

Op-Ed: How Can State Government Attract and Keep the Best and Brightest?

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It may be too early to start thinking about New Jersey's 2017 gubernatorial race. With that said, here are some thoughts.

While the candidates who run for governor during the next two years will have different positions on a wide variety of issues, they will share a desire that government be as capable as possible of doing whatever it is they believe it should do. Their administration, they hope, will be one that provides high-quality, responsive, efficient delivery of services and conducts meaningful policy analysis and program modernization.

Although this goal may be shared across the political spectrum, it can't be realized without first confronting two major obstacles. One is the state of the state's finances and the other is the condition of the state work force.

The former undoubtedly will be the focus of extensive analysis and debate, but the latter may well remain in the shadows. Yet the rules and procedures for attracting, motivating and replacing public employees have become inadequate for implementing virtually any agenda the next governor might want to put forward.

This personnel problem has its roots in the significant natural attrition that has followed the aging of the generation attracted to government careers in the 1960s and 1970s. As individuals have retired, budget cuts have forced departments to leave a sizable percentage of their positions vacant.

The situation has been exacerbated by quests from governors of both parties for bragging rights to a number by which the size of the state work force under their predecessor could be said to have been reduced.

Only rarely have these staff reductions been accompanied by any lessening of the scope and responsibilities of affected programs and agencies. More common has been the admonition given state workers, going back at least as far as the early 1990s, to 'do more with less.'

A catchy and maybe motivating mantra at first, 'doing more with less' has become a naïve and woefully ineffective remedy for meeting the state's needs.

For some agencies, there simply are not enough boots on the ground, to borrow a phrase. Over the last 12 years, for example, the NJDOT has experienced a net loss of 650 staffers – many of them engineers - while the need for repairs and upgrades to the roads, bridges and public transit facilities for which New Jersey state government is responsible has become ever more acute.

At the same time, increasingly large holes in the senior policy and management levels have become pervasive throughout state government. If governors and the agency heads they select are to be effective, they need a cadre of experienced lieutenants who have deep programmatic understanding and institutional memory. Some of the tools these people acquire can be as seemingly mundane as connections with federal agencies and workable relationships with knowledgeable counterparts in other states. Yet, as people with those resources and skills have retired, many of their positions, too, have been eliminated, left vacant or reassigned.

With the number of public employees depleted at every level, the often understandably stressed performance of those remaining contributes to a vicious cycle swirling around the image of government "bureaucrats."

Rarely beloved to begin with, short-staffed agencies are less able to quickly respond to public needs and inquiries. This feeds a negative image of government, which further depresses public support for the resources necessary to attract and retain a new generation of skilled public workers.

For men and women considering running for governor, there may be little pressure to address this problem during the campaign. They probably can get by with bromides about eliminating waste, adapting lessons from the private sector, applying common sense or just working smarter and being more efficient.

They may feel that developing specific proposals can wait until they are elected. But that may be too late.

During the transition period, the governor-elect will be consumed by choosing a cabinet and executive staff, and juggling 100 other demands. Once in office, thousands of other immediate needs will compete for attention, and the goal of a revitalized state work force will slip lower and lower on the priority list.

It would be far better if potential candidates and their advisors starting getting a handle on this problem now. Here are some of the questions they could be exploring:

- How could the process for getting a job in state government be made easier to access and understand? Does it include career ladders so that an undergraduate or graduate student who shows promise as an intern could be hired directly upon graduation? Are there other paths to entice people in academia, the private sector or nonprofits to consider a transition into state government?



- What are the satisfactions and frustrations of a stint or career in state government as viewed by current state workers at a variety of levels? How do recently departed cabinet members, agency heads and other staff view the situation and possible remedies?
- To what extent could the salary/benefit package offered to state workers be changed to provide greater incentive for smart, public-spirited young people to apply for jobs, and for more senior staff and managers to stay longer?

Earlier this summer, when Chris Porrino stepped down as Gov. Chris Christie's chief counsel, The Star-Ledger quoted the governor as saying that Porrino was "an invaluable source of guidance and wisdom." Senate President Sweeney added, "You hate to see people like him leave." Porrino himself said that if he could he would "do this job forever – it's that much fun."

So why isn't he staying? Because, with "kids who are getting close to college age and other family commitments" the salary is too low. That's a perfectly understandable choice for an individual to make, but should it just be a given that state government could never offer enough long-term benefits to compete with a private law firm?

If these and other related questions can be confronted before the next governor takes office, both the new governor -- and New Jersey residents -- would be well-served.

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