

Fixing Government Hiring

Robert Gordon

Executive Vice President for State Initiatives, Recoding America Fund



The idea

2

If democracy is going to deliver for its citizens, government needs the right people doing the people's work. Strong staff matter—in the classroom¹ or on the beat,² in crafting technology,³ or paving roads.⁴ We have to simplify government hiring so that managers can choose great employees fast.

Too often, state and local governments get hiring wrong.⁵ They post turgid job descriptions in complex classifications⁶ that scare off strong applicants. They require archaic civil service exams that dramatically slow the hiring process without adequately winnowing the field. They select for staff on resume keywords that reward exaggeration, gaming, and insider knowledge over expertise. They take so long to hire⁷ that individuals with options give up and go elsewhere. And they sort job roles into rigid compensation systems⁸ that aren't sensitive to the labor market, making it impossible to recruit for some positions even as others pay more than necessary.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 2025. Photo element: Anton Vierietin (iStock)

There are 2 state and local jobs open for every hire

PRIVATE SECTOR

1.37 to 1

6,894,000 open positions:
5,021,000 hires



STATE AND LOCAL

2 to 1

673,000 open positions:
323,000 hires

Many of these systems arise from an important objective—avoiding partisanship or nepotism and making hiring fair. Ironically, these strange and complex rules often send the opposite signal—that government jobs are only for people who know how to work the rules. In fact, smart systems can guard against corruption while still incentivizing and selecting for excellence. Job postings can use plain but inspiring language to convey both the skills and the commitment required of applicants. The hiring process can create opportunities for workers to show they have the skills that would actually matter for their jobs. Managers can get the final say in hiring—and the flexibility to tailor pay to meet real needs. All of it can happen with the urgency that job seekers expect and the public deserves.

New York, NY, 2009.
(Photo by Daniel Acker/
Bloomberg via
Getty Images)



For too long, “HR” has been geared around compliance, a set of boxes for both managers and employees to check. In a government that works, HR is a critical strategic function, recruiting and placing people in the right jobs at the right cost to taxpayers.

Fortunately, this is not just rhetoric. States are beginning to change.

Case studies

New York

Facing a growing wave of post-pandemic retirements, New York faced “a state government workforce crisis,”⁹ with more than 12,000 vacancies. The state responded with an unconventional step: suspending civil service exams.

The exam requirement had lengthened hiring timelines enormously.¹⁰ The state could take as long as three to four months¹¹ just to grade a test.

And so in 2023, New York State launched NY HELPS,¹² which temporarily lifted the exam requirement for many competitive civil service roles. Applicants’ CVs, not their test scores, became the primary determinant of whether candidates were hired. Agencies are now permitted to post vacancies with the competencies and credentials they need, review candidates who meet those criteria, and make permanent appointments quickly.

By getting government out of its own way, NY HELPS has accomplished precisely what it intended to, resulting in more than 34,000 appointments.¹³

The question now is whether the state can make the acceleration permanent. For most jobs, the information gleaned from the existing, old-fashioned tests is not worth the delays and the burdens of implementing them. Many states have abolished their traditional civil service exams without any evidence that hiring quality suffered or corruption increased. For some jobs, radically different tests—adaptive ones, focused on skills and simulations—could also be effective. It is time to end the status quo.

Tennessee

In 2012, Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam signed the Tennessee Excellence, Accountability, and Management (TEAM) Act into law.¹⁴ At the time, Tennessee law forced managers to hire from among only three to five candidates approved under a rigid points system, often after a civil service exam. The law ended the exams and allowed agencies to hire from the list of everyone who met basic qualifications. Beyond that, the law also instituted a performance-based evaluation system¹⁵ that streamlined removals while preserving protections against abuses. Over the following decade, Tennessee reported faster hiring timelines and better outcomes.¹⁶

Fletcher, NC, 2025.
(Photo by Allison Joyce/
Bloomberg via Getty
Images)



North Carolina

North Carolina is on its own path to reform. Facing thousands of vacancies—particularly in health, corrections, and social services—and a six-month hiring timeline,¹⁷ the state recognized that pay scales and hiring practices had fallen out of step with both the labor market and the needs of residents. One new law¹⁸ provides agencies with more flexibility to offer competitive starting salaries, simplifies job classifications, and enables agencies to match candidates to roles more quickly. A second new statute set in motion a comprehensive overhaul of the state’s civil service system. Already, the state has implemented a new applicant tracking system (ATS) to manage their recruiting and hiring workflows. More changes are coming.

