities to determine areas in need of improvement. The Study Group made several recommendations including paid parental leave, salary increases, tuition reimbursement, and adjustments to the State's retirement plan (Boozer et al., 2023). While all recommendations would contribute to increasing the State's retention rate, most proposed ideas would require some type of legislation in order to move forward. The primary goal of this project is to enhance the Study Group's research findings by investigating effective strategies that managers in the public sector can adopt to improve employee retention and strengthen workplace culture.



## PROJECT STATEMENT AND TASKS

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The Modernizing Retention Strategies for State Government team will highlight current policies, procedures, and management practices that have proven effective in retaining state employees, and offer research-based, modernized recommendations that supervisors can implement within their agency departments to better retain employees. This will be accomplished by:

- 1) Assessing the current challenges that state agencies are facing in retaining employees.
- 2) Researching existing management practices and policies in Alabama that are contributing to the retention of employees.
- 3) Researching best management practices and policies from other states that are designed to retain employees.
- 4) Offering recommendations that public sector managers can implement to strengthen retention of different age groups.

We will recommend strategies that can be easily put into place by all state agencies, most with the resources that are already available. The goal is to find the most efficient and effective ways to

encourage retention among state government while better serving the citizens of the State of Alabama.

## **CURRENT CHALLENGES WITH RETENTION**

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### **OVERALL RETENTION PROBLEM**

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Over the past several years, the United States has faced a significant challenge with retaining employees. The issue is not isolated to specific industries, regions, or companies but is a nationwide concern affecting organizations of all sizes. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact time that the retention issue began, there are many factors that have likely contributed to the growing problem. High employee turnover can raise significant concerns for companies, so it is important for them to understand the underlying causes so that they are better prepared to mitigate the problem and retain employees for the long-term.

The average U.S. turnover rate is almost 50%, with over 50 million people quitting their jobs in 2022 (Jadah, T., 2023). Out of these 50 million people leaving their jobs, 70% of these separations were voluntary, meaning these employees chose to quit on their own. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, workers stay with a particular company for no longer than 4.1 years (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). This means that turnover is constant, and employers are constantly having to re-hire and train new employees. This continuous cycle of hiring and training can be time-consuming and very expensive for companies. High employee turnover can also lead to decreased team morale and productivity and disrupt the company's overall workflow. Turnover also results in a loss of knowledge, experience, and talent among staff which affects the overall performance and success of the organization.

Several factors have contributed to the nation's employee retention problem. Job dissatisfaction is a key factor influenced by the increasing importance of work-life balance among employees today (Hetler, A., 2023). Many individuals find it challenging to achieve a healthy balance between their professional responsibilities and personal lives. As a result, excessive workloads often result in burnout and dissatisfaction, prompting employees to seek opportunities elsewhere that offer greater flexibility and remote work options.

Employees also become dissatisfied with their jobs when their career development opportunities are limited. Millennials and Gen Z workers deeply value career growth and will move on to another

company if their current role or organization does not offer opportunities for advancement. The new generation of workers wants to learn new skills, have adequate training, professional development, and see a potential for growth in their careers. They also want purpose-driven work that has meaning and aligns with their values. This leads younger employees to seek out employment with organizations that make an impact on society (Bones, A., 2023).

Another vital factor affecting employee retention is company culture and management. Poor leadership, lack of support, and ineffective communication from supervisors can create a toxic work environment (Griffin, T., 2024). Employees want to feel supported, valued, and respected and are more likely to leave companies that cannot provide these things. Companies without strong leadership will see a significant increase in employee turnover. Unpleasant managers who micromanage and are unsupportive cause employees to feel frustrated and unappreciated. Open communication, employee recognition, a feeling of belonging, overall happiness, and opportunities for growth are all things leading employees to seek new opportunities elsewhere (Griffin, T., 2024). The common saying “people don’t quit companies, they quit managers” has never been truer than it is now. Frequent turnover among staff and leadership can also leave employees feeling dissatisfied and insecure about their situation. This instability and uncertainty will drive employees away in search of a more stable environment.

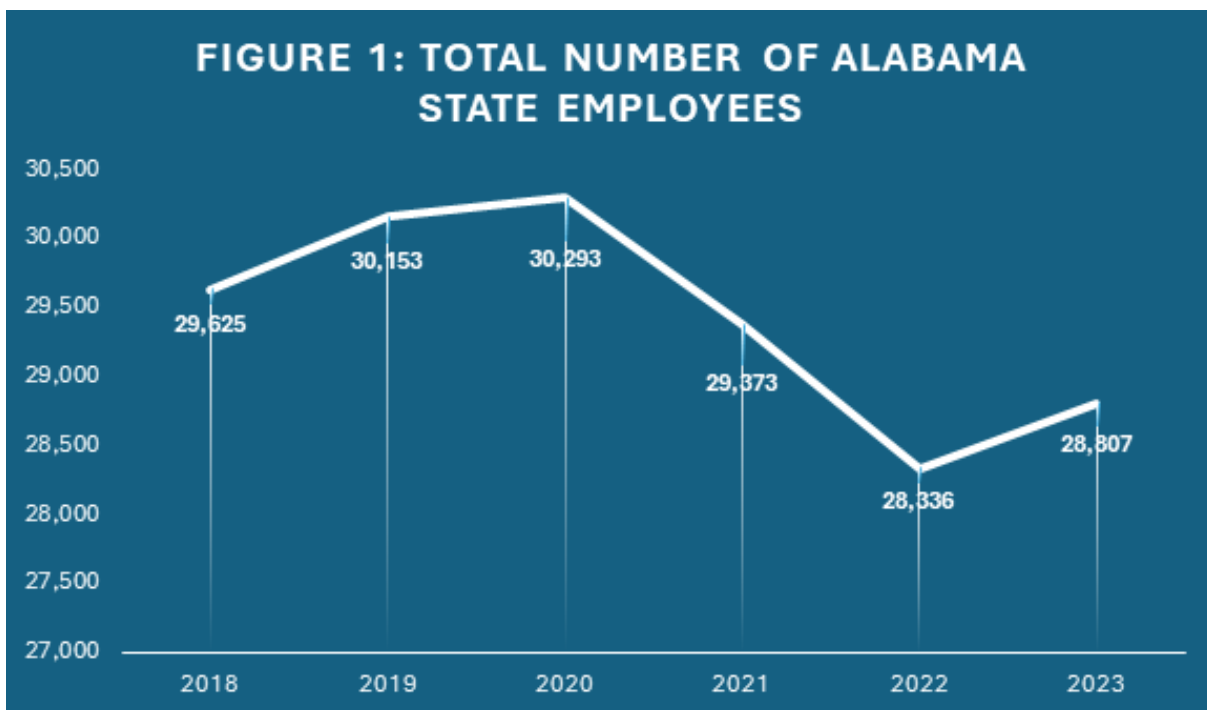
Employee turnover is a major hurdle for all industries right now for a variety of reasons. Good candidates expect opportunities for career advancement and fulfillment in their work; without these, retention becomes difficult. Employees seek roles where they feel valued, secure, and fairly compensated. If current positions do not meet these criteria, they are inclined to seek alternative opportunities.

