

Investing in Our Future

Broader public-sector collective bargaining will help workers and communities

Whether Black, brown, or white, young or old, from Abingdon to Arlington, public-sector workers in Virginia work hard for their families and the communities they serve. When public-sector workers can collectively bargain, **they gain the ability to formally make their voices heard in improving their workflow and workplaces, thereby boosting services like public education and emergency responses.** Communities across the commonwealth would benefit from a more unified state framework that more fully recognizes the rights of state and local employees to collectively bargain.

Broader collective bargaining rights can create thriving communities

- From teachers and bus drivers to firefighters and snowplow drivers, public-sector workers are critical to having well-functioning schools and services. These skilled workers need sufficient pay, good benefits, and positive working conditions to do this work for the long term.
- **Collective bargaining gives workers the power to formally express their ideas for improving their workflow and workplaces,** which leads to reduced turnover, better working conditions, and improved public services.¹
- Having the experience of collective bargaining and union representation makes people, particularly younger people and those with less formal education, more likely to participate in other systems of democratic governance such as voting. States with stronger unions are better for union and non-union workers because **unions build solidarity and mobilize working people to challenge inequality and defend civil rights through civic and political engagement.**²
- Here in Virginia, despite the current limited locality-by-locality system for recognizing labor rights, local public employees have made progress through collective bargaining in addressing barriers such as low pay, retention, and unsafe working conditions. Virginia deserves to have the opportunity to realize these sorts of gains for more public-sector workers.

Collective bargaining creates more equitable workplaces

Research shows that collective bargaining can reduce unfair pay penalties facing women and workers of color, improve public services, and strengthen communities.

- The **fair and clear standards provided by unions particularly boost wages for Black and Latino workers,** including in the public sector.
- Because Black people and women of all races are more likely than their white and male peers to work in Virginia's public sector, strengthening wages and voice in the workplace for public employees particularly advances opportunity for Black workers and women of all races. Given this, it is not surprising that the roots of Virginia's current ban on collective bargaining at state agencies can be traced to backlash against organizing by Black workers at UVA Health in the 1940s.

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Large pay penalties for public employees harm the quality of services

Both state and local public-sector workers in Virginia face significant challenges, including some of the biggest pay penalties in the country compared to comparable private-sector jobs. DHRM shows that state employee salaries average 16% below private-sector salaries and 5% below the public-sector median. Despite recent compensation actions, “Years without any salary adjustments in the past have made it difficult for state agencies to build a proactive and sustainable approach to addressing compensation, recruitment and retention concerns,” according to a November 2025 report by DHRM.³ Taking into account education and experience, state and local government employees in Virginia are paid, on average, 27% less than their private-sector peers.⁴

Low pay and a lack of collective bargaining rights directly harm our public-sector workers and their families. It also hurts our communities as a whole when workers don’t feel empowered to speak up about how to improve services, and leads to costly turnover and recruitment challenges, which impact the quality of public services.

Over 550,000 of our neighbors are state and local public employees

- Virginia had about 401,000 local government and school board employees in 2024. About half are local government and half are school board employees: In fall 2025, there were 208,834 public preK-12 school employees.⁵
- State executive branch employees, October 2025: 143,950⁶
 - This includes: 116,145 salaried and 27,805 wage workers
- Home care workers serve about 26,000 people in Virginia who are able to live in the community due to consumer-directed personal care services.⁷ These workers, who are paid by DMAS, are in addition to those above.

¹ [‘The Myth of Unions’ Overprotection of Bad Teachers: Evidence from the District-Teacher Matched Data on Teacher Turnover](#). Industrial Relations; Kim, J. et al (2010). [Employee voice and organizational performance: Team versus representative influence](#). Human Relations.; Choi, Y., & Chung, I. H. (2016) [Voice Effects of Public Sector Unions on Turnover: Evidence From Teacher Contracts](#). Public Personnel Management, 45(2), 213-233; Abraham-Aggarwal K et al (2024), [The Impact of Unions on US Direct Care Workers in Long Term Care Settings: a Systematic Review](#) J Am Med Dir Assoc. 2024 Dec;25(12):105236

² Bryson, A., Gomez, R., Kretschmer, T. and Willman, P. (2013) [Workplace voice and civic engagement: what theory and data tell us about unions and their relationship to the democratic process](#) . Osgoode Hall Law Journal, 50 (4). pp. 965-998; McNicholas et al, EPI (2025) [Unions aren’t just good for workers—they also benefit communities and democracy](#)

³ DHRM, [Biennial Compensation Report – 2025](#)

⁴ EPI (2026) [Stronger collective bargaining laws will benefit all Virginians](#)

⁵ TCI analysis of BLS Current Employment Statistics and VDOE positions and vacancies survey retrieved Jan 2026

⁶ TCI analysis of DHRM FTE reports retrieved from <https://www.dhrm.virginia.gov/reports>

⁷ DPB, 2025 [FIS for HB2764-ER](#)



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