Iterations of the idea

6

- Eliminate outdated civil service exams and create effective skills-based assessments instead.
- Modernize job classifications and write job postings in plain, compelling English.
- Allow individuals to apply for many jobs through a single posting.
- Allow multiple agencies to hire off of a single posting.
- Keep job postings open and allow agencies to hire from them over long periods.
- Give managers more discretion to hire qualified applicants.
- Raise pay in key roles facing chronic shortages, and align the full pay scale with market demands.
- Overhaul business processes and introduce an effective Applicant Tracking System to make the hiring process more efficient.
- Create performance management systems that connect employee goals to organizational goals, define competencies critical to jobs, provide for regular feedback, fairly evaluate employee contributions, elevate and reward effective employees, and swiftly improve or remove those who do not get results.
- Include employee performance in the context of annual salary increases, updating traditional seniority or step increases.
- Enable and evaluate variation within systems, so that different agencies can apply different approaches, and leaders can learn from those changes, and the system can improve over time.
- Use AI to review and improve classification systems, employee handbooks, hiring processes, and job listings. For more on the possibilities from AI for streamlining government, see [Let's Tidy Up State Government](#), *The States Forum Journal*, Summer 2025, by my colleague, Jennifer Pahlka.

So much of excellence in employment depends on qualities that are not visible in a test or on a resume. This does not make hiring arbitrary, but it does mean that managers often need discretion to consider data from interviews or reference calls that cannot be reduced to formulas. But that discretion can and must be channeled—by holding managers accountable for their results. In an agency where people are just punching the clock, a mid-level manager might get away with hiring somebody's nephew. But if that manager needs to deliver on clear metrics, he will think twice. For this reason, streamlined hiring benefits from streamlined firing.

Each in their own way, all of the states above point to important pathways forward.

Improving these practices may differ state to state. Virtually everywhere, HR departments have discretion under current law to improve their hiring processes and technology, cutting the time to hire in the process. The impressive startup Work for America offers two case studies of the difference that a modern Applicant Tracking System can make. State legislatures can jumpstart this work by holding hearings to focus executives on what's broken today and offering with very modest funding for reform.

More structural changes may require legislation, but even here, there is often surprising executive discretion. Rarely do laws require thousands of job classifications or turgid job descriptions. Even pay levels can be a policy call, though it may sit with a semi-independent board or commission rather than an executive agency. Civil service exams and termination procedures are in state statutes, and in some cases, in state constitutions.

In short: Effective legislators can drive change simply by asking important questions about why hiring in government is so hard. Modest funding may be helpful to drive some changes, while others are about courage more than money. Everything depends on raising the profile of an issue that few take seriously today.

Why act?

8

- **HIRING THE BEST WORKFORCE IS A SIMPLE IMPERATIVE.** State governments are multi-billion dollar enterprises, performing the life-saving and life-changing work of delivering health care, public safety, our children’s education, and economic vitality. It should not be a bureaucratic maze.
- **WE NEED TO OPEN THE PROCESS.** Civil service systems are based on the right principles, but too often they have become what they meant to stop, rewarding insiders and blocking those who do not know how to work the system. It’s time to simplify the process so governments can meet the needs of their constituents.
- **EVERYONE HAS A STAKE IN STATE GOVERNMENTS THAT WORK.** Even in an era of deep partisan divides, civil service reform can unite a broad coalition. In New York, organized labor supported the initial suspension of civil service exams. In Tennessee, Republicans in power worked with¹⁹ and gained the support of the Tennessee State Employees Association²⁰—which cited “weeks of negotiations and help from our friends in the House and Senate.” And in North Carolina, Democrats and Republicans came together²¹ in the legislature to establish a mandate for change. By focusing on the problem and listening to competing views, the states were able to push through structural changes in their civil service systems and make reform more durable.

To drive these and other improvements in state capacity, the Recoding America Fund has launched a six-year bipartisan effort.