## **STATE RETENTION PROBLEM**

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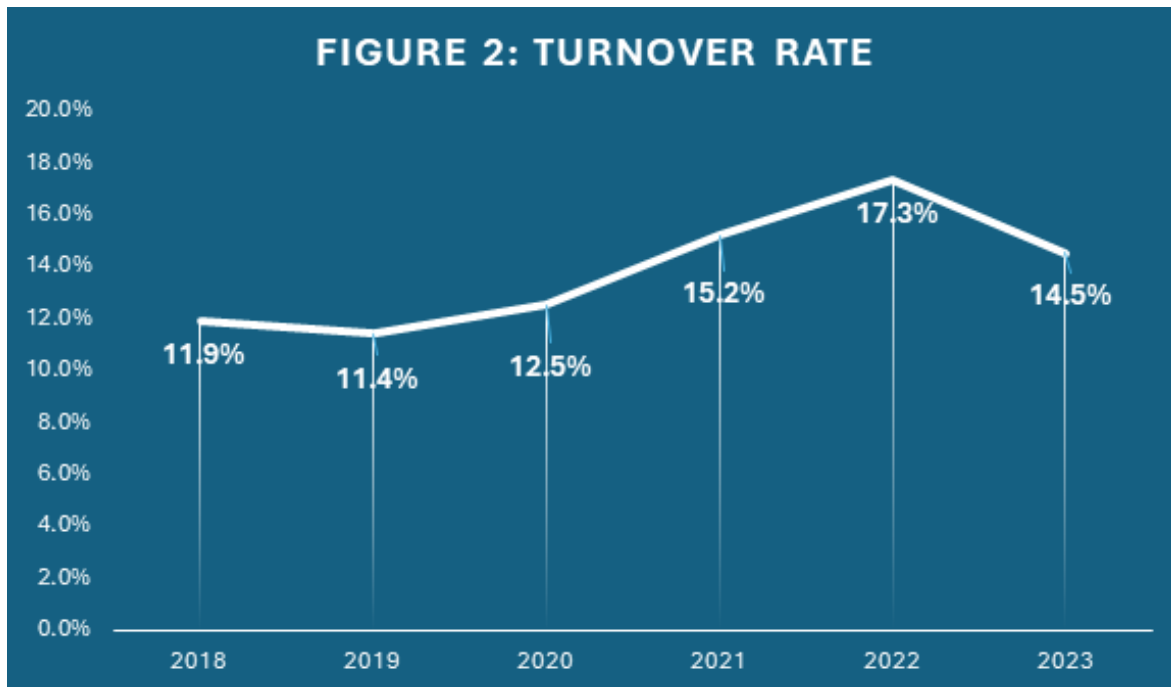
For the State of Alabama to promote more efficiency among the more than 200 agencies that serve the people of Alabama, it is necessary to provide a strong and consistent state employee workforce. State employees must be adept to learning, have a high level of competence, and be committed to serve the citizens of the State in order to carry out the State’s mission with the least waste of resources. It is necessary for the State to modernize recruitment and retention strategies to attract this type of employee and mitigate the impact on efficiency that turnover has in these positions.

It is essential to understand the extent of retention and turnover issues among public sector employees in Alabama and the challenges state agencies are facing in retaining those employees. To do this, an evaluation of the current status and trends of Alabama’s public sector employment is necessary. According to the State of Alabama Personnel Department (SPD) 2023 Annual Report (AL State Personnel, 2023), 28,807 individuals held either a classified, unclassified, exempt or unskilled position with the State of Alabama at fiscal year-end 2023. As visualized in Figure 1, this is a 1.7% increase from 2022, but remains almost 5.0% lower than state employment numbers from 2020 (AL State Personnel, 2023).



The total separations from state employment (turnover rate), provided in Figure 2, is inversely proportional to the number of Alabama State Employees (AL State Personnel, 2023). This comparison further solidifies the statement in the Final Report of the Governor’s Study Group on Efficiency in State Government that, “...an increased number of employees are leaving the workforce as a whole, and while the number of open positions continues to grow, the number of candidates seeking to fill those positions continues to decrease.” (Boozer et al., 2023)

