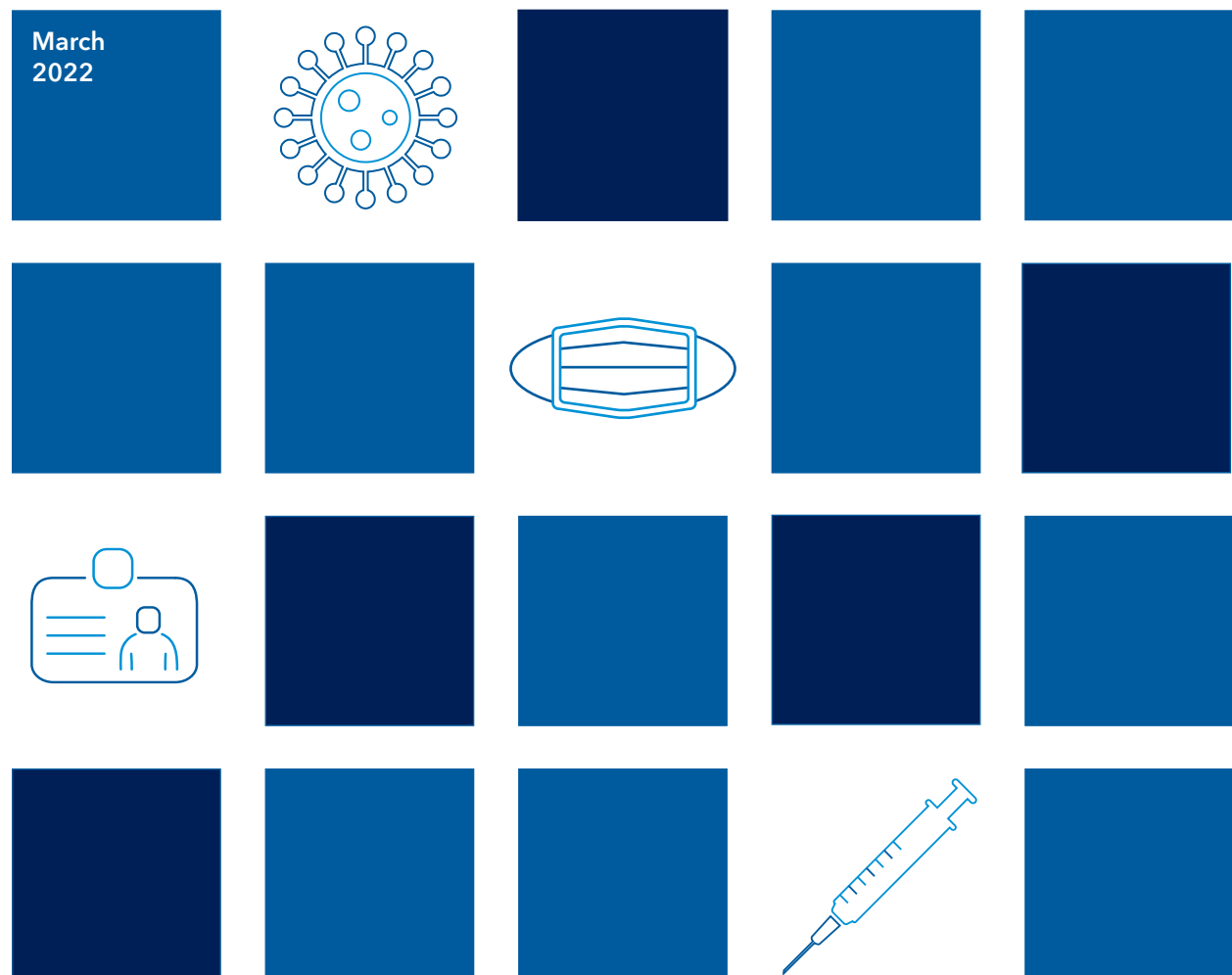


## Survey Results

# Continued Impact of COVID-19 on Public Sector Employee Job and Financial Outlook, Satisfaction, and Retention

Report prepared by MissionSquare Research Institute





## Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by Rivka Liss-Levinson, PhD (MissionSquare Research Institute) and describes results of a survey conducted with Greenwald Research.

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## Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a November/December 2021 national online survey conducted by MissionSquare Research Institute and Greenwald Research of 1,100 state and local government employees, assessing their views on COVID-19's impact on their job and financial outlook, general concerns about COVID-19 and morale, and general satisfaction with their employer and retention issues.

Where applicable, comparisons are made between this survey and three prior MissionSquare Research Institute/Greenwald Research surveys of state and local government employees, conducted May 2020 (n=1,008), October/November 2020 (n=1,205), and May 2021 (n=1,203).



### Top 10 takeaways

1

There has been a **substantial increase in return to in-person work**. While only 26% of respondents in May 2020 reported no remote work, this number has risen to **70%** of workers reporting **no remote work** in November/December 2021.

2

Among those engaged in any in-person work, **80%** of respondents **consider their job** at least somewhat **risky** in terms of their potential exposure to people who have COVID-19; this is the highest percentage considering themselves at risk in all four survey rounds.

3

Nearly two in three respondents (**63%**) agreed that the **policies** their employer has implemented during the pandemic have been **fair to all employees**. However, they also indicated that the pandemic has created **tension** in their working relationship **with coworkers** (**38%**) and with their **supervisor** (**24%**).

4

**To reduce employee stress**, respondents were most likely to recommend that employers provide **salary increases** (24%), **hire more staff** or reduce workload (15%), or **provide emotional support** (e.g., respect, acknowledgment, encouragement) (13%).

5

62% of respondents reported that their organization has experienced **more people leaving their jobs** voluntarily since the start of the pandemic. Among those who have seen an increase, **78% say this has put a strain on their workload**; 39% indicate it has put a significant strain on them.

6

**36%** of respondents reported that working during the pandemic has made them **consider changing jobs**. This percentage has increased from a low of 20% in May 2020 and is up five-percentage points in the past six months. Further, **33%** agreed that the pandemic has made them **consider retiring**, and **28%** are **considering leaving the workforce** entirely.

7

Asked what their organization could do **to retain more employees**, respondents most commonly endorsed **improving salaries** (62%), offering or increasing **bonuses** (50%), and/or showing more **appreciation and recognition** of employees and the work they do (38%).

8

Just over half of respondents (**51%**) described their current **morale** regarding work as **positive**. However, respondents also reported feeling stressed (44%), burned out (42%), and/or anxious (39%) while at work about the pandemic.

9

When asked about working in the public sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents were most likely to report that they **value serving their community during this difficult time** (59%).

10

The **negative financial impact** of the pandemic has led workers and other members of their households to take a variety of financial actions, most frequently **taking on more debt** than they would have otherwise (23%), **spending money from an emergency fund** to make ends meet (21%), and/or **borrowing money from friends or family** (12%).

## Introduction and Methods

As the COVID-19 pandemic enters into its third year, there are reasons for optimism. In addition to the authorization of three COVID-19 vaccines<sup>1</sup> for adults in the United States, one vaccine has been approved for children as young as five years of age, vaccines for children under the age of five are anticipated in the coming weeks, and booster shots have become available. Across the nation, 212 million Americans are fully vaccinated, representing 63.8% of the total population.<sup>2</sup> Further, the federal government is purchasing 1 billion at-home, rapid COVID-19 tests to distribute free of charge to American households across the country.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, a myriad of challenges remains. After the widespread impact of the delta variant over the summer of 2021, the even more contagious omicron variant has disrupted the hoped-for “return to normal” in a variety of ways, from school outbreaks causing temporary shutdowns to nursing staff shortages to the continued economic suffering of the retail, hospitality, and tourism industries. And the damage that the COVID-19 pandemic has already inflicted is substantial. As of February 28, 2022, more than 436 million cases and 5.9 million deaths due to COVID-19 have been recorded around the world, with the United States accounting for more than 79 million cases and nearly 950,000 deaths.<sup>4</sup>

During this next phase of the pandemic, the work of the approximately 19 million individuals who are employed by state and local governments will be as crucial as ever, as educators, public safety and public health personnel, and professionals from all public sector industries continue to provide critical services, programs, and activities for their communities. To ensure that states and localities have a resilient workforce that can respond to the current challenges and those that lie ahead, it is necessary to understand and address public sector workers’ general concerns about COVID-19, their views on the impact of the pandemic on their jobs and finances, their job satisfaction, and their outlooks on the short- and medium-term impacts of the pandemic.

In May 2020, MissionSquare Research Institute (formerly the Center for State and Local Government Excellence) and Greenwald Research conducted an online survey of 1,008 full-time state and local government employees, assessing their views on the COVID-19 pandemic’s financial impacts, job impacts, and other related issues. Follow-up surveys were conducted in October/November 2020 with 1,205 state and local government employees, and in May 2021 with 1,203 public sector workers to understand how these views continued to evolve over the course of the pandemic. Findings from these surveys have been released in the form of reports, infographics, and animated videos (see [COVID-19 and the Public Sector Workforce: Collected Resources](#)).

This report presents the results of a fourth round of COVID-19 survey research assessing state and local government employees’ views on the job and financial impacts of COVID-19, general concerns about COVID-19 and morale, and job satisfaction and retention issues. It provides results from a 12-minute online survey of 1,100 full-time state and local government employees conducted by MissionSquare Research Institute (the “Institute”) and Greenwald Research from November 9 through December 16, 2021.

Where appropriate, results are compared with prior Institute/ Greenwald Research surveys of full-time state and local government employees conducted in May 2020 (n=1,008), October/November 2020 (n=1,205), and May 2021 (n=1,203). The final data for all four surveys were weighted by gender, age, income, and industry type to reflect the distribution of the state and local government workforce as found in the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey and the U.S. Census of Governments.

