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State Needs to Address Its Pay Gap

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD Jan 2, 2017

Year in and year out, Virginia has been recognized as having one of the best-managed state governments in the nation. Quality of employees. Fiscally responsible management of taxpayer dollars. A solid “return on investment” — in other words, more bang for the buck spent.

That might all be in jeopardy.

Virginia began to see economic ripples well before the financial meltdown of September 2008 and the ensuing Great Recession. Then-Gov. Tim Kaine began tightening the belt during the latter half of his administration, and his successor, Bob McDonnell, continued rolling back state spending as revenues slowed and declined.

One of the easiest budget lines to cut is that of salaries and benefits, which is where Kaine, McDonnell and Gov. Terry McAuliffe have gone each time a budget gap has opened. Cost-of-living raises have been all but non-existent, more of the cost of benefits has shifted to employees and, in the worst of the recession, furloughs were implemented.

As a result, the average state salary lags the public sector by an average of 27 percent, according to an analysis by the Richmond Times-Dispatch. That despite the fact that two years ago, in the 2015 session of the General Assembly, legislators were able to restore a planned 2 percent raise for the public workforce.

McAuliffe had proposed a 3 percent raise in the current budget in an attempt to close the public/private pay gap. When revenues missed target dates, the raise was put off, replaced by a one-time 1.5 percent bonus to be paid in December 2017.

But low pay, both entry-level salaries and salaries for longtime employees, still plagues the commonwealth. The Virginia State Police, for example, has more than 100 open, sworn trooper positions and dozens more open support staff jobs. The starting pay of a trooper? Just more than \$36,000, for men and women who put their lives on the line every day on behalf of the public. Then there are the workers for the Virginia Department of Transportation — the men and women who respond in snowstorms to keep the roads open in 12-hour shifts, who keep the state's highways in top shape in dangerous jobs. Local sheriff's deputies, doctors and nurses with the public health department, teachers: All are important jobs that suffer from low pay.

Good pay for these critical positions is vital for retention of experienced employees and for recruitment of top talent. It's an investment in people and the work they do.

For some state workers, a public-sector job is just that, a job they might leave at the drop of a hat. For many more, though, a public-sector job is a form of public service; yes, there's a paycheck, but there's also a calling to serve their fellow citizens.

Our elected leaders must address this growing pay gap sooner rather than later and before employee morale begins to affect the efficient functioning of state government as a whole. A top-quality public workforce is as important to overall economic growth as is a top-quality private sector. When the pay gap between the two is so out of kilter, the entire Virginia economy will suffer.



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