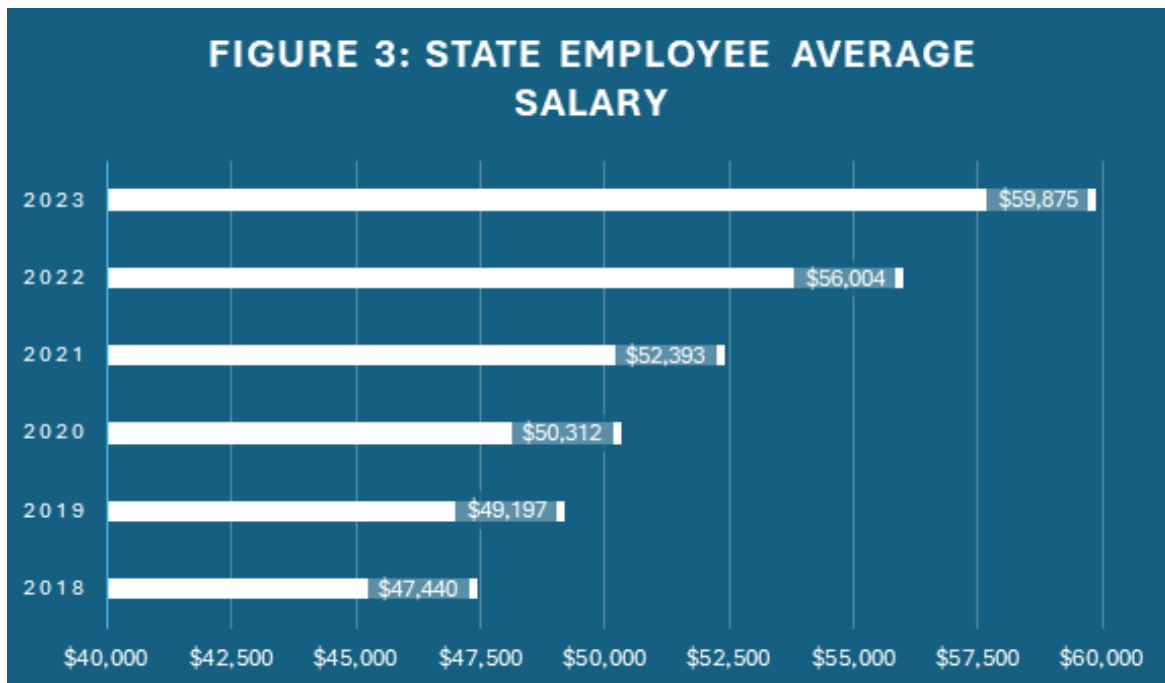




The turnover rate for state employees in Alabama is comparable to national trends that were projected due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which provoked turnover because of flexible scheduling and a lack of connection to workplace culture, on top of historic reasons for turnover such as retirement, salary and benefits, and development and advancement. (Maurer, 2021)

The age of Alabama state employees is a large contributor to turnover. Looking again at SPD Annual Reports, the average age of state employees is 46.1. In 2023, there were 770 separations due to retirement, which was down from the 1,021 retirements in 2022. Additionally, over 9,000 state employees are eligible to retire by 2028. As the employee population continues to age, this will remain a continuous challenge among state agencies (AL State Personnel, 2024).

Another traditional cause of turnover and retention problems is salary. From 2018 to 2023, state employees have seen four cost of living adjustments of at least 2% and many classification pay scale adjustments from salary reviews by the Alabama State Personnel Department. This has brought the average salary of classified employees to \$59,875.05 in 2023 (AL State Personnel, 2023). Although these adjustments have resulted in a 26.2% increase from 2018 (see Figure 3), which has been able to mitigate the 22% (approximate) increase in inflation (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024) over the same time, it has not been able to compensate for the increased workload taken on by state employees due to a reduced workforce.



The potential for career development and advancement opportunities, or lack thereof, is somewhat of a traditional cause in turnover. In a survey developed for this research and distributed to 206 Alabama state employees, only 42% agreed when asked if they are satisfied with promotional opportunities within their department. Further, 47% of respondents felt that training programs provided by their agency or department were not relevant to their career goals.

One additional challenge in retaining state employees that was highlighted by the pandemic is job flexibility. State agencies were forced to adapt to flexible work environments by allowing flexible schedules and locations, just as private companies were, all while continuing to provide essential services to the public. As the pandemic became less restrictive, state agencies, in many cases, became less flexible. When the survey asked how important a flexible work schedule would be for a positive work/life balance, 90.73% of state employees answered important or very important. As more employees begin to value flexibility in their jobs, agencies will be challenged because, as stated in Governor Kay Ivey’s Executive Order No. 727, “...unlike private employers, however, state-agency employers must abide by state requirements concerning the recruitment, retention, compensation, and supervision of their employees.” (The State of Alabama Governor’s Office, 2023)

Lastly, it will be a challenge for agencies to meet the increasing importance employees and job seekers are placing on workplace culture. According to an MIT Sloan Research article, a toxic

work culture is the strongest predictor of attrition and is 10.4 times more likely to contribute to attrition than compensation (Sull et al., 2022).

## STATE RETENTION INCENTIVES

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The State of Alabama offers government employees a comprehensive benefits package and supplementary employment incentives aimed at enhancing their overall well-being and financial stability. These offerings are crucial for attracting new talent and retaining existing staff.

STATE OF ALABAMA BENEFITS	
Insurance	Health (Single, Family) Dental Supplemental Cancer Policy
Retirement	Tier 1 - contribute 7.5% Tier 2 - contribute 6%
Paid Time Off	12 Holidays 1 Personal Day 13 Sick Days (accrued) 13-29 Annual Leave (accrued) 168 Military Leave

(AL State Personnel, 2022 and RSA, 2024)

While typical benefits such as insurance and annual leave are common offerings among employers, our research centers on the best practices that contribute to the State's success in employee retention.

## WELLNESS PROGRAM

A review of the State Employee Insurance Board's (SEIB) State Wellness Center (SWC) and Pharmacy website provided detailed information as to what the state sponsored program offered. This facility is located in downtown Montgomery and provides free urgent and acute services for State Employees and their covered dependents who are 12 years of age and older. Some of the services offered at no cost include annual wellness screenings, immunizations, and treatment of common illnesses. There are also free resources offered to assist with managing weight loss, diabetes, tobacco cessation and a maternity program for expectant mothers. The SWC Pharmacy is a full-service local specialty pharmacy for SEIB members, offering services such as prescription filling after medical visits, call-in prescriptions, mail delivery for specialty drugs outside Montgomery, and worksite delivery within the Montgomery area. Additionally, the SWC Pharmacy sells over-the-counter medications at prices lower than those in retail stores (SEIB, 2024).

## BONUSES

According to communications provided from the State of Alabama Personnel Department, an agency can provide several different types of bonuses to employees including a retention bonus, special merit bonus and an incentive bonus. Each type of bonus is discussed below.

### RETENTION BONUS

An agency can offer a retention bonus to a critical or essential employee to prevent them from leaving State service. This bonus is a one-time lump sum payment, with a maximum amount of \$10,000. To be eligible, the employee must have a written job offer from a non-state government employer with a higher salary, received a high-performance rating on their most recent appraisal, have no disciplinary actions in the last twelve months, and hold permanent status in their current classified service classification. The employee must also commit to staying with the agency for at least one year in order to be considered. (AL State Personnel, 2024).