End notes

9

- 1 Chetty, Raj, John N. Friedman, and Jonah E. Rockoff. "Measuring the Impacts of Teachers II: Teacher Value-Added and Student Outcomes in Adulthood." *American Economic Review*, vol. 104, no. 9, 2014, pp. 2633–2679. <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.104.9.2633>
- 2 Bonkiewicz, Officer Luke. "The IMPACTT of a Patrol Officer: Evaluating Productivity Metrics." *National Institute of Justice*, U.S. Department of Justice, 13 July 2020, <https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/impactt-patrol-officer-evaluating-productivity-metrics>
- 3 Herd, Pamela, Eric R. Giannella, Jeremy Barofsky, Luke Farrell, and Donald Moynihan. "Interventions to Automate Medicaid Renewals Reduce Procedural Denials and Increase Coverage." *Health Affairs*, vol. (forthcoming/2025), <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/full/10.1377/hlthaff.2025.00316>
- 4 Liscow, Zachary D., Cailin Slattery, and William Nober. *State Capacity and Infrastructure Costs*. SSRN Electronic Journal, Yale Law & Economics Research Paper, Aug. 23, 2025, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4522676
- 5 Gordon, Robert, and Gabe Paley. "New York's Civil Service System vs. Public Sector Progress." *Vital City*, 11 Nov. 2025, <https://www.vitalcitynyc.org/articles/new-yorks-mamdani-ny-civil-service-system>
- 6 National Governors Association. *Empowering Progress: Harnessing Skills-Based Strategies to Drive Public Sector Excellence*. National Governors Association, Feb. 2025, <https://www.nga.org/publications/empowering-progress-harnessing-skills-based-strategies-to-drive-public-sector-excellence/>
- 7 Institute for Responsive Government. *Cutting Red Tape for States to Hire Top Talent: A Landscape Overview*. ResponsiveGov.org, 26 June 2025, <https://responsivegov.org/research/cutting-red-tape-for-states-to-hire-top-talent-a-landscape-overview/>
- 8 Risher, Howard. "What's in a Name? Everything That's Wrong With Job Classification." *Government Executive*, 16 June 2015, <https://www.govexec.com/management/2015/06/whats-name-every-s-wrong-job-classification/115369/>
- 9 Justin, Raga. "NY Faces Looming State Government Workforce Crisis." *Times Union*, 1 Feb. 2023, <https://www.timesunion.com/state/article/ny-faces-looming-state-government-workforce-crisis-17756737.php>
- 10 Public Employees Federation. *NY HELPS: Frequently Asked Questions*. March 2024, <https://www.pef.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/NY-Helps-FAQ.pdf>
- 11 "Frequently Asked Questions." *City of Albany*, City of Albany, <https://albanyny.gov/m/faq?cat=26#question-190>
- 12 New York State Department of Civil Service. "NY HELPS." *cs.ny.gov*, <https://www.cs.ny.gov/help/>
- 13 New York State Department of Civil Service. *NY HELPS – State Update Through September 2025*. September 2025, https://www.cs.ny.gov/help/pdf/monthly-appointments/september_2025.pdf
- 14 News Staff. "Tennessee Governor Bill Haslam Signs TEAM Act into Law." *Clarksville Online*, 25 Apr. 2012, <https://www.clarksvilleonline.com/2012/04/25/tennessee-governor-bill-haslam-signs-team-act-into-law/>
- 15 Risher, Howard. "One State's Proven Strategy for Civil Service Reform." *Government Executive*, 7 May 2019, <https://www.govexec.com/management/2019/05/one-states-proven-strategy-civil-service-reform/156773/>
- 16 Barrett, Katherine, and Richard Greene. "How Tennessee Transformed the Way It Hires and Fires People." *Governing*, 28 Oct. 2015, <https://www.governing.com/archive/gov-tennessee-civil-service-reform.html>
- 17 Henkel, Clayton. "With Double-Digit Vacancy Rates, NC State Government Looks to Revamp Its Hiring Process." *NC Newsline*, 17 Mar. 2025, <https://ncnewsline.com/2025/03/17/with-double-digit-vacancy-rates-nc-state-government-looks-to-revamp-its-hiring-process/>
- 18 North Carolina Office of State Human Resources. "Session Law 2025-34: State Hiring Accessibility and Modernization." *oshr.nc.gov*, <https://oshr.nc.gov/session-law-2025-34-state-hiring-accessibility-and-modernization>
- 19 Tennessee State Employees Association. "TEAM Act Timeline." *TSEA Online*, 13 years ago, <https://tseaonline.org/issues/team-act/team-act-timeline/>

20 Tennessee State Employees Association. "TEAM Act." *TSEA Online*, published ~13 years ago, <https://tseaonline.org/issues/team-act/>

21 Henkel, Clayton. "With Double-Digit Vacancy Rates, NC State Government Looks to Revamp Its Hiring Process." *NC Newsline*, 17 Mar. 2025, <https://ncnewsline.com/2025/03/17/with-double-digit-vacancy-rates-nc-state-government-looks-to-revamp-its-hiring-process/>