

RESULTS SUMMARY

Researchers consulted groups nationwide to create a comprehensive guide to help local and state transportation agencies discover creative and innovative strategies for attracting and retaining new highway maintenance workers.

PROJECT DETAILS

Project Title: Recruitment and Retention of Highway Maintenance Workers

Project Number: CR19-02

Project Cost: \$70,000

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Project Co-Champions:
Brian Burne

Maine Department of Transportation
brian.burne@maine.gov

Cliff Spoonmore

Wyoming Department of Transportation
cliff.spoonmore@wyo.gov

Investigator: Laura Fay

Western Transportation Institute
Montana State University
laura.fay1@montana.edu

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STRATEGIES TO FIND AND KEEP HIGHWAY MAINTENANCE WORKERS

For at least a decade, local and state transportation agencies have experienced increasing challenges in recruiting new highway maintenance workers and keeping those already on staff. With a generation of older workers now retiring, agencies face a new generation of potential workers whose career expectations differ considerably from those leaving the workforce. This project's wide-ranging investigations provided the basis for a comprehensive and easy-to-use guide that agencies can reference to develop innovative recruitment and retention strategies for a modern workforce.

Need for Research

Not long ago, transportation agencies could advertise highway maintenance jobs and expect many qualified applicants. Today, those agencies find that as they try to replace retiring workers, far fewer people apply. In addition, agencies are experiencing a loss of current workers as many choose to leave the profession after a few years rather than make it a lifetime career. It has become especially difficult for agencies to hire enough workers for winter road maintenance—jobs with long, unpredictable hours in severe weather conditions.

Exploring the causes of these workforce changes and learning how other employers in the transportation sector have navigated them will give agencies a better understanding of the available strategies for recruiting and retaining workers.

Objectives and Methodology

Researchers conducted a literature search to review the recent publications that address the recruitment and retention of highway maintenance workers. To gather a wide range of information on how organizations have experienced and responded to these challenges, researchers created surveys for four groups: human resources managers, winter maintenance managers, maintenance workers and private maintenance contractors. The research team distributed the surveys to all Clear Roads member states and numerous other national organizations concerned with winter road maintenance, receiving a total of 154 responses.



MaineDOT uses social media posts on Facebook and other platforms to advertise open highway maintenance positions.

Researchers rounded out the survey findings with 15 follow-up telephone interviews that delved deeper into topics such as partnerships with departments of corrections, staff training, increasing the applicant pool, changing incentives for workers and more.

In addition, researchers developed case studies of organizations that have tried new strategies such as recruiting military veterans and ex-prisoners, and training existing staff in new skills. Others used social media for recruitment, sharing engaging stories and images. Researchers highlighted the innovative strategies implemented in Colorado, Idaho, Maine, Ohio and Oregon.

Researchers also examined ways to attract and retain women and minority workers, as well as young professionals. As the latter group's career expectations tend to differ greatly from those of retiring baby boomers, agencies must recognize that the benefits and incentives that attracted workers in the past may no longer work for younger generations.

Results

While the new employment landscape is here to stay, the research team found scores of opportunities for agencies to enhance their practices and thrive within it. Beginning with the employee's initial recruitment and continuing throughout their tenure, agencies need to be more aware

and proactive. From greatly expanding their perception of who might apply to actively seeking out people who haven't considered the field, agencies can find the workers they need. Enlisting the help of human resources in recruitment efforts, such as career fairs and social media posts, and in retention efforts, such as exit interviews and employee surveys, agencies can establish, enhance and energize their practices.

Though higher salaries may not be an option, agencies must identify the advantages they already have or could easily offer, such as education, mentorship programs, and career ladder programs offering promotion through training. Working with local unions to develop changes in training tied to title and salary levels could encourage the best possible candidates for promotion, rather than advancement based solely on longevity. Moreover, while hourly pay rates at public agencies are often lower than the private sector, the total compensation packages are often worth more due to better benefits offered by public employers.

Benefits and Further Research

The comprehensive [recruitment and retention guide](#) developed by the researchers allows users to follow topics most relevant to their own agency's challenges and possibilities. Available on the [Clear Roads website](#), the guide includes all survey information and interviews conducted throughout the project.

With all the progress that has been made in this area and potential solutions available to agencies, the research showed that much work is still needed. Opportunities for next steps include creating and sustaining mentorship programs, using employee check-in surveys to enhance retention, and better educating public employees on the overall competitiveness of compensation packages.

"No single approach will solve all of the staffing challenges agencies may have, but this project should absolutely help identify a suite of options that will likely enhance an agency's level of success in meeting overall staffing goals."

Project Co-Champion Brian Burne
MaineDOT
brian.burne@maine.gov