### SPECIAL MERIT BONUS

State Personnel provides state agencies with the option to grant a Special Merit Bonus, which offers a one-time payment of up to \$2,500. Permanent employees can be nominated for this bonus based on outstanding performance beyond their regular job duties. Nominations must be endorsed by the agency's appointing authority and approved by the State Personnel Board (AL State Personnel, 2024).

## INCENTIVE BONUS

State agencies have the opportunity to utilize an incentive bonus for specific classifications in order to improve efficiency and strengthen employee engagement. This bonus is awarded to a certain classification based on the agency's justification of the position and position requirements of the employees within the classification. If approved, the agency may award the bonuses on a quarterly, biannual, or annual basis, but each employee is limited to \$2,500 in a 12-month period (AL State Personnel, 2024).

## **EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES UTILIZED BY OTHER ENTITIES**

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### **OTHER STATE GOVERNMENTS**

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When researching employee retention strategies across the 49 other states, the focus was placed not only on states geographically near Alabama but also on those that operate in a similar manner. Consequently, six states were selected for further examination of their most effective strategies to improve employee retention: Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Maine. All of these states offer the standard benefit packages that include insurance, retirement options, holidays, and standard annual and sick leave. However, our research primarily concentrates on the additional initiatives each state undertakes beyond these standard practices to maintain a resilient and highly valued workforce.



## GEORGIA

### ***Paid Leave***

Effective July 1, 2015, the State of Georgia passed House Bill 313, which added a new type of leave available to all eligible full-time employees (O.C.G.A. § 45-20-32, 2015). This leave, known as Education Support leave, is geared towards full-time working employees that participate in activities related to student achievements such as attending parent/teacher conferences, classroom activities, and attending award and recognition ceremonies. This serves as a significant incentive to support employee retention and work-life balance, providing up to 8 hours of paid leave per calendar year.

### ***Professional Development***

In December 2022, the State of Georgia launched the Workforce Strategies Initiative. Joining forces with the Georgia Department of Education, the Technical College System of Georgia and the University System of Georgia, the Governor's Office of Planning and Budget (OPB) has an objective of developing career paths for key positions within state government with the end goal of enhancing retention rates and strengthening the state's workforce (Georgia Department of Administrative Services, 2024). Through the assessment of job classifications, professional development was identified as pivotal for advancing the State's future. According to a publication issued by the Georgia Department of Administrative Services for the Georgia Workforce Strategies Initiative Project Update in April 2023, a pilot program was introduced to enable employees to earn a micro-credential from a technical college, thereby qualifying them to sit for a certification exam as well.

## FLORIDA

### ***Education Assistance***

The State of Florida offers full-time employees the opportunity to take up to six credit hours per semester at any state university or state college, free of charge. This initiative, known as the State of Florida Employee Educational Assistance Program, was designed to acknowledge the commitment of its workforce and support their personal and professional growth (The State of Florida Department of Management Services, 2024c).

### ***Paid Leave***

Florida also offers the following paid leave options outside the normal accrued annual and sick leave (The State of Florida Department of Management Services, 2024b).

- Child’s Activities Leave – Employees are eligible for up to one hour per month to engage in activities at their child’s school or child care center.
- Mentor/Volunteer Leave – Employees that participate in school or community volunteer activities are eligible for up to one hour per week, with a maximum of five hours per month, to support these endeavors.
- Education Leave – Employees attending a college, university, or training academy under an authorized agency program may be eligible for paid leave.
- Paid Parental Leave - Eligible employees are allowed to receive up to seven weeks of parental leave following the birth of a child and two weeks of parental leave to be used within the first year following a birth or adoption. Combined, some mothers can benefit from the additional 9 weeks of paid leave to recover and bond with their newborn (The State of Florida Department of Management Services, 2024a).

## TENNESSEE

### *Professional Development*

In 2023, Tennessee saw a 13% decrease in turnover rates (The State of Tennessee, 2023). To attract top talent and retain valuable employees, the State of Tennessee has implemented several recruitment strategies, including an agency guide to workforce and succession planning (The State of Tennessee, 2021). This guide aims to assist agencies in developing their workforce to better fulfill agency needs. Part of this planning involves ensuring strong leadership is in place or being groomed for future roles. The state encourages staff development, facilitates knowledge transfer from experienced employees, and assesses the requirements of various positions to strengthen its workforce and support retention.

### *Education Assistance*

There are two types of educational assistance that the State of Tennessee provides for eligible employees (State of Tennessee, 2024). The first is a fee waiver that applies to state employees looking to take graduate or undergraduate courses at any State college, university or technical school. Through this program, employees are eligible to take one course per semester with a maximum of four per year, free of charge (Tenn. Code Ann. § 8-50-114). Tennessee also offers an educational discount program for dependents of state employees. With this initiative, dependents enrolled in undergraduate courses may get up to a 25% discount on tuition (Tenn. Code Ann. § 8-50-115).

### *Paid Leave*

The State of Tennessee provides the opportunity for eligible employees to receive up to six weeks of paid parental leave for the birth or adoption of a child (State of Tennessee, 2024).

## MISSISSIPPI

### *Professional Development*

The Mississippi State Personnel Board acknowledges the significance of professional growth for its employees and its impact on retaining them. In 2021, a Talent Development Guide was introduced to offer state agencies tools for evaluating employee potential and pinpointing opportunities for skill enhancement (Mississippi State Personnel Board, 2021). The State also has a central portal that provides agencies the opportunity to enroll employees in certification programs such as Certified Public Manager and Executive Services Certification. Employees can also explore professional development courses and request registration, empowering them with access and control over valuable development opportunities that benefit both the employee and the state (Mississippi State Personnel Board, 2024).

### *Education Assistance*

Mississippi also offers state employees educational assistance and paid educational leave for those that qualify (Mississippi State Personnel Board, 2024). The objective of this program is to motivate employees to enhance their knowledge and skills, facilitating career advancement. Through this assistance program, the State will reimburse the employee for job-related courses they successfully complete. Employees are required to sign a contract agreeing to remain with the State for at least three years after finishing the course (Miss. Code § 37-101-293).

