

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

Human Services Staffing Shortage is at an 'An All-Time High'

By Hannah Gaskill

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Del. Kirill Reznik (D-Montgomery), chair of the House Appropriations Committee's Health and Social Services Subcommittee, says that the Department of Human Services' vacancy rate is a reflection of a "crisis-level staffing shortage" across the executive branch. Screenshot.

Agency employees said they've reached a breaking point Wednesday as the Department of Human Services reports a record staffing shortage.

Approximately 15% of authorized positions are currently unfilled.

According to Grace Pedersen from the Department of Legislative Services, the agency saw an “an all-time high” vacancy rate on Jan. 1, when comparing data from the past decade.

The Department of Human Services has lost over 300 employees since 2020. Currently, there are more than 250 positions that have been vacant for more than a year and 20 open positions that have been entirely abolished, according to legislative analysts.

The Department of Human Services is the state’s primary social services provider, managing financial assistance and support programs for vulnerable children and adults.

At a news conference hosted by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 3 on Wednesday morning, Patrick Moran, the chapter president, said the department is “sending money back to the state” in spite of growing need.

Monique Boyd, a union member and licensed social worker with Child Protective Services at the Baltimore City Department of Social Service, said that child maltreatment cases have exploded since schools have reopened.

Boyd said that her agency is “losing workers as fast as we can hire them,” attributing the vacancies to skyrocketing caseloads, low pay, poor working conditions and “unrealistic expectations, among other things.”

Pedersen said child maltreatment complaints in Maryland had decreased, possibly because children have been exposed to fewer mandatory reporters like teachers, doctors and social workers during the pandemic.

Lourdes R. Padilla, the secretary of the Department of Human Services, told subcommittee members that maltreatment reports are now back up to pre-pandemic levels.

Asked what the agency is doing to remedy the staffing shortage, Padilla told House Appropriations Health and Social Services Subcommittee Chair Kirill Reznik (D-Montgomery) that the department’s Social Services Administration follows the Child Welfare League of America’s Caseload Standards.

According to Padilla, an analysis determined that the agency needed 1,129 caseworkers in 2021, which the department exceeded by 285 employees.

In a Tuesday news release, Boyd said that she and her coworkers are “carrying 24-28 cases” — “triple” the Child Welfare League of America’s standards.

Padilla said some jurisdictions have a surplus of caseworkers while others have vacancies.

Cherrish Vick, the secretary-treasurer for AFSCME's Maryland chapter, said that shortages in Baltimore are so severe that the administration is pulling child welfare caseworkers from surrounding jurisdictions and paying them \$5,000 bonuses.

According to Vick, caseworkers who were originally assigned to Baltimore won't be getting the same bonuses. She called this another example of the Hogan administration "continuing to rob Peter to pay Paul to meet the staffing needs."

"These are the types of decisions that the administration is making right now," she said. "All workers deserve to be paid what they're worth, and to be treated with dignity and respect."

Acknowledging "the great resignation" brought on by the pandemic, Padilla also said that she is looking into alternative work setups, like continued telework and hybrid operations, for department employees and has asked her Human Resources department to conduct an "aggressive" hiring campaign.

Reznik said at the Wednesday news conference the agency's vacancy rate is "not a function of 'the great resignation,' or COVID or the economy or any other excuse."

"The administration has repeatedly failed to deal with this crisis-level staffing shortage, both... in DHS and across a number of agencies: Corrections, Labor, Health — you name it," he said. "These workers know it and my colleagues in the General Assembly know it."

Reznik said that Maryland's \$4 billion budget surplus comes "primarily as a result of action at the federal level ... and because of the neglect that we have seen over the last seven years of staff shortages and the money that was saved from failing to staff people and pay them properly."

Michael Ricci, a spokesman for Gov. Lawrence J. Hogan Jr. (R), said in an email exchange Wednesday afternoon that the surplus is attributable to "prudent fiscal decisions and economic growth."

Asked if any of the excess funds will go to employee recruitment or retention, Ricci pointed to the governor's "Re-Fund the Police" initiative, appropriations in his proposed 2023 budget for salary enhancements for correctional officers and his "five-point plan" for spending the surplus that was released in October

"Delivering on that proposal, the governor's FY23 budget provides generous salary enhancements and bonuses for state employees totaling in excess of \$850 million," he said.



Hannah Gaskill

Reporter

Hannah Gaskill received her master's of journalism degree in December 2019 from the University of Maryland. She previously worked on the print layout design team at The Diamondback, reported on criminal justice in Maryland for Capital News Service and served as a production assistant for The Confluence – the daily news magazine on 90.5 WESA, Pittsburgh's NPR member station. Gaskill has had bylines in The Baltimore Sun, The Washington Post and The Chicago Tribune, among other publications. Before pursuing journalism, she received her bachelor's of fine art degree from Carnegie Mellon University in 2016. She grew up in Ocean City.

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