## Survey Results

### Sample Demographics

The demographic characteristics of the 1,100 survey respondents are displayed in Table 1. The majority of survey respondents are female, White or Caucasian, working for local government, have children or stepchildren, and have a total annual personal income of less than \$75,000. Respondents have a median age of 45<sup>5</sup> and tend to be well educated (69% have received their bachelor's or a graduate/professional degree). Nearly half of respondents (49%) are married, 51% live in a suburban area, and 53% work in education. There is more variation in respondents' household income, geographic region, area population size, and number of years working for their employer.

The demographic characteristics of the survey sample generally align with the overall state and local government workforce profile. Of the approximately 19.8 million state and local government employees who worked across the United States in 2020, 11.2 million worked in education and nearly 1 million were in police protection, with the rest filling all other state and local positions (e.g., general administration, utilities, transportation, hospitals).<sup>6</sup> As of 2021, the total population of state and local workers has a median age of 45 years; 61% of these workers are female; 77% are White; 60% are married; and 59% have a bachelor's, advanced, or professional degree.<sup>7</sup>

Table 1 **Sample Demographics**

<b>Gender</b>		<b>Marital Status</b>		<b>Industry</b>		<b>Total Annual Household Income</b>	
Male	33%	Married	49%	Education	53%	Less than \$25,000	4%
Female	66%	Single, never married	27%	Public Safety	16%	\$25,000 to \$49,999	29%
Prefer to self-describe	<0.5%	Divorced or separated	15%	Health & Human Services	13%	\$50,000 to \$74,999	22%
<b>Age</b>		Living with a partner	7%	Transportation	5%	\$75,000 to \$99,999	18%
		Widowed	2%	Administration & Finance	4%	\$100,000 to \$124,999	10%
		Prefer not to say	<0.5%	Public Works/Utilities	4%	\$125,000 to \$149,999	7%
				All Other	3%	\$150,000 or more	10%
Under 40	37%	<b>Children/Stepchildren</b>		Parks & Recreation	1%	Don't know	<0.5%
40-59	47%	Yes, under 18	35%	<b>Number of Years Working with Current Employer</b>		<b>Area Population Size</b>	
60 or older	16%	Yes, 18 or older	32%	Less than 1 year	4%	Less than 10,000	13%
<b>Education</b>		No children/stepchildren	37%	1 to 5 years	30%	10,000 to 24,999	13%
Less than a high school diploma	<0.5%	Prefer not to answer	1%	6 to 10 years	20%	25,000 to 49,999	15%
Graduated high school	10%	<b>Region</b>		11 to 15 years	13%	50,000 to 99,999	13%
Some college (no degree)	10%	South	41%	16 to 20 years	13%	100,000 to 199,999	12%
Associate's degree or completion of technical or vocational school	11%	Midwest	22%	21+ years	19%	200,000 to 499,999	7%
Bachelor's degree	37%	Northeast	19%	<b>Total Annual Personal Income</b>		500,000 to 999,999	5%
Graduate/professional degree	32%	West	18%	Less than \$25,000	5%	1,000,000 or more	7%
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		<b>Area Type</b>		\$25,000 to \$49,999	38%	Don't know	15%
White or Caucasian	69%	Suburban	51%	\$50,000 to \$74,999	25%		
Black or African American	14%	Urban	26%	\$75,000 to \$99,999	18%		
Hispanic/Latino/Spanish descent	13%	Rural	14%	\$100,000 to \$124,999	6%		
Asian or Pacific Islander	5%	Small town	10%	\$125,000 to \$149,999	3%		
Native American	1%	<b>Employer</b>		\$150,000 or more	5%		
Other	<0.5%	Local government	65%	Don't know	<0.5%		
		State government	35%				

Note: n=1,100; some figures may not total to 100% due to rounding or to dual responses selected for racial/ethnic identification and children/stepchildren ages.

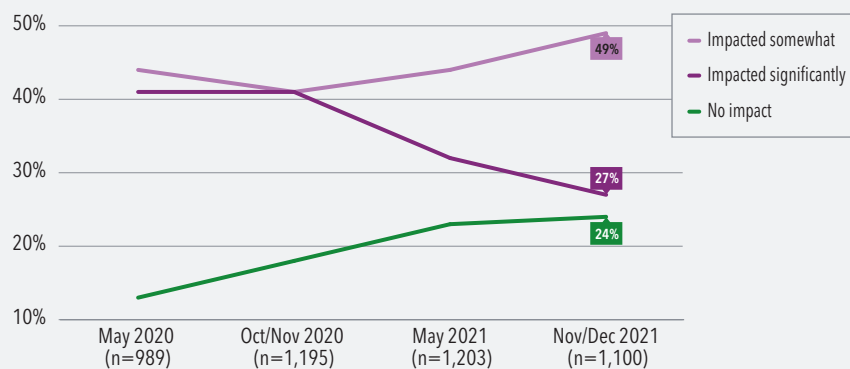
## Job Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have an impact on the nature of employees' jobs - more than three in four (76%) say COVID-19 has impacted what they do, where they work, and how they go about the tasks required (Figure 1). While the overall percentage of those reporting any impact has remained steady at 76% since May 2021, the intensity of the impact has decreased, from 32% reporting a significant impact in May 2021 to 27% reporting a significant impact in November/December 2021.

The percentage of respondents indicating that it has been extremely or very difficult to adjust to changes to their job due to COVID-19 in November/December 2021 is nearly identical to the percentage that reported it being very or extremely difficult to adjust at the start of the pandemic (see Figure 2). There has, however, been some decrease in those reporting that it has been extremely or very difficult to adjust since May 2021 (from 31% to 28%). This may reflect respondents becoming more acclimated over time to adjustments in their job due to COVID-19. It is also worth noting that the omicron variant was not identified in the United States until December 1, 2021. Therefore, while there is some overlap with the survey period, most of that variant's impact on cases, hospitalizations, and workplace dynamics has occurred after the close of the survey.

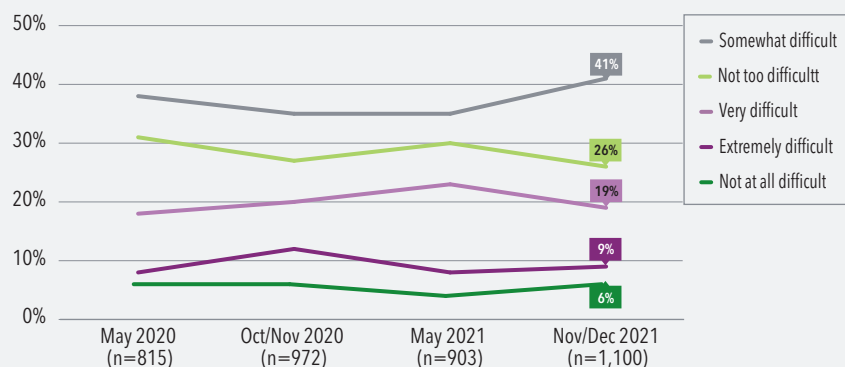
One significant change to the nature of public sector workers' jobs is the increase in return to in-person work. While only 26% of respondents in May 2020 reported no

Figure 1 **Extent to which COVID-19 Has Impacted Nature of Job**



Note: Percentages may not equal 100% due to excluding responses for "Not sure" from figure.

Figure 2 **Difficulty Adjusting to Changes to Job as a Result of COVID-19**



## Breaking Down the Numbers

Those reporting that COVID-19 has significantly impacted the nature of their job were significantly more likely to be:

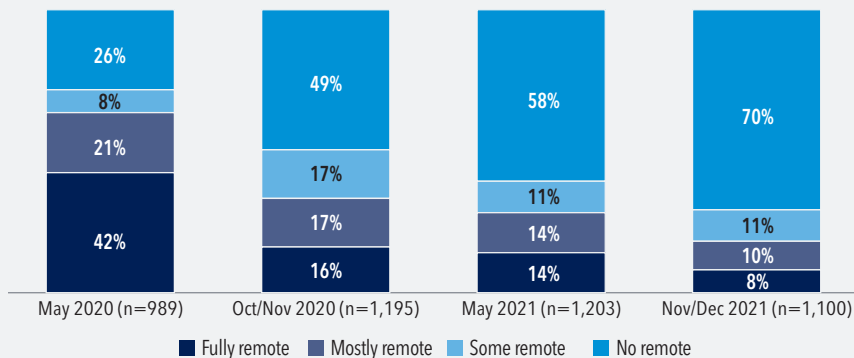
- Female
- Under age 40
- African American
- Considering changing jobs
- Working in a teaching role in K-12 education
- Concerned about their risk of exposure to COVID-19 at work
- Dissatisfied with their job

remote work (i.e., their job requires them to go into a workplace and/or interact in-person with other people), this number has continued to rise throughout the course of the pandemic, with seven in ten workers reporting no remote work as of November/December 2021 (Figure 3).

Nearly one in four respondents (23%) have found it extremely or very difficult to balance both work and homelife demands during the past six months of the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 4). This percentage has remained unchanged since May 2021.

For many parents with children or stepchildren under the age of 18, one of these challenges has been needing to work from home while also taking care of their children (whether during school or day care closures or when they have been participating in virtual schooling). More than two in three (69%) report that they have had to do so, with 30% saying they have needed to do so for a lengthy period of time (Figure 5). The percentage having to work from home while also taking care of their

Figure 3 **Working Remotely?**



Note: Percentages may not equal 100% due to excluding responses for "Other" from figure.