## NORTH CAROLINA

### *Employee Recognition*

North Carolina acknowledges that, aside from salary, people ultimately go to work for recognition (North Carolina Office of State Human Resources, 2024a). For this reason, the State has enacted a policy of recognizing employees for outstanding service and dedication through the State Employee Recognition Program. The program seeks to provide management tools to recognize ongoing employee dedication and contribution; educate the citizens of North Carolina on what a pivotal role state government employees play in the quality of their lives; encourage loyalty, or a feeling of pride, among state government employees; and promote careers with state government.



Award programs given under this program (North Carolina Office of State Human Resources, 2024a) consist of the following:

- Excellence in Service Awards – awarded for each five-year milestone of service.
- Governors Awards for Excellence – the most prestigious award an employee can receive for exceptional achievements.
- Caswell Award – named in honor of Richard Caswell; bestowed upon employees with 45 or more years of dedicated service.
- Employee Appreciation – designates a day, week, or month to express appreciation for state employees.
- Memorial Program – recognizes the dedication of state employees who sacrifice their lives in the line of duty.

### *Paid Leave*

To ensure employees, have a great work-life balance, the State of North Carolina offers a range of leave options in the hopes that this will encourage employees to excel at their work (North Carolina Office of State Human Resources, 2024b). Leave is offered in categories such as vacation, sick, community service, family and medical, family illness, civil, etc. Below is a list of the more unique leave options with a short explanation (North Carolina Office of State Human Resources, 2024b):

- Personal Observance Leave – Utilized by qualified employees for any single shift or day of personal significance, such as days of culture or religious importance, among others (Exec Order 262).
- Civil Leave – provided to those employees fulfilling jury duty or acting as a witness.
- Community Service Leave –Employees seeking to contribute to the community in the following capacities are eligible for five hours each month (G.S. § 126-4.5b):
  - Supporting parents in school-related activities involving their children.
  - Volunteering in schools or with community service organizations.
  - Tutoring or mentoring in educational settings.
  - Participating in volunteer work at a state university, community college, or state agency, provided the service falls outside the employee’s regular duties and is unpaid.
- Paid Parental Leave –state employees who have given birth are permitted up to eight weeks of paid leave to recover from and care for a newborn baby. Other eligible employees, such as newborn fathers and adoptive or foster parents, are permitted four weeks of paid leave.

## MAINE

### *Wellness Resources*

Maine state employees can participate in the Gym Membership Reimbursement Program (The State of Maine, 2024d). This is one of their many programs to encourage a healthy lifestyle. To qualify, the employee must join any participating gym and attend at least 8 times per month. Proof of attendance must be provided in order to request a quarterly reimbursement for up to \$40 per month.

### *Work-Life Balance*

As part of the State's EAP program, known as the Living Resources Program, work-life solutions specialists are on hand to help employees with back to school planning, locating child care, after-school programs and even tutoring programs (The State of Maine, 2024e). These specialists can also assist with college planning and referring older adult care providers, which is a valuable resource for employees trying to balance home and work-life.

A Child care Reimbursement Program exists for qualifying employees to request a lump sum child care reimbursement based on a sliding scale which is in proportion to the gross family income (The State of Maine, 2024c).

### *Paid Leave*

Employees receive 12 weeks of fully paid parental leave when welcoming a child. This includes expecting fathers and adoptive parents. This is a new initiative that is effective May 2026 (The State of Maine, 2024b).

## **FEDERAL GOVERNMENT**

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The federal government employs several strategies to retain employees. In addition to the most popular strategies of work-life balance through telework and hybrid work options, the federal government also focuses on a variety of ways to promote career development and advancement within federal agencies.

### CAREER PATHS

The US Office of Personnel Management created career path guides to assist in training and development efforts for government employees. These guides offer career advancement framework allowing the employee to visualize their future opportunities, specify areas to aid in planning career-focused training and development, and provide a listing of common degrees and

certifications that other employees in similar occupations hold (US Office of Personnel Management, 2024d).

### INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

The Federal government offers Individual Development Plans (IDP) to aid employees in their career and personal growth. The objective is to assist employees in achieving career goals and enhancing job performance. This tool is viewed as a collaborative effort between the employee and supervisor, involving preparation and ongoing feedback. IDPs are mandated by numerous agencies for new hires and existing staff (US Office of Personnel Management, 2024c).

### EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

Employee well-being is the backbone of other valuable outcomes an organization is trying to achieve. For employees to perform well, they need to feel well. The best way to accomplish this is by listening to them, validating their experiences, and acting on their feedback.

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has launched a program called Reduce Employee Burnout and Optimize Organizational Thriving Task Force (REBOOT). This program is a long-term approach to address major factors that contribute to burnout and to promote their employees' well-being (VA Health Systems, 2024). There were seven priority areas of focus:

- **Implement Chief Clinician Wellbeing Officer (CWO):** The CWO's role is to engage and foster the well-being of the employees by having regular check-ins, and making sure the employees have everything they need to do the job.
- **Optimize meeting practices:** This is to encourage more effective meeting practices.
- **Optimize Training Management System (TMS) education and training:** An approach to gain vital education and training.
- **Strengthen mental health support:** Investments to increase mental health resources for employees.
- **Address clinical team inefficiencies:** To empower and reward leaders and employees at all levels to eliminate inefficiencies.
- **Maximize the use of HR policies/flexibilities:** Promotes increased interaction with HR to boost employee well-being and retention.
- **Strengthen the culture of servant leadership:** To encourage leaders to strive to serve and support others.

## APPRENTICESHIP PROGRAMS

The federal government also focuses on career development and advancement by incorporating apprenticeship programs. Recently, President Biden encouraged federal agencies to utilize apprenticeship programs in order to further develop employee skillsets (Wagner, E., 2024). There are several apprenticeship programs designed to train and retain employees across various fields.

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“The expansion of registered apprenticeships within the federal government will create new opportunities for working Americans to advance their careers and find stable, well-paid employment in the trades while also ensuring our nation is equipped with the skills and expertise needed to meet the challenges of the future,” said American Federation of Government Employees National President Everett Kelley (Wagner, 2024).

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## MENTORING PROGRAMS

For years, the federal government has promoted the use of mentoring programs within its agencies to boost morale and support career development (US Office of Personnel Management, 2024a). They provide resources such as a guide and a toolkit to assist each agency in developing a program that is tailored to meet their specific needs.

## PAID PARENTAL LEAVE

Qualified employees are eligible for up to 12 weeks of paid parental leave following childbirth, foster care or adoption placement (US Office of Personnel Management, 2024b).

