

A Closer Look

at NCDHHS

A SEANC Examination of State Operated Healthcare Facilities

State Employees Association
of North Carolina
2023





Introduction

Just a few short years ago, everyone called them heroes. As the global COVID pandemic swept through the nation and the state, we looked to those employees willing to hold the line at our Department of Health and Human Services State Operated Healthcare Facilities (DSOHF) with reverence, thankfulness, and respect.

These public servants risked their lives to care for the most vulnerable of North Carolina's citizens during the pandemic. They're still risking their safety daily, but as the pandemic has waned, we wonder — **Have these essential workers been forgotten?**

The current situation at our DSOHF developmental and treatment centers, and hospitals is dire. Of the more than 11,000 full-time positions available, over 30% are vacant. Sixty-eight percent of those jobs have been vacant for larger than six months.

This understaffing not only puts a strain on the services that each facility can provide, but it's also downright dangerous for the employees there.

It's no secret what it will take to combat this problem and protect employees at these facilities. It will take investment. The state **must** increase pay to keep workers on the job. Meaningful retention bonuses coupled with drastic pay increases are the only way to keep good employees, and recruitment bonuses are already necessary to bring more people into the workforce.

Don't just take my word for it. This report provides a first-hand look at the conditions at our facilities from those who work there every day. We surveyed more than 450 SEANC members working at DSOHF facilities to get the truth about their problems.

Over 35% of respondents had more than 15 years of experience in DSOHF facilities, and 70% had more than six years of experience. These are primarily veteran employees who have seen the good and bad times. No one knows these facilities better than they do.

This report provides a breakdown of their responses to our survey from their perspective. We hope it will serve as a wake-up call as leaders consider budget priorities in the 2023 General Assembly session.

Working at a DSOHF facility is rewarding.

State employees devote their lives to helping the state's most vulnerable populations. They are committed to helping these citizens in their times of need.

Unfortunately, their dedication is not returned in many cases. Less strenuous and exhausting jobs in their town, perhaps even at a retail store or restaurant, often pay the same or more than the state pays.

Our survey found that:

Understaffing

- 90%** of respondents feel that their facilities are understaffed.
- 73%** say understaffing is making work harder that it used to be.
- 69%** believe their facility is in **crisis** because it doesn't have enough staff.
- 53%** say their facility has empty beds because of understaffing.

Pay

- 94%** say facility is losing staff because people can get better pay elsewhere.
- 80%** of respondents feel they aren't compensated fairly.
- 74%** have considered leaving their jobs in the last year.
- 40%** say they have to pick up extra shifts.
- 35%** can't take time off.



98%

**say their
desire to
help
people
is a
significant
reason
why they
continue
to work
at their
facility.**

Survey Responses



"I have been in my current position since June 2021. Since then we have been down at least two workers. My stress levels have been through the roof and it has taken a toll on my health. It is hard to take leave as the work doubles when you do."

"Something needs to be done. If not, plenty of people will resign!"

"Due to the cost of living, I am left with no choice but to retire to collect both Social Security and retirement to have more money."

"We have to cover another shift at least 4 out of 7 nights a week. Plus, a lot of us are working overtime every weekend because of no staff."



"It's hard coming to work and being effective when you have to maintain multiple jobs to survive."

"I love the work I do. It would be nice to be appreciated and told how well I am doing. I feel like I shouldn't be afraid to call out if my children are sick."

"A large number of contract workers hired to 'fill in the gaps' either do not show up to work, have the same connection with the residents, or display an indifference of attention for the facility's rules and regulations."



"Salaries for all staff positions are not in line with workers outside of state facilities. Salaries were increased for nurses, social workers, and doctors but left out all others as if their positions are not important. It takes everyone in the village to complete the tasks involved in running and managing a hospital."



96%

say a
step-pay
plan would
help to
retain and
recruit.

Recommendations

Pay Increases

- “Pay does not compare with the private sector. That’s why people are leaving.”

DHHS needs more flexibility to make new hires quickly

- 72% feel that facilities need to do more to recruit and hire new staff.
- “The state takes 3 - 6 months to approve new hires. We lose good people due to the wait.”

Retention bonuses for staff who have already proven their dedication

- 92% believe retention bonuses would help.
- “New hire bonuses have left senior staff feeling undervalued. Mandatory overtime has taken away the ability to work at this job while having a family.”

A step-pay plan to guarantee increases for employees who are good at their jobs

- “The step-pay plan idea seems encouraging for those that have worked here for so long and earn way less than people with no experience that are just coming in the door.”
- “I struggle with the fact that new hires make within hundreds of dollars of my salary and I’ve been with the agency 17 years. The agency should look at merit raises based on performance plans to reward and keep good employees.”

A commitment to show employees appreciation

- “Make staff feel valuable, know they make a difference, and put fun back into the workplace. Show faithful workers their work does not go unnoticed.”
- “If leadership would consistently demonstrate that they value staff and care about retention, it would be great throughout DHHS.”

Thank You

On behalf of the SEANC Board of Governors and Executive Committee, I would like to thank the SEANC DHHS Study Committee for their hard work. They have grappled with the issues facing our state employees at DHHS facilities for more than two years. Hopefully, this report will help increase awareness of the problems and dangers facing our members who work there.

I would also like to thank the leaders of all the SEANC districts that are charged with representing members at their facilities, and members of the SEANC Executive Committee and staff who also had a hand in this important report.

The work of this committee is critical to SEANC's mission of protecting and enhancing the rights and benefits of current, retired, and future state employees. We hope the recommendations in this report will lead to lasting changes for our members.

Martha Fowler
SEANC President



DHHS Study Committee

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Director of Member Relations
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"I've seen a lot of
people come and go.
I've never seen it this bad
out of the 22 years
I've been here."

"We are devoted
to the people we serve
despite being underpaid
with no opportunities
for promotions
in the department."



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