Figure 4 **Difficulty Balancing Work and Homelife Demands During Past Six Months**

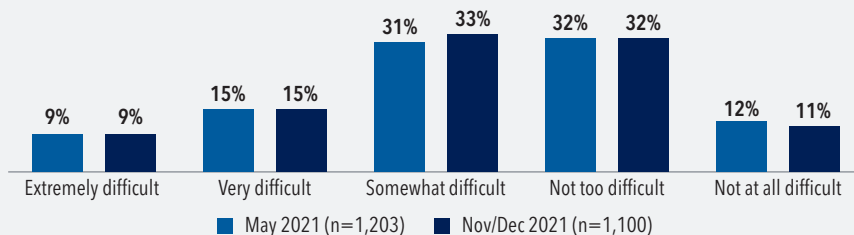
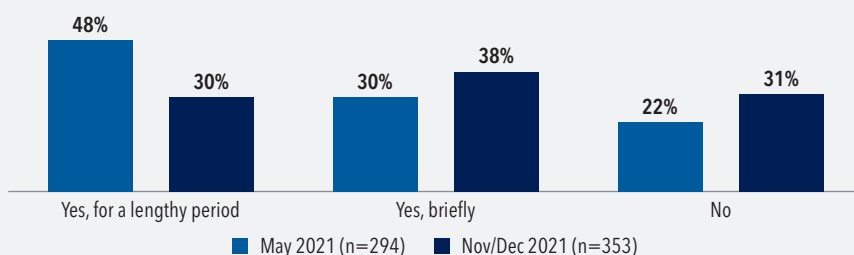


Figure 5 **Had to Work from Home While Also Taking Care of Your Children During Past Six Months?**



### Frontline Feedback

"For those of us whose jobs don't require face-to-face interaction, give us an opportunity to work from home a few days a week or have flexible work at home hours. Many of us have children and we don't have the child care resources we had before the pandemic."

– Post-secondary educator

children decreased by ten percentage points from May 2021, likely due to an increase in schools holding classes in person in the fall of 2021. With the surge of the omicron variant, this percentage of those having to take care of their children for a brief period of time may continue to increase in the coming months as schools turn to virtual learning during outbreaks.

Asked how difficult it has been to manage childcare needs now compared with prior to the pandemic, nearly half (49%) of those with children or stepchildren under the age of 18 indicated that it has been much or somewhat more difficult now than prior to COVID-19 (Figure 6). Another 38% reported that there has been no change in difficulty in managing childcare needs, while 13% said that it has been somewhat or much less difficult now than prior to the pandemic.

Among those engaged in any in-person work, 80% of respondents consider their job at least somewhat risky in terms of their potential exposure to people who have COVID-19; this is the highest percentage to consider themselves at risk since the start of the survey (Figure 7). Forty-four percent of respondents consider their job extremely or very risky, the highest percentage since October/November 2020. Meanwhile, the percentage of respondents considering their job “not too risky” dropped from 21% to 14% over the past six months.

Figure 6 **Difficulty Managing Childcare Needs Now Compared with Prior to COVID-19, Nov/Dec 2021** (n=353)

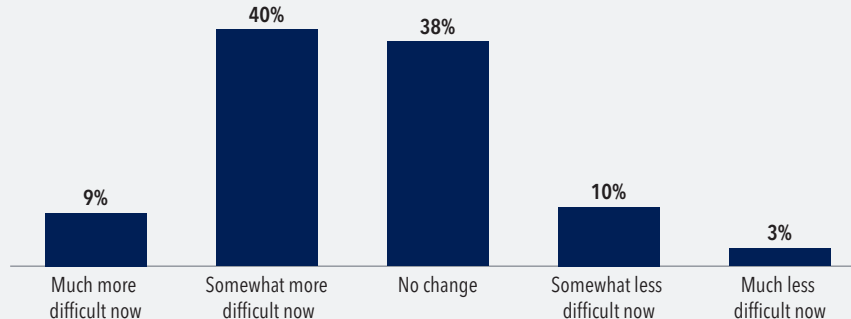
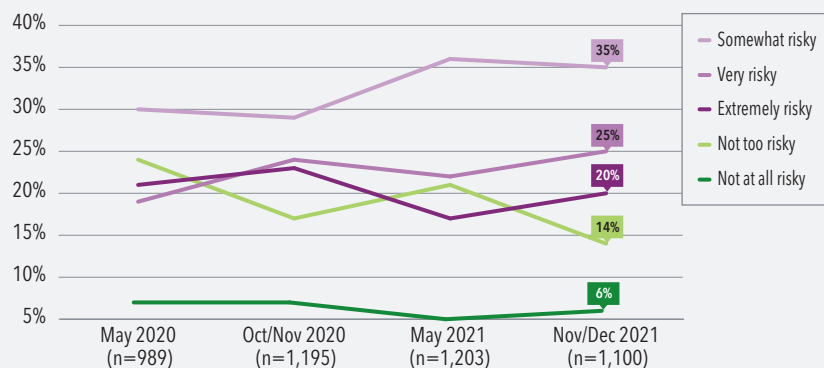


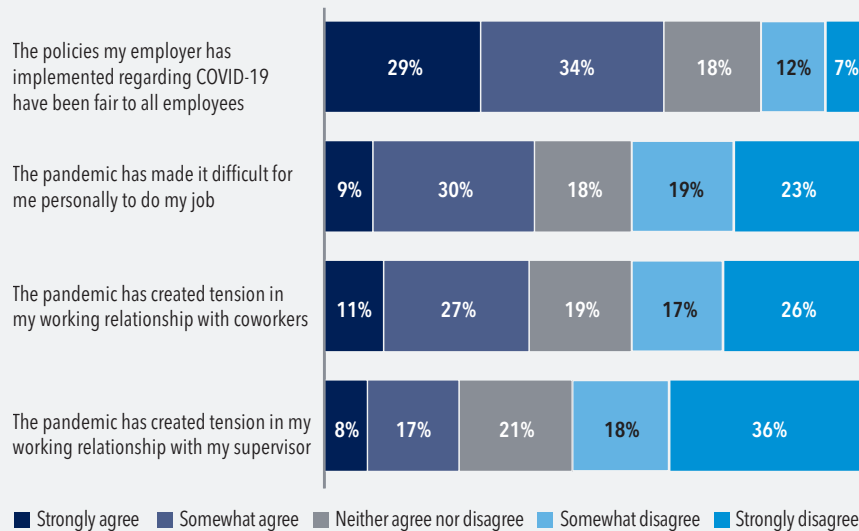
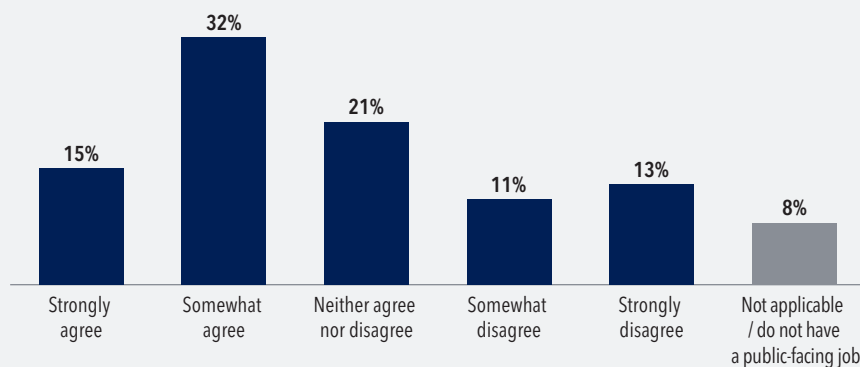
Figure 7 **Perceived Risk of Exposure to COVID-19 at Work**



### Key Stat

80% of respondents engaged in any in-person work consider their job risky in terms of exposure to people who have COVID-19 – the highest percentage since the start of the pandemic.



Figure 8 **Pandemic Impact on Job, Policies, and Relationships at Work**Figure 9 **Tensions with Public [Students' Parents] Created by Pandemic?**

Respondents were also asked about the pandemic's impact on job policies, their ability to do their job, and various working relationships. As shown in Figure 8, nearly two in three respondents (63%) agreed that the policies their employer has implemented during the pandemic have been fair to all employees. However, four in ten reported that the pandemic has made it difficult for them personally to do their job. Further, 38% indicated that the pandemic has created tension in their working relationship with coworkers, and 24% reported that the pandemic has created tension in their working relationship with their supervisor.

When asked whether the pandemic has created tension in how the public (or in the case of K-12 employees, students' parents) interact with them, nearly half (46%) reported that the pandemic has caused tension with the public or students' parents, while nearly one in four (24%) disagreed with this statement (Figure 9).

In some instances, tension with the public and students' parents has been related to vaccination requirements. As of November/December 2021, 86% of state and local government workers surveyed had received the COVID-19 vaccine; more than one in three (36%) are fully vaccinated and have received a booster shot, and another 49%



### Frontline Feedback

"We've had problems with parents coming into school who refuse to wear masks. Police have been called to escort them outside when they won't comply."