## PRIVATE ENTITIES

Private companies are addressing employee retention through a range of strategies aimed at creating a positive work environment, promoting employee engagement, and offering opportunities for growth and development. Many of these approaches are easy to implement, cost-effective, and highly successful in protecting the irreplaceable knowledge and talent within the workforce. By prioritizing these initiatives, companies create an atmosphere where employees feel appreciated and motivated to remain with the organization long-term.

## EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION

Employee recognition plays a crucial role in employee retention by nurturing a positive work environment and reinforcing a sense of value and belonging among employees. When employees are acknowledged and appreciated for their contributions, they tend to feel more satisfied and engaged in their work, leading to increased morale, motivation, and commitment to the

organization. According to research by Boucher and Flynn (2023), a lack of recognition is cited as the primary reason professionals leave their jobs. Moreover, recognition initiatives help foster loyalty and trust between employees and the company by demonstrating that their hard work is recognized and valued. Companies with established employee recognition programs are reported to experience 31% less voluntary turnover compared to those without such programs (Wickham, N., 2024).

While traditional rewards like compensation and benefits remain essential, genuine acknowledgments in the form of verbal praise, written commendations, or performance-based incentives exemplify various ways appreciation can be expressed. These initiatives have been shown to enhance employee motivation and engagement, leading to heightened productivity and greater job satisfaction. Research suggests that employees in fields of work that have a positive impact on others appreciate social recognition over monetary benefits. A study by O’Flaherty et al, (2021) highlighted that simple gestures, such as a letter expressing gratitude for hard work and dedication, can significantly boost motivation and foster a sense of belonging among employees. This form of acknowledgment is advantageous as it is cost-effective while potentially resulting in increased employee retention rates. These symbolic awards are easily tailored to specific workforces to provide the necessary incentives for continued performance.

Additionally, employee recognition can contribute to a culture of desired behavior and continuous improvement within the organization. When employees see their colleagues being recognized for their accomplishments, it can inspire them to strive for excellence and contribute to the success of the company, ultimately strengthening their own connection to the organization and reducing turnover rates.

#### PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

Personal development programs can significantly impact employee retention by demonstrating a company’s investment in its employees’ growth and career advancement. Managers play a pivotal role when they have a clear understanding of the ambitions of their team and advocate for them through support, constructive feedback, and facilitating their journey toward realizing their full potential. Recognizing opportunities for advancement and professional growth is vital for individuals in the early stages of their careers, and a clear career path reassures them that their efforts will be recognized and rewarded over time, grooming them for future leadership roles.

Having this proactive approach to personal development benefits employees by providing a clear vision of their future within the organization, giving them a sense of purpose that motivates them to be more engaged and committed to their work. Ultimately, providing a clear career path communicates to employees that the company prioritizes their long-term success, leading to higher satisfaction and retention rates. Verizon recognized this and developed the “Your Career Journey” site for their employees to access a full job library, as well as tools to set career objectives through research and self-assessments (Verizon’s Approach to Strategic Workforce Planning, 2022). Employees have the option to choose the skills and experiences they possess, and relevant positions for which they are qualified will be presented for their consideration.

Offering avenues for professional development, such as training courses, mentoring programs, and apprenticeships, contributes to employees’ growth and demonstrates the company’s support for their progress. These efforts should go beyond standard on-the-job training and prioritize areas that benefit both the employer and the employee, inspiring individuals to embrace new challenges. Financial backing for training programs is essential for their success, and employees’ dedication to qualifying for these opportunities results in increased responsibility, better classification, and higher compensation.

Mentoring programs provide a valuable platform for individuals to receive guidance, support, and opportunities for learning as they work towards achieving their goals. Companies implementing workplace mentoring programs have reported heightened levels of employee engagement and retention, illustrating the significant impact of mentorship on motivation and talent retention. For example, research summarized by Flynn (2023) indicated that “[e]mployees being mentored have a retention rate of 72%, compared to only 49% for those without a mentor.” Effective communication within mentoring programs not only fosters employee success but also strengthens their connection to the company and nurtures loyalty.

Apprenticeships provide a structured and immersive learning experience that encourages personal and professional development. Completing an apprenticeship can enhance career prospects and opportunities for advancement. Sigelman (2023) found that 36 million Americans are employed in low-wage jobs, often being disregarded for alternative positions. This absence of motivation is causing them to switch jobs every few years. With proper training, these employees have the potential to fill various sought-after positions. Certain roles prioritize specific skills over a

particular degree. Simply recognizing these positions and the potential opportunities they bring, along with utilizing the skills already present in current employees, creates a recipe for success. Numerous companies are adopting this strategy, prompting them to invest in their workforce to enhance existing skills and make them better suited for new roles.

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“Apprenticeships can be a powerful mechanism for unlocking that potential and for bridging the gap between workers yearning for opportunity and businesses starving for talent.” (Sigelman, 2023)

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Griesback (2022) reported in an al.com article, that The Alabama Community College System and Alabama Office of Apprenticeship have partnered to provide this opportunity in the state to registered companies. Josh Laney, director of the Alabama Office of Apprenticeship, said “[apprenticeships] offer a proven path to meet Alabama’s workforce demand in high-wage, high-demand occupations and allow citizens to earn a living while they learn a skill.” State officials emphasize that apprenticeships can both facilitate opportunities for Alabamians pursuing degrees and address critical workforce gaps within the state.

### WORKPLACE CULTURE

The office culture has a profound impact on employee retention, as individuals seek a sense of belonging within their workplace.

Recognizing this, more businesses are developing strategies to foster strong relationships among their employees. According to Levy-Ajzenkopf (2019), insights from workplace culture expert Kirk Weisler reveal that a disconnect between staff and management can adversely affect employee morale



and the overall office culture. Ensuring that staff understand company goals and promoting engagement among team members are crucial for building a cohesive team.

An article published by the North Dakota State Government (2024) found that hiring a full-time morale booster or “culture coordinator” to support employees is the greatest investment a company

can make. This role aims to facilitate communication between upper management and employees, ultimately reducing turnover costs incurred by talented individuals leaving for better opportunities (North Dakota State Government, 2024).

