

Report: Public Sector Hiring Systems Not Keeping Up with Applicant Interest

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New research assessing hiring conditions across state and local government finds applicant volume increasing, but internal system performance is holding the public sector back from effective hiring.

Work for America's recently released From the Frontlines 2026 report sees AI-enabled job search tools and "a historic outflow of federal workers" driving up the number of local government applicants.

However, the research also "illustrates how hiring challenges stem not only from limited candidate supply, but also from government's ability to process applicants effectively, revealing longstanding inefficiencies in hiring systems," according to Work for America.

Based on anonymous interviews and surveys of more than 70 government HR leaders representing more than 740,000 public employees, the report finds that, even when the talent supply is plentiful, "internal system performance holds the public sector back from effective hiring."

According to the report, a number of operational challenges are making hiring more difficult for public sector organizations, such as system bottlenecks, fragmented process ownership and negative candidate experience, leading to disengagement over time.

The research also cited input from a survey conducted as part of a recent Work for America workshop, during which participants from 16 jurisdictions were asked to name their top hiring challenges.

The largest number (69%) cited slow time-to-hire. Another 56% pointed to difficulty attracting qualified candidates (56%), followed by approval bottlenecks, inconsistent workflows and limited data visibility (45%).

Across interviews, state and local government leaders described a consistent pattern in their hiring efforts, with many saying their hiring systems struggle to move candidates forward, even when applicant interest has increased.

Calling for “a broader shift in how public sector hiring is understood and addressed,” the report highlights a handful of jurisdictions that are demonstrating “what improvement can look like through targeted operational changes,” according to Work for America.

The City of St. Louis, for example, has reduced hiring times from more than nine months to roughly three months, by simplifying workflows and modernizing systems. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has reduced hiring timelines by identifying and addressing bottlenecks in the interview stage of the hiring process.

“Across the country, we’re seeing a new reality: interest in public service is growing, but hiring systems aren’t keeping up,” said Caitlin Lewis, executive director of Work for America, in a statement.

“Local government is where so much of real life actually gets better—safer streets, cleaner water, stronger schools. The opportunity in front of us is to build hiring systems worthy of that mission, so that when great people want to serve, we can actually bring them in.”