– K-12 educator

Figure 10 **Vaccination Status, Nov/Dec 2021** (n=1,100)

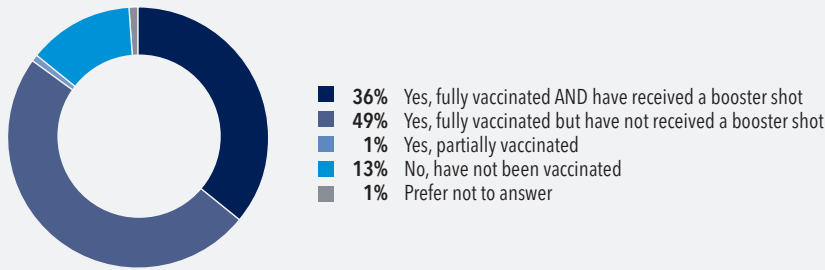
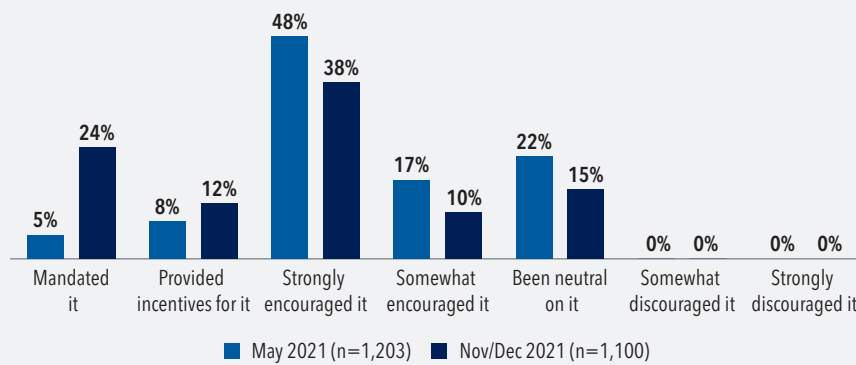


Figure 11 **Employer's Stance on the COVID-19 Vaccine**



are fully vaccinated (Figure 10). Fourteen percent of public sector workers remain unvaccinated – a decrease from May 2021, when 22% reported being unvaccinated.

One reason for the rise in vaccinations may be the increased role that employers are playing in encouraging COVID-19 vaccinations. As can be seen in Figure 11, nearly one in four employers (24%) have mandated the vaccine, a substantial jump from May 2021, when only 5% of employers were mandating the COVID-19 vaccine. The percentage of employers providing incentives for vaccines has also risen, from 8% in May 2021 to 12% in November/December 2021. Fewer employers are now neutral in their stance on the vaccine (a decrease from 22% to 15% in past six months), and less than 1% have discouraged their employees from receiving the vaccine.



### Key Stat

Nearly one in four employers (24%) have mandated the vaccine, a substantial jump from May 2021, when only 5% of employers were mandating the COVID-19 vaccine.

## Satisfaction and Retention Issues

Overall, just under half of respondents (49%) in November/December 2021 were extremely or very satisfied with their employer. This is slightly down from the 51% who reported being very or extremely satisfied in May 2021, but higher than the 46% very or extremely satisfied in October/November 2020. In contrast, 18% said they were not too satisfied or not at all satisfied with their employer in November/December 2021, up from 12% in May 2021 and closer to the 17% in October/November 2020 reporting dissatisfaction (Figure 12).

The three elements of their job that respondents were most satisfied with, displayed in Figure 13, are job security (64% were extremely or very satisfied), their leave benefits

Figure 12 **Satisfaction with Employer**

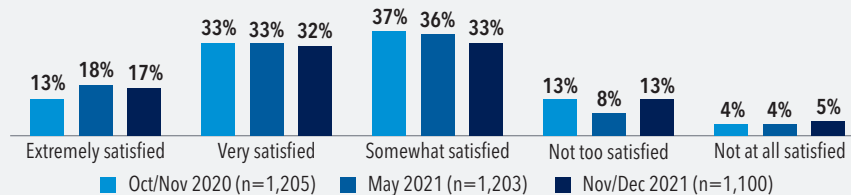
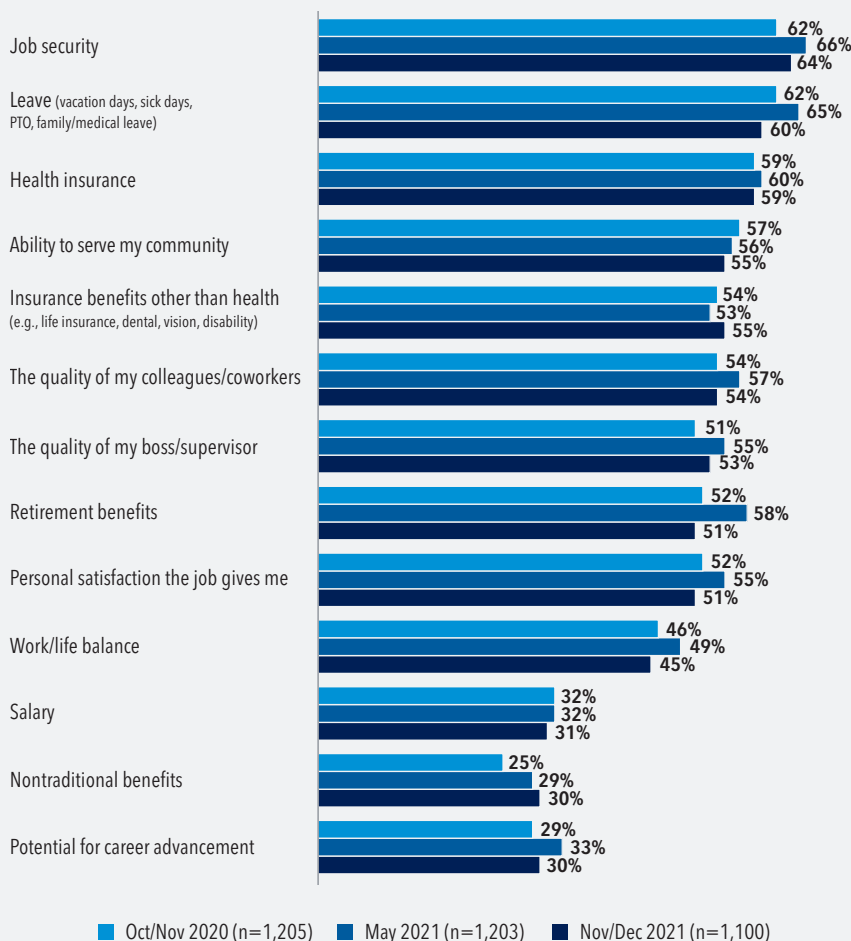


Figure 13 **Satisfaction with Job Elements** (% extremely or very satisfied)



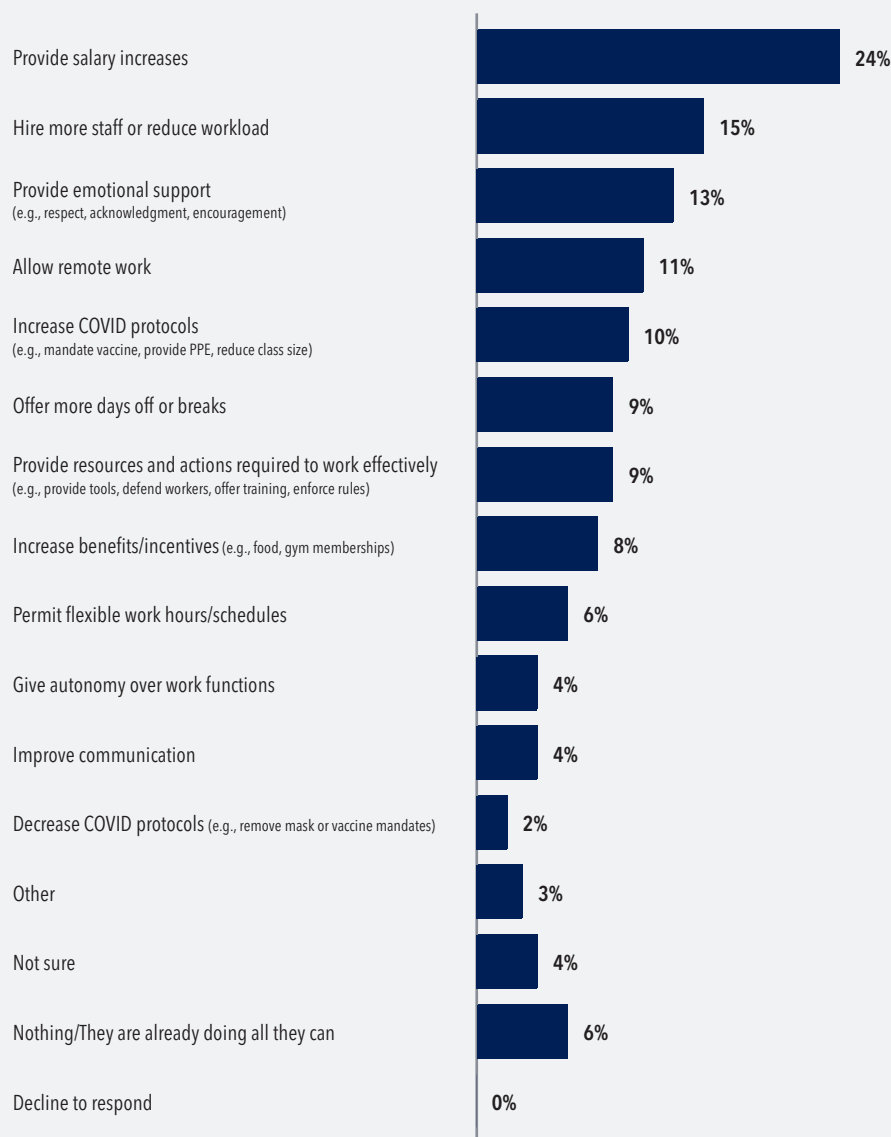
### Key Stat

Overall, just under half of respondents (49%) in November/December 2021 were extremely or very satisfied with their employer.

(60%), and their health insurance (59%). These are the same three elements that they were most satisfied with in May 2021 and October/November 2020, with satisfaction with leave showing a five-percentage point decrease over the past six months. In contrast, less than one in three respondents were very or extremely satisfied with their salary, their nontraditional benefits (e.g., tuition assistance or student loan repayment, employee assistance programs, child care assistance), and/or their potential for career advancement.