Companies such as SAP and Coca-Cola have adopted similar roles to provide effective training and personalized experiences for their staff. These initiatives tailor training opportunities to individual needs, addressing areas for improvement and devising plans to enhance employees' career paths (Kelly, J., 2024). Gathering feedback through surveys and stay interviews helps implement processes to boost employee engagement.

These “Chief Morale Officers” are tasked with creating a work environment that prioritizes employee growth by investing in their employees' well-being. Assigning someone the responsibility of identifying the need for personal development programs or recognizing individual achievements is a simple yet impactful initiative that can greatly enhance employee satisfaction, morale and retention rates.

#### ONSITE DAYCARE/CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE

Offering onsite child care as an employee benefit is gaining popularity among companies striving to support working parents and enhance employee satisfaction. According to statistics provided by Bright Horizons (n.d.), there are between 30 and 60 million parents in the workforce, many of whom hold critical leadership roles that companies cannot afford to lose. With the average age of parenthood rising, individuals in higher-level positions become crucial for businesses to retain, preserving their wealth of knowledge and preventing further disruption within the company. However, balancing full-time office work can pose challenges for parents of young children, as access to child care is often limited and the associated expenses can outweigh earnings, leading to employees leaving their jobs to manage responsibilities at home. Companies offering onsite child care, backup child care options, or assistance with rising child care costs provide a valuable benefit for growing families.

Jeff Murphy (2024) addressed the importance of child care assistance as an employee benefit. Child care costs are substantial and families in Alabama can expect to spend approximately 12% of their income on child care (Daniels, 2024). The average monthly cost of infant care is estimated at \$640 per month while the average cost of pre-kindergarten age child care is approximately \$432 per month (AL DHR, 2024). The increasing expense of child care poses a significant challenge for



working parents. Employers can utilize services such as Bright Horizons to develop onsite child care programs tailored to the demographics of their workforce.

Additionally, locating available child care services poses a challenge for working parents. Results from a poll conducted by NPR, as reported by Kamenetz and Khurana (2021), indicate that 34% of families encounter difficulty finding child care for their young children. Furthermore, a study by the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation found that 58% of working parents were compelled to leave their job due to lack of suitable available child care options.

In early 2024, Hyundai Motor Manufacturing Alabama established a partnership aimed at providing child care benefits to its employees (Willis, 2024). The automotive manufacturing company announced a collaboration with TOOTRiS, enabling Hyundai employees to conveniently find local child care providers through this platform. Additionally, eligible employees will receive a monthly stipend covering 25% of child care expenses, up to a maximum of \$150 (Willis, 2024).

#### TIME OFF FOR VOLUNTEERING/GIVE BACK PROGRAM

Volunteering as a whole has experienced a slight decline over the years, but Rodell (2021) noted that it is actually on the rise in the corporate world as companies are offering paid time off for volunteering as part of their benefits package. These companies recognize the importance of giving back to the community and understand that encouraging their employees to contribute can boost engagement, morale and their overall well-being. Weinger (2024) states that on average, 60% of US companies provide paid time off for volunteering by offering 20 hours per year for employees to serve their favorite charitable organization. Employees have the opportunity to feel good about the work they are doing outside of their organization, bond with fellow coworkers and even develop their skills further. Companies can benefit from employees further developing their communications skills outside the organization, as well as other skills that could directly affect their current position, such as empathy, leadership, and collaboration. Community engagement can also be a way for companies to attract new talent. Different generations want to feel like they are making a difference in the workforce and this doesn't always have to mean doing the actual job they are getting paid for. Having the opportunity to participate and give back to the community helps fulfill that goal and have a stronger connection with the employer that arranged the opportunity.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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Through our research, we have identified several strategies used by other governmental entities and the private sector to improve employee retention for state government. The findings have been consolidated into three primary recommendations: Opportunities for Career Development, Workplace Culture, and Work-Life Balance. These recommendations might appear straightforward, yet evidence suggests that even modest initiatives produce significant results.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT

#### *Individual Development Plan*

A majority of employees aspire to advance their careers and acquire new skills. When employees perceive a lack of upward mobility, they often begin searching for new job opportunities. Employers can foster a sense of value and encourage career growth by actively promoting and facilitating training and development opportunities within their workforce. There are various ways this can be accomplished within state government.

Implementing individual development plans (IDP) establishes a framework to motivate employees to achieve short-term and long-term career goals and benefits the agency by ensuring that development opportunities are in line with its mission and objectives. Supervisors gain insight into their employees' goals, strengths and weaknesses through the IDP process, while employees are able to take ownership of their career development. Creating an individual development planning guide, similar to what the Federal Government provides its agencies is key for the success of this initiative (US Office of Personnel Management, 2024e). The purpose of the guide is to explain the importance of the IDP, identify the responsibilities of the employee and supervisors in reaching the goals set forth in the IDP, and reference training opportunities that are available. The most important part of this guide is a template form for the employee to complete each year, with the assistance of their manager. This form consists of areas for the employee to notate the short-term and long-term goals they wish to meet over the course of the next year. Each federal government agency has created their own IDP form, but the State of California has developed a form that is used across all state agencies (The State of California, 2019). The manager helps identify training opportunities that will be needed so these goals can be accomplished. At the end of each annual period, the IDP should be assessed to see what was accomplished, then a plan for the upcoming year should be completed.

### *Training and Certification Website*

Creating a website dedicated to being a centralized database for State employees to explore available training and certification options would benefit employees at all organizational levels while also helping them achieve their IDP goals. This portal, which is similar to one offered by the State of Mississippi, would allow employees to apply for courses that are relevant to their job or personal interests (Mississippi State Personnel Board, 2024). The application process involves employees selecting the training they are interested in, registering and the application is routed to their supervisor for approval.

### *College and University Collaboration*

Another approach to boost professional development involves partnering with state colleges, universities, and technical colleges. This collaboration focuses on identifying and implementing educational programs that allow employees to pursue further education and advancement. The State of Georgia initiated an effort to analyze job classifications to pinpoint areas where additional education could strengthen employees in those roles (Georgia Department of Administrative Services, 2023). The State of Alabama could collaborate with the Alabama Community College System (ACCS) and other state universities to establish a comparable initiative, providing state employees with opportunities for discounted or tuition-free education to advance their careers. The ACCS has also joined forces with the Alabama Office of Apprenticeship to offer paid on-the-job training for participating employers statewide, presenting another avenue for the State to support its employees (Griesbach, 2022). These opportunities enable employees to advance towards their career goals, benefiting both the State and enhancing their effectiveness in their roles.

