



Rebuilding Stronger for Virginia Beach: Collective Bargaining Advances Equity and Strengthens Families

By Briana Jones, Laura Goren & Phil Hernandez

Virginia Beach is a vibrant, diverse community where people choose to live and work together for better opportunities for all of us. Part of why so many people choose to make Virginia Beach home is its high quality public services, and city employees play a significant role in creating and maintaining those services. It is important that public servants are fairly paid and have a voice in their workplace. Allowing collective bargaining will allow city employees a formal voice to lift up ways to improve public services and build a more equitable workplace. In the end, that benefits every one of us.

Methodology

Affordability of living in Virginia Beach is TCI analysis of 2021 salary data and EPI family budget calculator for a family of three. Pay and salary data includes both merit and non-merit employees and both part-time and full-time employees. For part-time employees, pay was calculated as if the person worked full-time, year-round. EPI's analysis shows that a single person in Virginia Beach would need an annual income of \$43,451 to pay for housing, transportation, healthcare premiums and out-of-pocket costs, taxes, and other necessities. For a parent with two children, that amount is \$82,361.



"I have to work lots of overtime on our low wages. If we made better pay, I wouldn't have to be away from my family every other weekend just to make ends meet. Cost of living is steady going up and our wages are not. We deserve better wages. With a union we would have collective bargaining to help raise everyone's wages."

— Derrick Holley

Motor Equipment Operator II,
Public Works, Street Maintenance
City of Virginia Beach

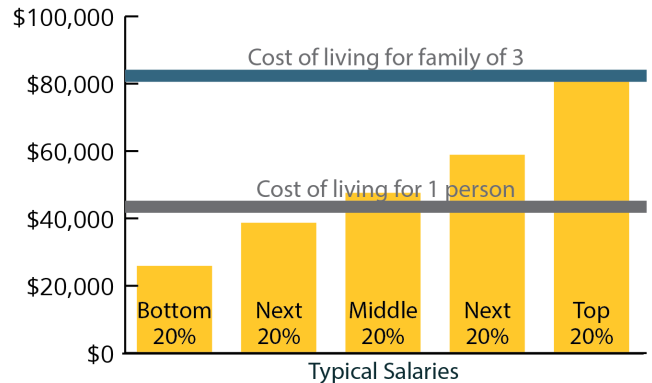
Public employees in Virginia are currently underpaid

- Many local public employees in Virginia Beach cannot afford to live in the city they serve. A review of city employee classifications and maximum hourly pay or salaries for those roles shows that 4 in 10 Virginia Beach city employees could not afford to support themselves on their salary in Virginia Beach at a modest yet adequate standard of living. And 9 in 10 could not attain an adequate standard of living on what they are paid if they have children.
- Currently, a single person would need to make approximately \$43,451 to afford a quality standard of living. Add one child into the mix, and the minimum salary needed raises to more than \$65,000. An employee raising two kids will need to make a minimum of \$82,361.
- Local public employees in Virginia are typically paid 29.9% less than their private-sector peers with similar levels of education, age, and hours worked, one of the largest pay penalties in the country.¹
- Pension and health care benefits do not make up for these pay penalties. Employee benefits for local public employees in Virginia are less generous than in other parts of the

Public Servant Salaries Lag Family Costs in Virginia Beach

Typical salaries of Virginia Beach staff compared to the cost of a modest yet adequate standard of living in Virginia Beach

(for hourly staff, assumes full-time, year-round employment)



Source: TCI analysis of Virginia Beach salary data and Virginia Beach cost of living estimates from the Economic Policy Institute family budget calculator.



country, and many private-sector employees, particularly full-time employees of large companies, receive generous benefits. For Virginia as a whole, the estimated total compensation penalty for local employees compared to their private-sector peers is 28.0%, close to the pay penalty of 29.9%.



"The normal case load in the Infant Program should be between 35, with 40 clients max per staff. The Clinician II's sometimes run above 55-60. They are given workloads and Client-to-staff ratios that are unreasonable, placing our health and safety at risk. This also violates the rights of those we care for. We cannot provide adequate care without adequate resources."

— Louise Lindsey

Infant Program, Administrative Assistant, Human Services Department
City of Virginia Beach

Collective bargaining promotes pay equity

For public employees, one of the benefits of unions with collective bargaining rights is increasing pay to levels that are closer to that which could be obtained in the private sector. Overall, public-sector collective bargaining tends to boost pay by 5% to 8%,² and the fair and clear standards provided by unionization particularly help Black and Latinx workers.³ Women, who make up the majority of local government workers (especially in Virginia), would also particularly benefit from collective bargaining. This is important because past discrimination and ongoing barriers mean Black workers, Latinx workers, and women of all races are still typically paid less than white men with the same level of education and experience in both public- and private-sector employment.

Having the right to collectively bargain over pay and working conditions shrinks public-sector pay penalties, although it does not eliminate them. In Virginia, where until recently public-sector collective bargaining was totally banned, local government employees are typically paid 29.9% less than their private-sector counterparts with similar education and experience. In states that have a policy like Virginia's new law that allows but does not require localities to permit employees to collectively bargain, the average pay penalty for local employees compared to their private-sector peers was 16.6%, and where collective bargaining rights are fully protected by state law the pay penalty was a smaller 10.5%.⁴

Since women and Black people are more likely to choose public service jobs, addressing pay penalties for public employees will reduce the broader problem of women and Black people being paid less than their peers with similar levels of education and experience.

Given the particular importance of unions in raising pay for those who for too many years have been underpaid compared to their levels of experience and education, it is not surprising that anti-union laws throughout the south were passed using explicit appeals to racist ideas. Undoing that legacy will require proactive steps to create more equitable policies and workplaces.

9 in 10

local public employees could not attain an adequate standard of living in Virginia Beach on what they are paid if they have children



"With all these COVID-19 cases, management is telling workers that they have to use their own leave time if they get exposed. Even though the federal government paid the city all this money, they don't wanna pay workers. They are making up rules as they go along. These new workers don't get sick and vacation time the same way that we do. The union would change that a lot, it would help enforce fair rules and bargain better benefits and protections for the workers."

— George "Zeek" Roulhac
Public Utilities, Sewer Collection
City of Virginia Beach



Having a union provides a voice in the workplace

The impact of unions is not just on pay and benefits. Collective bargaining provides a way for represented workers to formally express their ideas for how to improve their workflow and workplaces. This can improve communication and a sense of belonging. Having the experience of collective bargaining and union representation in the workplace even makes people — particularly younger people and those with less formal education — more likely to participate in other systems of democratic governance such as voting.⁵

Endnotes

1. Morrissey, M., “Unions can reduce the public-sector pay gap: Collective bargaining rights and local government workers,” Economic Policy Institute, Jun 2021
2. Brunner, E., and Ju, A., “State Collective Bargaining Laws and Public-Sector Pay,” ILR Review, Mar 2019
3. McNicholas, C. et al, “Why unions are good for workers—especially in a crisis like COVID-19,” Economic Policy Institute, Aug 2020
4. Morrissey, M., “Unions can reduce the public-sector pay gap: Collective bargaining rights and local government workers,” Economic Policy Institute, Jun 2021. This analysis used data from 2015 to 2019, before the state of Virginia permitted local governments to collectively bargain with their employees.
5. Bryson, A., Gomez, R., Kretschmer, T., and Willman, P., “Workplace voice and civic engagement: what theory and data tell us about unions and their relationship to the democratic process,” Osgoode Hall Law Journal, 2013



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