Asked to describe in their own words one or two realistic actions their employer could take that would reduce employee stress, respondents were most likely to recommend providing salary increases (24%), hiring more staff or reducing workload (15%), or providing emotional support (e.g., respect, acknowledgment, encouragement) (13%; Figure 14). Ten percent of respondents were unsure of what their employer could do or felt that their employer was doing everything they can.

Figure 14 **Realistic Actions Employer Could Take that Would Reduce Employee Stress, November/December 2021** (n=1,100)



### Frontline Feedback

“Improve pay. People want to feel rewarded/compensated for the work they do.”

– Social services professional

Respondents were asked several questions about organizational changes and staff retention during the pandemic. When asked whether their organization has experienced a change in the number of people leaving their jobs voluntarily since the start of the pandemic, more than six in ten (62%) reported that more people have been leaving voluntarily, with one in four (25%) indicating that significantly more people have left voluntarily since the start of the pandemic (Figure 15). Only 2% reported somewhat or significantly fewer people leaving their jobs voluntarily.

Those who reported more individuals leaving their jobs voluntarily were asked for their views on the major factors causing the increase in the number of people leaving. Results are displayed in Figure 16. Respondents were most likely to attribute this increase to the added stress due to the pandemic (58%), concern about safety due to COVID-19 (52%), and/or people rethinking what they want to do (47%).

Figure 15 **Change in Number of People Leaving Organization Voluntarily Since Start of Pandemic, Nov/Dec 2021** (n=1,100)

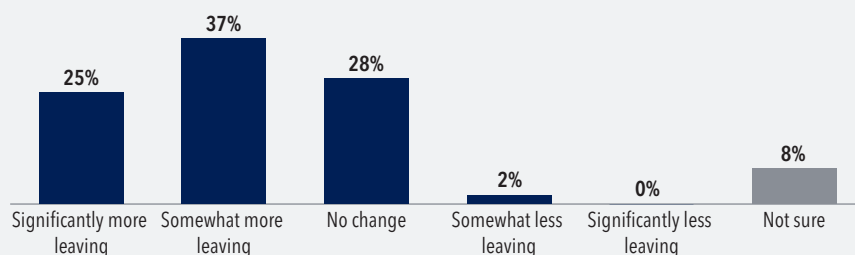
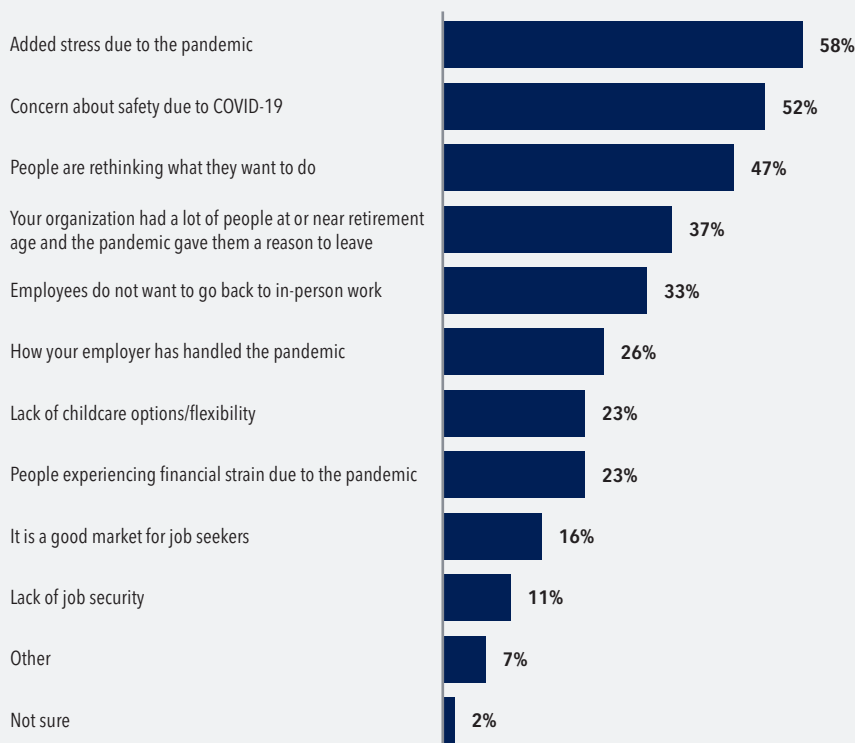


Figure 16 **Major Factors Causing Increase in Number of People Leaving Voluntarily, Nov/Dec 2021** (n=664)



### Key Stat

More than six in ten (62%) respondents reported that more people have been leaving their organization voluntarily since the start of the pandemic.

Figure 17 **Strain on Workload Due to Increase in Number of People Leaving Voluntarily? Nov/Dec 2021** (n=664)

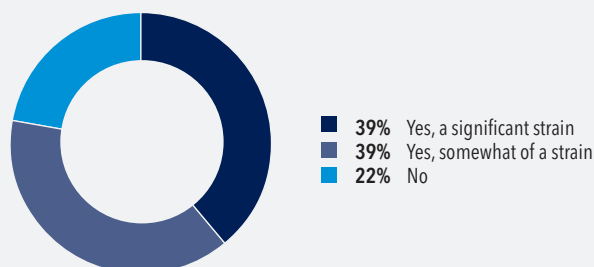
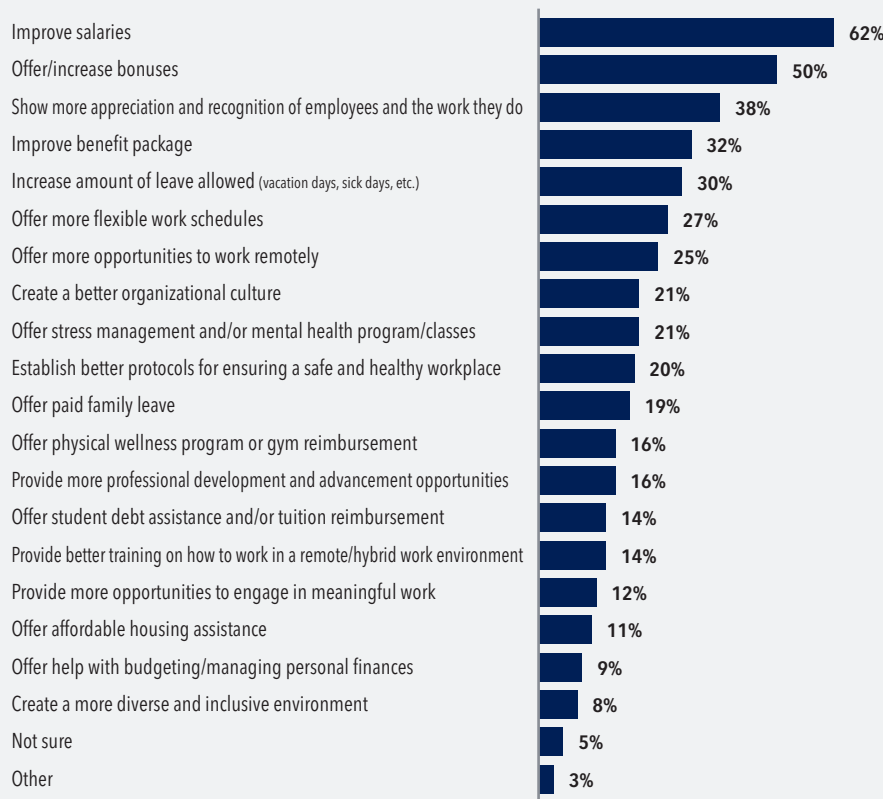


Figure 18 **What Organization Could Do to Retain More Employees, Nov/Dec 2021** (n=1,100)



These same individuals were also asked whether the increase in the number of people leaving voluntarily has put a strain on their workload. Nearly eight in ten (78%) reported that this has put a strain on their workload, with 39% indicating that it has put a significant strain on them (Figure 17).

When asked what they feel their organization could do to retain more employees, respondents most commonly endorsed improving salaries (62%), offering or increasing bonuses (50%), and/or showing more appreciation and recognition of employees and the work they do (38%). Interestingly, showing more appreciation and recognition ranked above actions such as improving benefits packages, increasing the amount of leave allowed, and offering more flexible work schedules (Figure 18).



### Frontline Feedback

“Find ways to show their appreciation for all employees (e.g., recognition, awards, special days to increase morale) and provide resources that could be used by employees if they fell into hard times (e.g., time donation, flexibility working, a fund to assist those who need extra help).”

– Police protection professional

## General COVID-19 Concerns and Morale

Just over half of respondents (51%) described their current morale regarding work as somewhat or very positive (Figure 19). This is down from 56% reporting positive morale in May 2021, but higher than the 41% reporting positive morale in October/November 2020. In contrast, one in four employees reported somewhat or strongly negative morale, a slight increase from May 2021, but lower than October/November 2020 levels.

Asked to describe what emotions they are feeling while at work about the pandemic, respondents were most likely to report feeling stressed (44%), burned out (42%), and/or anxious (39%). Figure 20 displays trends in the top five emotions felt about COVID-19 while at work since the start of the pandemic.

While employees at all four time points surveyed were most likely to report feeling stressed, the rise in stress from May 2020 to October/November 2020 was followed by a similarly large decrease by May 2021. By November/December 2021, however, the percentage reporting feeling stressed had returned to May 2020 levels. Feelings of burnout showed an even sharper increase from May to October/November 2020 (up 20 percentage points) but have leveled off over the past year to 42%. Anxiety, which was high for the first year of the pandemic, decreased by 13 percentage points from October/November 2020 to May 2021, but has since rebounded (up eight percentage points in the past six months). Meanwhile, feelings of gratitude have continued to decrease over time, from 33% at the start of the pandemic, down to 18% by November/December 2021. And finally, feelings of indifference/neutral have remained fairly stable over time, ranging from 15–20% over the four time periods surveyed.

