

Report shows state, local government employees left in record numbers in 2021

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State and local employees left their jobs at record highs in 2021, according to a new Wisconsin Policy Forum report.

The study of Wisconsin Retirement System data found 17,646 left the pension system in 2021 for reasons other than retirement, death or disability. At the end of 2021, there were 257,683 active WRS members. That marked the second consecutive year of decline with a net decrease of 0.6 percent from the 259,234 active members at the end of 2019.

The WRS system data include employees ranging from teachers, police officers, prison guards and university employees, to local governments, school districts and state agencies.

According to the report, reasons for leaving employment at such high rates could include “near record low unemployment rates, the effects of federal stimulus, pandemic-related burnout” and opportunities in other industries.

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The group also found the number of active “protective” members, such as police officers and firefighters, went down 2.2 percent from 2020 to 2021, to 21,937 members. That’s the lowest end-of-year total for protective employees in WRS since 2005.

Data from Milwaukee County and the city of Milwaukee also show a decline in members in the city’s retirement system, with a 4.5 percent net decrease from 2020 to 2021 after accounting for new hires — the lowest level in 10 years.

According to WPF, the WRS and Milwaukee system decreases could be due to job cuts or workers who have left but not been replaced.

Among all kinds of employees, 8,151 retired in 2020 and 8,303 in 2021. The only comparable year for retirements is 2011, when 12,906 retired in the wake of Act 10, which took away collective bargaining rights for public workers.

The report states increased WRS retirements are partly due to the state's aging workforce and potentially to challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. The data show 17,646 people left WRS in 2021 for "other separations," meaning they took another job or became unemployed for other reasons.

Meanwhile, the city of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County also experienced higher rates of turnover at 14 percent and 17.6 percent respectively. That could be partially due to high turnover in the county's behavioral health division after deciding to outsource inpatient services.

The study also found membership in WRS has gotten younger and less experienced, with an average age of 44.6 years old, the youngest average age since 2003. The average employee also had 11.1 years of experience, the lowest amount since 2001.

WPF in the report recommends public officials consider increasing pay and more flexible working conditions, as well as using more new technology and exploring "service sharing arrangements between neighboring governments" and using private contractors.

"Given the state's aging and shrinking workforce, both the public and private sectors in Wisconsin will continue to face labor challenges," the report states. "Yet, the importance of positions like police officers, paramedics, and teachers may require a particularly thoughtful and urgent public sector response."

Read the report:

<https://www.wispolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/220825Forum.pdf>