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“State leaders say apprenticeships can help open doors for more degree-seeking Alabamians and can also fill needed spots in the state’s workforce.”  
(Griesbach, 2022)

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Furthermore, granting employees the flexibility to dedicate some of their work hours to pursue job-related educational courses or certification training opportunities would demonstrate the State’s commitment to fostering both personal and professional development among its employees.

## WORKPLACE CULTURE

### *Employee Recognition Program*

Research has shown that enhancing workplace culture significantly impacts employee retention. One effective method to achieve this is through the implementation of recognition programs within each state agency. These programs can be customized to align with the unique missions and requirements of each agency. Recognition is not only valued by employees who feel their efforts are appreciated and acknowledged, but it also communicates to all employees the priorities and values of the state agency regarding behavior. Recognizing and appreciating employees who consistently excel and surpass expectations benefits both those individuals directly and motivates other employees to strive for recognition in their own roles. One approach to achieve this is by implementing an employee recognition initiative that could be used statewide by all agencies. While the program can be tailored to suit each agency's specific needs, there should be basic elements required statewide. Providing a comprehensive guide for agency personnel is crucial for the program's success.

The State of Virginia offers a similar guide that includes examples of methods to show appreciation to employees, whether through informal gestures or formal recognition (Virginia Department of Human Resource Management, 2019). The guide also requires agencies to consider any budgetary needs each year in order to carry out this initiative. Importantly, the guide ensures that agencies comply with legal and ethical guidelines in demonstrating appreciation, aligning with the State's standards.

Senate Bill 299, enacted into Alabama law in May 2024 with an effective date of October 1, 2024 (Act # 2024-287, 2024), grants state agencies the authority to allocate public funds for recognizing employees for outstanding performance. This legislative framework already in place sets a solid foundation for the program to succeed right from its inception.

### *Mentorship Program*

Mentorship programs encourage the use of valuable internal resources, showcasing a culture that prioritizes teamwork and employee development. These programs can vary widely in their structure and goals. Some focus on guiding employees toward a suitable career path, while others aim to share knowledge and set job expectations. Whether formal or informal, it is essential to establish clear guidelines to ensure the program's success. These mentoring relationships foster connections among employees across various organizational levels, building camaraderie, trust,

and enhanced communication within the workplace. Engaged employees resulting from such initiatives are generally more satisfied with their roles and demonstrate greater commitment to the organization. The federal government has implemented such a mentorship program that is highly recommended across its agencies (US Office of Personnel Management, 2008). Federal agencies receive a guide and toolkit to assist them in creating a program that aligns effectively with their mission and objectives. The guide serves the essential purpose of outlining the program's objectives and mandates that agencies appoint a dedicated program manager to oversee its implementation across the agency. It is crucial to establish a process for matching mentors and mentees, determine the type of mentorship required (such as career guidance or informational support), and develop a method for evaluating the mentorship's effectiveness and progress.

### *Culture and Training Coordinator*

Establishing a dedicated position focused on nurturing workplace culture and coordinating employee advancement is an innovative approach to prioritize employee retention. Designating an individual whose primary responsibility is to cultivate a positive work environment and support career development would not only create a fulfilling and rewarding role but also emphasize the State's commitment to employee growth and overall satisfaction. This position could implement strategies to improve access to job-specific training and education, facilitate communication between employees and leadership, and ensure supportive interactions throughout all organizational levels. Such a role would be well-suited to oversee the implementation of programs like the individual development plan, employee recognition program and mentoring programs within each agency.

## WORK-LIFE BALANCE

### *Paid Leave Options*

Achieving work-life balance has a significant impact on employee retention. While employees devote a substantial portion of their day to their jobs, they also prioritize maintaining boundaries. It is crucial for employees to feel capable of managing their work responsibilities while also attending to their personal lives, especially those raising families. Many employees strive to effectively balance their professional and personal tasks, but sometimes these obligations overlap. While some agencies offer flexible work schedules or remote work options to aid in this dilemma, not all employees have access to these benefits. Therefore, finding ways to support a healthy work-life balance for all employees is essential.

Other state governments offer different types of leave options that complement this initiative. Offering leave specifically for employees to participate in their children’s school events or engage in community volunteer work can be particularly beneficial and seen as an additional employee perk. Some states may provide either an option for volunteer leave or educational support leave, but North Carolina allows up to five hours per month for employees to use for either volunteering or attending children’s school events, depending on what is desired (North Carolina Office of State Human Resources, 2024b).

### *Child Care Assistance*

Balancing work responsibilities with child care duties can pose challenges for some parents or guardians. Factors such as cost or limited availability of child care options can contribute to these challenges. Some employers are addressing this issue by providing support. Research has shown that the local Hyundai facility, for example, offers services of TOOTRiS, a child care locator, to assist employees in finding suitable child care facilities in the area (Willis, 2024). Additionally, they provide a child care reimbursement stipend of up to \$150 per month to help alleviate the financial burden of child care costs.

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“Increasing the labor force participation is a major focus for Gov. Kay Ivey; programs like TOOTRiS really do make a difference,” McNair said. “We’re hoping that other industries follow Hyundai’s lead in taking on this initiative.” (Willis, 2024)

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While creating a state-run child care facility may present challenges, organizations dedicated to helping individuals find child care or elderly adult care services could facilitate a meaningful advancement by extending these services to state employees.

## **CONCLUSION**

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Enhancing employee retention within state government is crucial for sustaining organizational effectiveness and continuity. This CPM Solutions Alabama Project aimed to propose retention strategies that would require minimal policy and budget implications. Through comprehensive strategies such as improving workplace culture, implementing mentoring programs, and fostering career development opportunities, state agencies can create environments where employees feel valued, supported, and motivated to contribute their best efforts. By investing in these initiatives,

the State of Alabama will not only retain talented employees, but also cultivate a positive workplace culture that enhances productivity, innovation, and overall success in serving the public. As state government continues to evolve, prioritizing employee retention remains integral to achieving long-term organizational goals and fulfilling each agency's mission effectively.



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