Figure 19 **Current Morale Regarding Work**

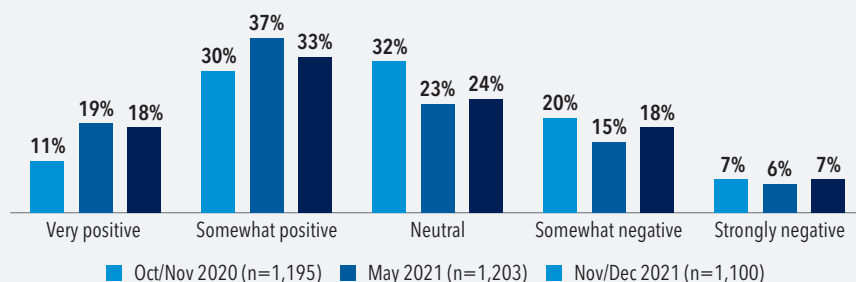
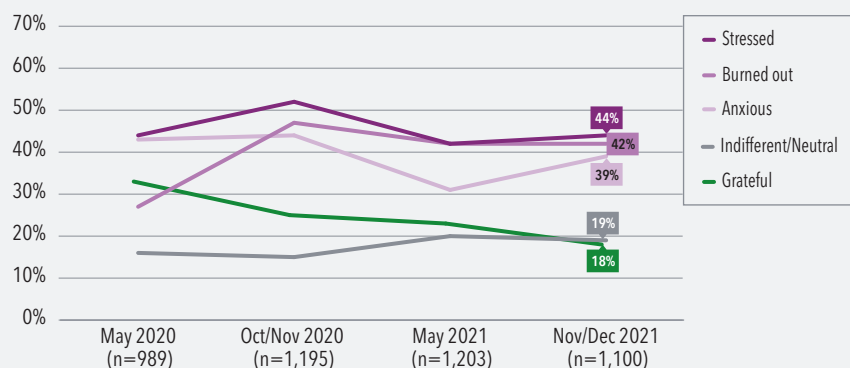


Figure 20 **Top Five Emotions Feeling While at Work about the COVID-19 Pandemic**



### Breaking Down the Numbers

Respondents who reported feeling stressed while at work about the COVID-19 pandemic were significantly more likely to be:

- Female
- Considering changing jobs
- Working in a teaching role in K-12 education
- Concerned about their risk of exposure to COVID-19 at work
- Dissatisfied with their job

Thinking about their job going forward, respondents continue to be most concerned with keeping their family safe from contracting COVID-19 and with staying protected from contracting the virus at work (both 74%; see Figure 21). For concern about keeping their family safe from contracting COVID-19, this represents a decrease since May 2021 of seven percentage points. This decrease may be at least partially explained by great vaccination rates and the availability of vaccines for children ages 5+. For staying protected from contracting the virus at work, on the other hand, concern increased over this same time period by ten percentage points. This may relate to the increase in the percentage of respondents who are back to working in person. Concerns about having pay or employee benefits package reduced have shown modest decreases over time since May 2020. About one in three employees are concerned about having their hours severely reduced/being furloughed and/or losing their job.

Asked about their feelings about working in the public sector during the COVID-19 pandemic, respondents were most likely to report that they value serving their community during this difficult time (59%; see Figure 22). This positive feeling has been the most consistently endorsed throughout all four survey rounds. Two other positive feelings – that the COVID-19 pandemic has made the public more aware of

Figure 21 **Concerns about Job Going Forward**  
(% extremely/very/somewhat concerned)

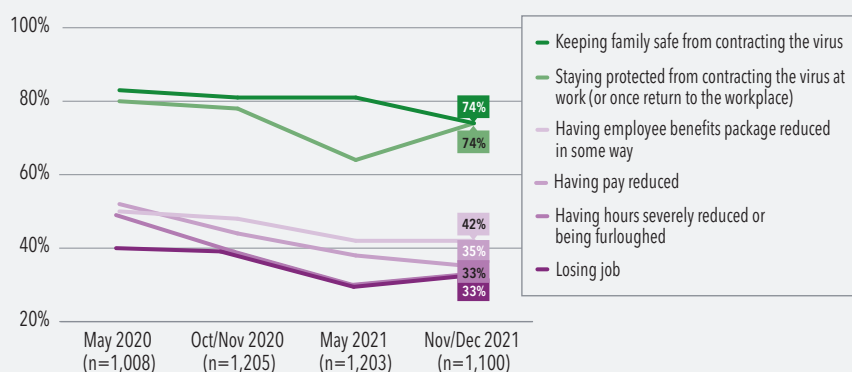
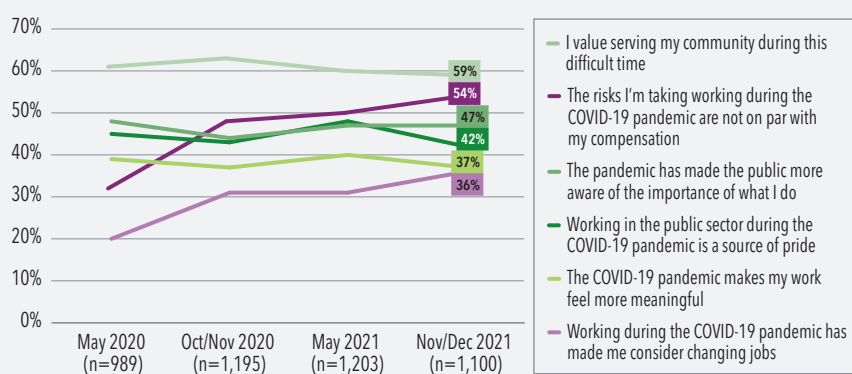


Figure 22 **Feelings about Working in the Public Sector During COVID-19**  
(% strongly or somewhat agree)



### Breaking Down the Numbers

Those considering changing jobs were significantly more likely to be:

- Under age 40
- African American
- Working in K-12 education
- Concerned about their risk of exposure to COVID-19 at work

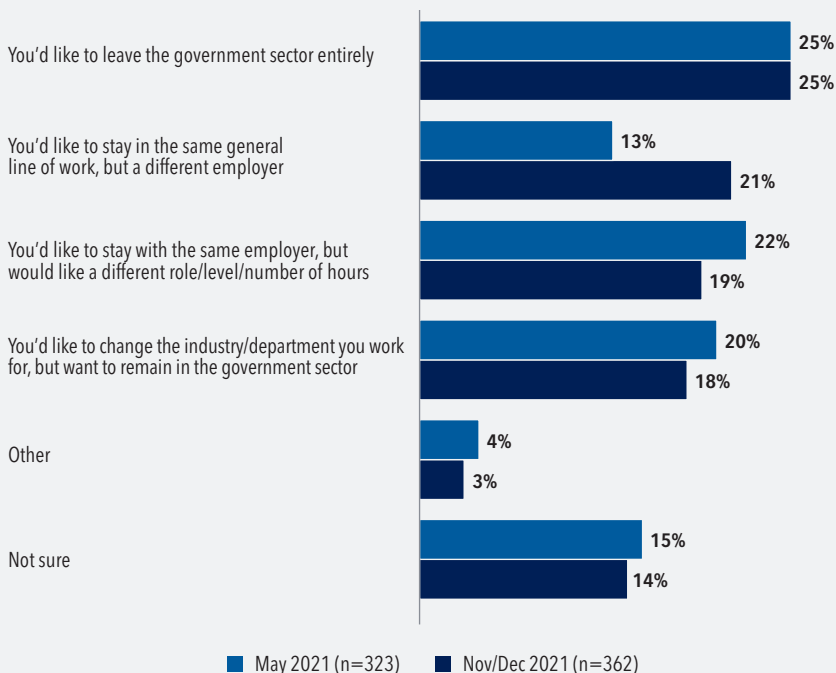


the importance of what they do and has made one's work feel more meaningful – have both remained fairly stable across all time points, with the percentage of respondents agreeing with the former ranging from 44–48% and the percentage agreeing with the latter ranging from 37–40%.

For three of the statements asked about, however, the trends have been more troubling. The feeling that working in the public sector during COVID-19 is a source of pride showed a decrease from 48% in May 2021 to 42% in November/December 2021, its lowest level of endorsement since the start of the pandemic. Meanwhile, the feeling that the risks one is taking while working during the pandemic are not on par with their compensation has continued to increase over time. While the largest rise in this sentiment was from May to October/November 2020 (from 32% to 48%), this number has continued to increase, rising to 54% in November/December 2021. Finally, the feeling that working during the pandemic has made one consider changing jobs also continues to increase, from a low of 20% in May 2020 up to 36% in November/December 2021 (a five-percentage point increase since May 2021).

The 36% of respondents who indicated that the pandemic has made them consider changing jobs were then asked about the type of job change they had in mind. Respondents were split, with one in four (25%) indicating that they would like to leave the government sector entirely; this number was identical in May 2021 (Figure 23). Another 21% would like to stay in the same general line of work but with a different employer, an eight-percentage point increase from May 2021. And 19% would like to stay with the same employer but have a different role/level/number of hours, while 18% would like to stay in the government sector but change the industry or department they work for.

Figure 23 **Type of Job Change Have in Mind**



### Key Stat

Of the 36% of respondents who indicated that the pandemic has made them consider changing jobs, one in four (25%) would like to leave the government sector entirely.

These same respondents were also asked why the pandemic has made them consider changing jobs. As shown in Figure 24, respondents were most likely to indicate wanting a higher salary or benefits package (52%), that they are burned out from the stress of their job during the pandemic (47%), and/or that they need a better work-life balance (36%).

For the first time, this survey round asked respondents whether working during the pandemic has made them consider retiring. As shown in Figure 25, one in three respondents (33%) reported that the pandemic has made them consider retiring.

Figure 24 **Why Considering Changing Jobs, Nov/Dec 2021** (n=362)

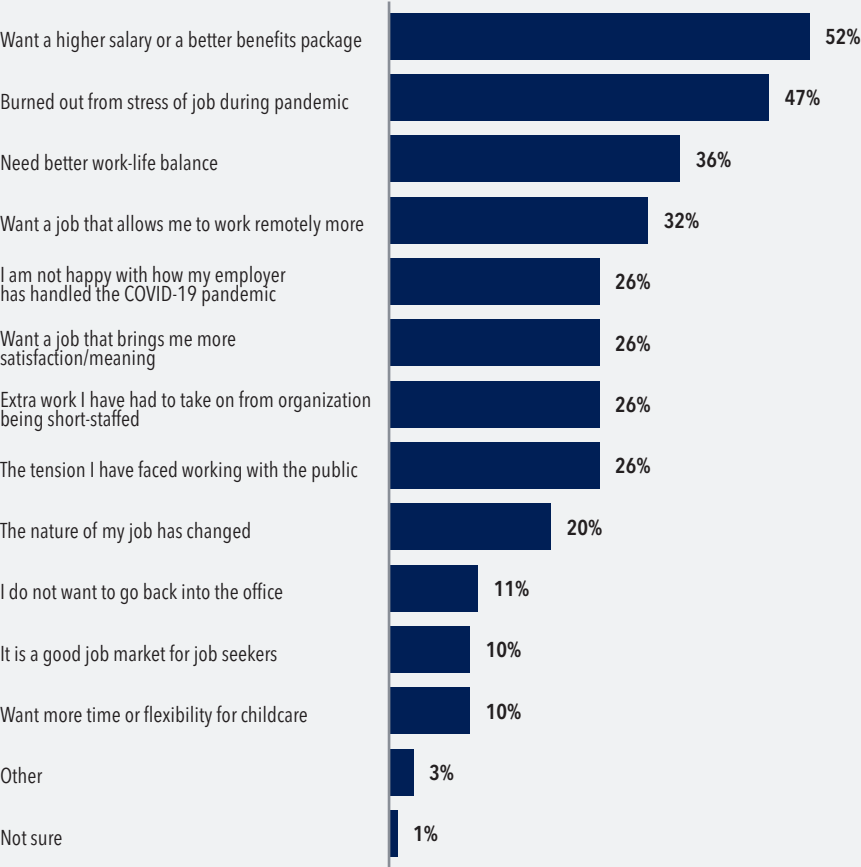
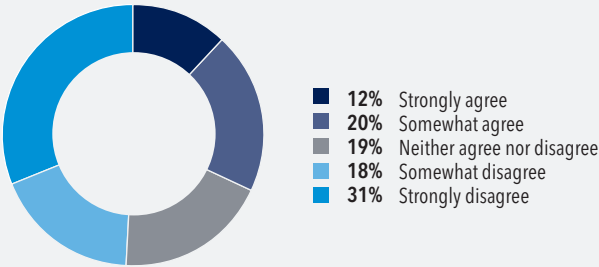


Figure 25 **Working During Pandemic Has Made Me Consider Retiring, Nov/Dec 2021** (n=1,100)



Key Stat

One in three respondents (33%) reported that the pandemic has made them consider retiring.

Figure 26 **Working During the Pandemic Has Made Me Consider Leaving the Workforce Entirely for the Foreseeable Future, Nov/Dec 2021** (n=1,100)

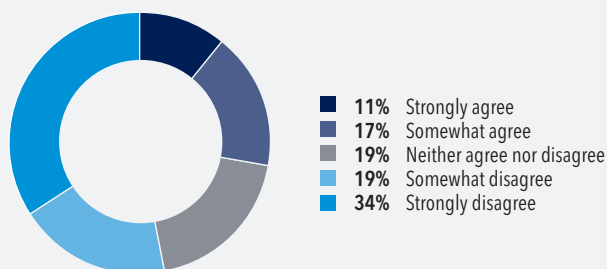
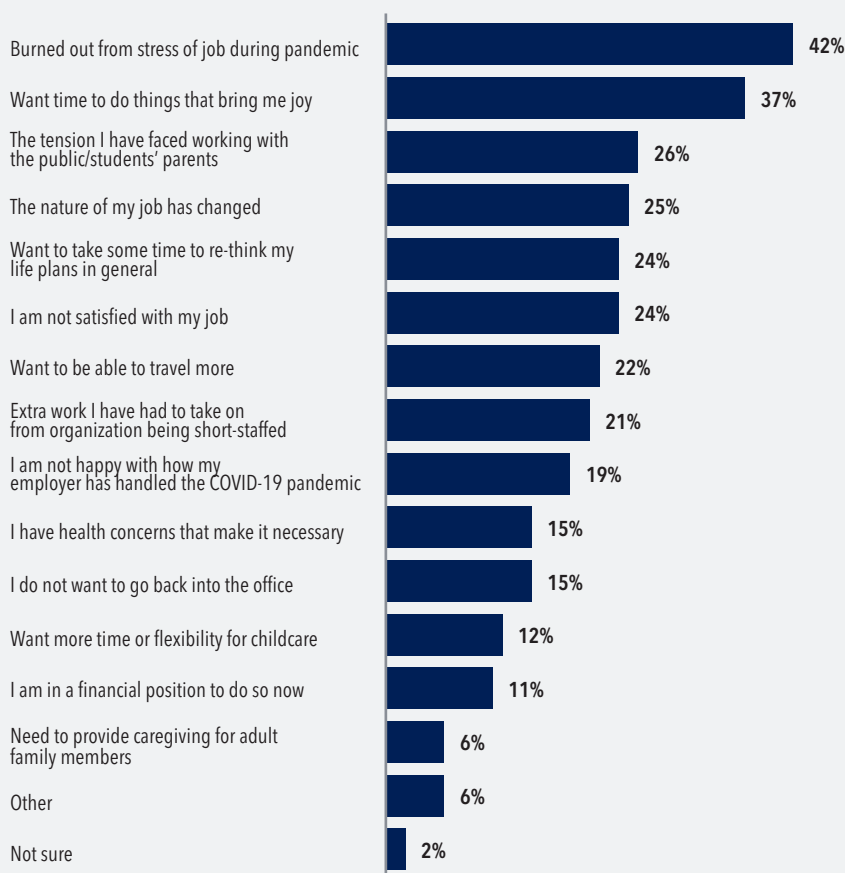


Figure 27 **Why Considering Retiring or Leaving Workforce, Nov/Dec 2021** (n=461)



### Breaking Down the Numbers

Those considering leaving the workforce entirely were significantly more likely to be:

- Under age 40
- African American
- Concerned about their risk of exposure to COVID-19 at work
- Dissatisfied with their job

Respondents were also asked whether working during the pandemic has made them consider leaving the workforce entirely for the foreseeable future. About one in four (28%) agreed with this statement (Figure 26).

Those respondents who indicated that the pandemic has made them consider retiring or leaving the workforce entirely were asked why they are considering doing so. As shown in Figure 27, respondents most commonly reported being burned out from the stress of the pandemic (42%), wanting time to do things that bring them joy (37%), and/or facing tension working with the public or with students' parents (26%).

## Financial Impact

For many public sector workers, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a negative financial impact. In November/December 2021, 44% reported that they and their family had been negatively impacted financially by the pandemic, with 6% indicating the financial impact has been negative to a significant extent (Figure 28). The percentage reporting a negative impact has risen just slightly from May 2021.

This negative financial impact has led workers and other members of their households to take a variety of financial actions. As shown in Figure 29, the most frequent actions have been taking on more debt than they would have otherwise (23%), spending money from an emergency fund to make ends meet (21%), and/or borrowing money from friends or family (12%).

Figure 28 **Financial Impact of COVID-19**

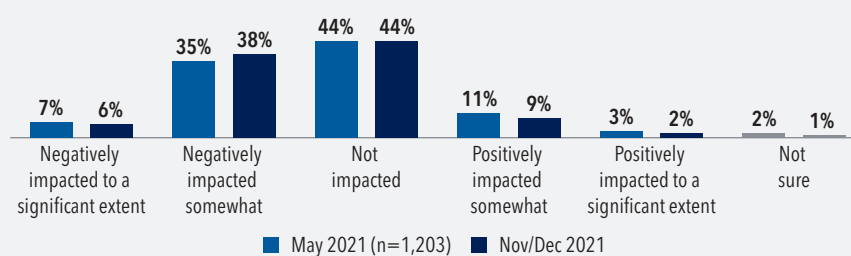
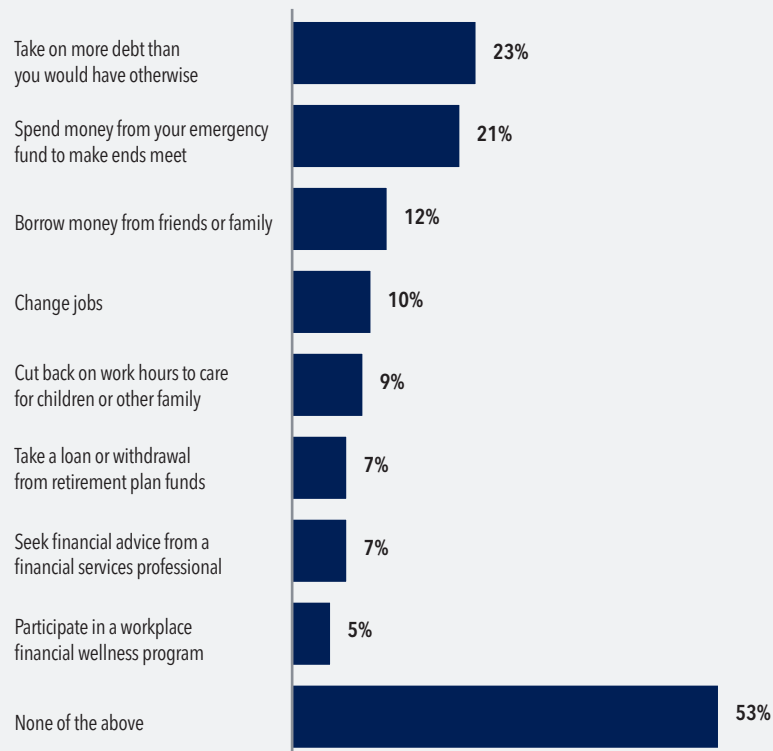


Figure 29 **Financial Actions Taken Due to COVID-19, Nov/Dec 2021**



### Key Stat

In November/December 2021, 44% reported that they and their family had been negatively impacted financially by the pandemic.

With many taking on additional debt and/or spending from their emergency fund to make ends meet, it is unsurprising that respondents were most likely to indicate that a program that helps set aside money from one's paycheck into an emergency savings fund would be an extremely or very helpful finance-related resource from their employer (45%; see Figure 30). Following closely behind were a program that automatically increases contribution amounts to a secondary retirement savings plan every year up to a preset maximum (43% agree this would be extremely or very helpful), a program that automatically enrolls you into a secondary retirement savings plan (42%), and free online financial wellness resources (41%).

Concerns about the adequacy of their pensions may be one reason that respondents have favorable views toward a program that automatically increases contribution amounts to a secondary retirement savings plan every year up to a preset maximum. When asked how confident they are that their pension will cover all of their living expenses in retirement, only 20% were extremely or very confident. More than twice as many (43%) were not too confident or not at all confident (Figure 31).

Figure 30 **Helpfulness of Finance-Related Resources from Employer, Nov/Dec 2021** (n=1,100)

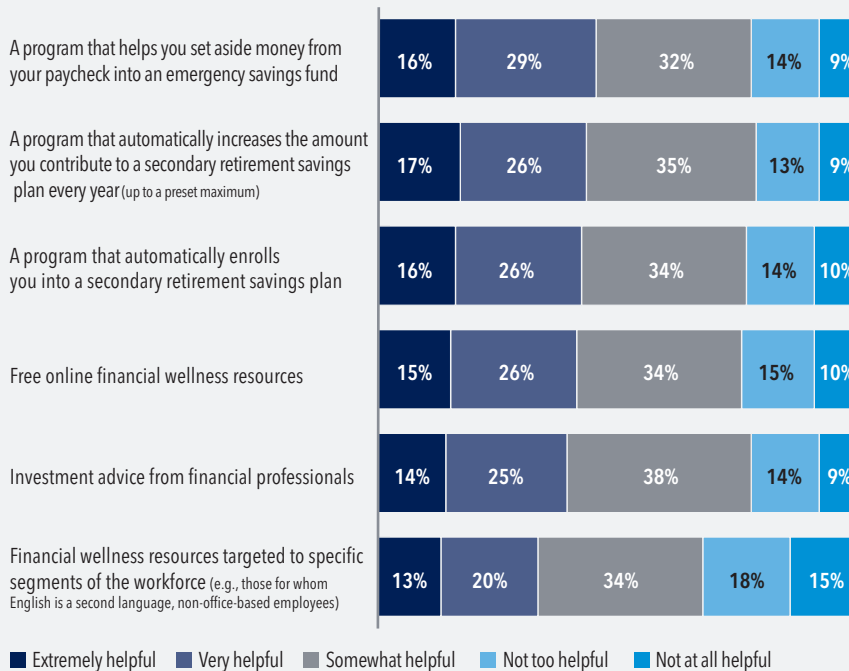
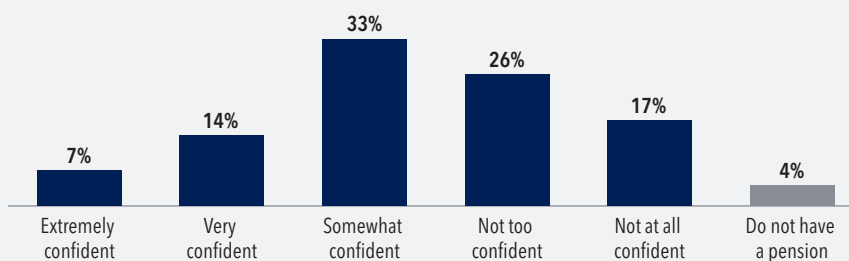


Figure 31 **Confidence in Pension Covering All of Living Expenses in Retirement, Nov/Dec 2021** (n=1,100)



### Key Stat

45% of respondents indicated that a program that helps set aside money from one's paycheck into an emergency savings fund would be an extremely or very helpful finance-related resource from their employer.

## Conclusion

This report describes the results of a nationally representative online survey of 1,100 state and local government employees in November/December 2021 that assessed their views on COVID-19's impact on their job and financial outlook, their general concerns about COVID-19 and morale, satisfaction with their employer, and retention issues. Where applicable, comparisons are made between this survey and surveys conducted in May 2020, October/November 2020, and May 2021.

Results indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to have an impact on the nature of employees' jobs, even as the number of public sector employees returning to in-person work continues to rise. The vast majority of those engaged in any in-person work consider their job risky in terms of their potential exposure to people who have COVID-19; the 80% who believe they are at risk is the highest percentage to date. The percentage of state and local government workers who are fully vaccinated (and boosted) also continues to rise, as does employer encouragement of vaccines.

Just over half of respondents describe their current morale regarding work as somewhat or very positive, with many feeling stressed, burned out, and/or anxious about the pandemic while at work. While respondents continue to be most concerned with keeping their family safe from contracting COVID-19 and with staying protected from contracting the virus at work, the majority also report that they value serving their community during this difficult time.

Unfortunately, working during the pandemic has also made an increasing number of state and local government workers consider changing jobs due to wanting a better salary or benefits package, feeling burned out from the pandemic, and/or needing a better work-life balance. Many are also considering retiring and/or leaving the workforce entirely for the foreseeable future.

The negative financial impact of the pandemic continues to affect a sizable portion of state and local government employees, leading some to take on more debt, spend from their emergency fund, and/or borrow money from friends and family. As public sector workers express concerns about the adequacy of their pensions, they believe that their employers can take certain actions (e.g., auto-enrollment in retirement plans, providing an emergency savings program and/or free financial wellness resources) to help with their financial health.

Employees are also feeling the strain of the additional workload they have had to take on as more people have voluntarily left their organizations. Just under half of respondents report that they are currently extremely or very satisfied with their employer. However, they do feel that there are steps their organization could take to retain more employees, especially improving salaries, offering or increasing bonuses, and showing more appreciation and recognition of employees and the work they do.



### 5 Strategies for Practitioners

As we enter this next phase of the pandemic, understanding the evolving impact of the pandemic on state and local government workers' employment and financial outlooks, general COVID-19 concerns and morale, and views on satisfaction and retention continues to be critical as the public sector competes for talent in a tight labor market. This information, in turn, will help employers recruit and retain the individuals they need to provide crucial public services in the years ahead.

1

**Increase Compensation:** State and local government employees' top recommendations for improving retention are salary increases and offering bonuses. Consider how you can increase compensation, whether utilizing recent federal funds and increased tax and fee revenues, repurposing existing funds, or pursuing other options.

2

**Show Appreciation and Recognition:** Nearly 4 in 10 respondents suggested employers could improve retention by showing more appreciation and recognition of employees and the work they do. Make sure that you are recognizing the ways in which employees have gone above and beyond in their jobs during the pandemic, and take actions to demonstrate your appreciation (e.g., provide more flexibility in schedule, write personalized thank you notes to employees, acknowledge individuals at team meetings, showcase staff out in the community).

3

**Provide Financial Wellness Resources:** With many taking on additional debt and/or spending from their emergency fund to make ends meet during the pandemic, workers are looking to their employer for programs and resources that can help their financial health. Explore the possibility of offering programs that help set aside money from one's paycheck into an emergency savings fund, programs that automatically increase contribution amounts to a secondary retirement savings plan every year up to a preset maximum, programs that automatically enroll employees into a supplemental retirement savings plan, and free online financial wellness resources.

4

**Prioritize Employee Safety and Mental Health:** Employees are feeling stressed, burned out/fatigued, and anxious while at work due to the pandemic, and many are concerned about exposure to COVID-19 while working in person. Implement safety measures to reduce this stress and anxiety, and provide emotional support (e.g., respect, acknowledgment, encouragement) to improve morale and productivity.

5

**Emphasize Employee Impact on Community:** Nearly 6 in 10 public sector employees surveyed reported that they value serving their community during this difficult time. Emphasize the critical role that these workers are playing in making a difference in their communities, and in keeping essential services and programs running across the country.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Different COVID-19 Vaccines," January 21, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "COVID Data Tracker," accessed February 7, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> The White House, "Fact Sheet: The Biden Administration to Begin Distributing At-Home, Rapid COVID-19 Tests to Americans for Free," January 14, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University, "Coronavirus Dashboard," accessed February 28, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> The mean (average) age of respondents was 45.58.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "2020 Government Employment and Payroll Tables," accessed February 7, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Author analysis of IPUMS-CPS. See IPUMS-CPS, "Current Population Survey."

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