

TO: Senate Committee on Government Operations
FROM: Cary Brown, Executive Director, Vermont Commission on Women
RE: S228, An act relating to collective bargaining over remote, in-person, and hybrid work standards for State employees

February 24, 2026

Thank you for taking up S228, an act relating to collective bargaining over remote, in-person, and hybrid work standards for State employees. As you contemplate this legislation, the Vermont Commission on Women appreciates the opportunity to contribute input around the inequitable impacts that are felt by employees when changes to the ability to work remotely are implemented.

The ability to work remotely (or not) has disproportionate impacts on people based on their gender, race, disability, LGBTQ+ status, and other intersecting identities.

This memo includes:

- Information from research on equity impact considerations
- A memo regarding gender equity considerations that the Commission on Women shared with the Secretary of the Agency of Administration in August 2025
- Details of feedback collected from state employees

Gender

Research tells us:

- Women are significantly more likely to leave their job after a return-to-office order, with a turnover increase nearly three times higher than that of male employees.¹
- Women with childcare responsibilities are 32% less likely to leave their jobs when remote work options are available.²
- Sexual harassment, microaggressions, and workplace bias are less likely to occur in a hybrid/remote environment. In one study, 88% of women reported that hybrid work arrangements have contributed to a more equitable workplace.³ This is more pronounced for women of color; in a 2021 Future Forum survey, 97% of Black respondents in the U.S. said they preferred a fully remote or hybrid workplace.⁴

¹ [Return-to-Office Mandates and the Hidden Cost of Brain Drain | Hankamer School of Business | Baylor University](#)

² [Remote-Work Options Can Boost Productivity and Curb Burnout](#)

³ [IWG Report - March 2023 Women Hybrid Workers Survey - Fact Sheet.docx - Google Docs](#)

⁴ [Slack survey finds 97% of Black knowledge workers want the future of the office to be remote or hybrid - Future Forum](#)

Race

Research tells us:

- Employees of color are at a higher risk for workplace injuries, which has led to an increased frequency and prevalence of work-related disabilities for Black and foreign-born Latine workers.⁵
- In a 2021 Future Forum survey, 97% of Black respondents in the U.S. said they preferred a fully remote or hybrid workplace.⁶
- A McKinsey study found that Black employees were 14% more likely than their White peers to leave if hybrid work was not possible.⁷
- During the pandemic, Black workers were more likely to prefer remote work, with many of them saying that it allowed them to avoid some of the biases they faced in the office.⁸

Disability

Research tells us:

- Remote work in response to the Covid pandemic contributed to an increase in the number of people with disabilities in the workforce.⁹
- A McKinsey study found that employees with disabilities were 11% more likely to prefer a hybrid work model than employees without disabilities, and 14% more likely to leave entirely than employees without disabilities.¹⁰

LGBTQ+

Research tells us:

- In a 2023 UCLA School of Law study, 47% of LGBTQ respondents reported being discriminated against or harassed at work, and 58% reported engaging in “covering” behaviors (such as altering their physical appearance or avoiding using public restrooms) to avoid harassment. The need to engage in covering behaviors is amplified in physical office environments.¹¹
- A McKinsey study found that LGBTQ+ employees were 13 percent more likely to prefer hybrid work than their heterosexual peers.¹²

⁵ Seabury, S. A., Terp, S., & Boden, L. I. (2017). Racial and ethnic differences in the frequency of workplace injuries and prevalence of work-related disability. *Health Affairs*, 36(2), 266–273.

<https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2016.1185>

⁶ [Slack survey finds 97% of Black knowledge workers want the future of the office to be remote or hybrid - Future Forum](#)

⁷ <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/hybrid-work-making-it-fit-with-your-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-strategy#/>

⁸ <https://www.bloomberglinea.com/english/more-black-hispanic-job-seekers-in-us-prefer-to-work-remotely-than-white-applicants/>

⁹ <https://alyciaanderson.com/how-does-the-return-to-in-person-work-order-affect-people-with-disabilities/?srsltid=AfmBOooSIVHaWiMK6lm6KSlA2XovNfwdiclvuGXdGlm6hVzxeatsc4P5>

¹⁰ <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/hybrid-work-making-it-fit-with-your-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-strategy#/>

¹¹ [LGBTQ People’s Experiences of Workplace Discrimination and Harassment - Williams Institute](#)

¹² <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/hybrid-work-making-it-fit-with-your-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-strategy#/>

Caregiving responsibilities

Research tells us:

- Women with childcare responsibilities are 32% less likely to leave their jobs when remote work options are available.¹³
- Among full-time caregivers who also work, 84% report that it's very helpful.¹⁴

¹³ [Remote-Work Options Can Boost Productivity and Curb Burnout](#)

¹⁴ <https://www.aarp.org/pri/topics/work-finances-retirement/employers-workforce/employer-caregiving-survey/>

MEMO

TO: Sarah Clark, Secretary of Administration
FROM: Cary Brown, Executive Director, Commission on Women
DATE: August 25, 2025
RE: Update on Remote/In-office Work

Thank you for your recent update on remote/in-office work. We very much appreciate being kept in the loop as this strategy develops, and we particularly appreciate the opportunity to contribute input regarding gender equity considerations for any shifts in policy.

The ability to work remotely (or not) has disproportionate impacts on people based on their gender. Particular impacts occur for women of color, LGBTQ+ people, those with disabilities, and other intersecting identities. When workplace policies are adjusted, it's important to recognize those impacts and factor them into any decisions made. This memo suggests ways to do so, and we would welcome further conversations and collaboration as you move forward.

DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT BASED ON GENDER

Women are more likely to quit in response to strict return-to-office policies.

- A Gartner survey of 2,080 knowledge worker employees from May through June 2023 found that intent to stay among average employees was 8% lower with strict RTO mandates, but among women the intent to stay was 11% lower.
- According to federal labor statistics analyzed by the [Washington Post](#), the labor force participation rate for women ages 25 to 44 with children under 5 fell nearly three percentage points between January and June 2025, reaching its lowest level in over three years.
- Women with childcare responsibilities are [32% less likely](#) to leave their jobs when remote work options are available.

Remote/hybrid work allows greater flexibility for family care – and women are still doing much more of that work than men are.

- Women still shoulder the majority of childcare and caregiving duties, with [mothers spending 2.1 times](#) as much time as fathers on the unpaid work of taking care of home and family.
- Mothers of young children have the highest rate of fully remote work across the board. Combining paid work with unpaid care work is more manageable with remote work as a possibility.
- Child care in Vermont is more accessible than it used to be, but there are still enormous challenges with availability and affordability – and many child care schedules don't align well with work schedules, particularly when time for commuting is factored in.
- Home health care in Vermont similarly has long waiting lists, and can be difficult to arrange around work schedules, which can make managing elder care challenging; and women are doing much more of this than men are.

- Given the inadequate availability of formal, paid elder and child care capacity in the state, women who perform informal, unpaid caring duties at home risk being unable to continue balancing both paid and unpaid labor.

Sexual harassment, microaggressions, and workplace bias are less likely to happen in a remote/hybrid environment.

- A significant [88% of women report](#) that hybrid work arrangements have contributed to a more equitable workplace.
- Women of color face particular inequity in the workplace, and on the whole have a more negative experience than white women. Microaggressions happen more frequently in person, contributing to environments that can feel physically and emotionally unsafe for women of color, leading some to find respite in remote work.
- In a survey by the [Slack think tank Future Forum](#) , 97% of Black respondents in the U.S. said they preferred a fully remote or hybrid workplace.
- Women of color [have reported](#):
 - “I’m nervous about going back...This was the first year that I haven’t had my hair commented on and touched without permission in my professional life,”
 - “I actually like not having to go into the office and be constantly reminded that I’m the only Black woman there.”
 - “Things like having your hair touched or people commenting on your body, or asking ‘Oh what are you eating? It smells weird’” (examples of microaggressions)
- It is much harder for harassment to occur when people are working together remotely, and all interactions are witnessed or recorded. The quiet comments, the off-color jokes, the inappropriate physical contact that can happen in the office when nobody else is around – they simply don’t have the same opportunity to occur. When women can prove through emails, text messages, and recorded video calls the interactions otherwise may have gone unwitnessed, those interactions are much less likely to happen. And when they do, there is written evidence.
- The [McKinsey 2024 report on women in the workplace](#) shows a dramatic decline in women experiencing microaggressions after 2020, when remote work became widespread, and in 2024 it jumped way up again – coinciding with increases in strict return-to-office policies.

The State of Vermont Employee Engagement Survey makes clear that remote/hybrid work has had a very positive effect on employees, and especially for women and non-binary employees.

- Work-life balance appears consistently as one of the top reasons for staying, and over 90% of people in 2024 said that remote work positively impacts their work-life balance. Since 2021 the percentage of people saying their job allows for a good balance has increased every year. This coincides with the increase in telework/hybrid schedules.
- The percentage of those who said they were likely to stay in the next year was higher among those who could do some telework/hybrid, and lower for those who could not. When broken down by gender, it’s clear that women and non-binary employees benefit from this ability:
 - 42% of women selected telework/hybrid schedule as a reason for staying compared to 27% of men and 34% of non-binary employees.
 - 34% of women indicated telework/hybrid schedule as a reason for leaving, compared to 35% of non-binary employees and only 20% of men.
- Telework/hybrid schedule also had a positive impact on the culture of the workplace. 79% of those who could do some telework/hybrid agreed with the statement, “In my department,

people are treated with respect and dignity.” Only 61% of those who could not do telework/hybrid felt similarly.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR GENDER EQUITY IN ANY WORKPLACE SCHEDULE PLAN

In any plan for work scheduling, whether it’s fully in-person, fully remote, or hybrid, there are several ways that gender equity can be considered.

Utilize flexible work arrangements whenever possible.

Vermont law requires employers to consider all requests for flexible work schedules, because Vermont has recognized that flexible work arrangements are one of the best tools for keeping women in the workforce. The capacity to tailor and flex work time to child care or elder care schedules makes balancing work and family responsibilities more manageable, which benefits whole families, including children.

Support employees with family responsibilities.

Providing assistance with child care, whether through on-site care or financial help, can alleviate the burden on working mothers. Similarly, assistance with elder care, or other dependent care, has a beneficial impact on women who are providing that care. Paid family and medical leave, as the State has recently implemented for its employees, is key, and should be as comprehensive and supportive as possible.

Create and maintain a healthy, inclusive culture.

Be aware of the increased risk for harassment and microaggressions when people are together in person. Remember that women of color and LGBTQ+ employees face exacerbated risks. Take advanced steps to ensure training for supervisors in creating and maintaining a healthy workplace culture; increase transparency around the process of reporting and processing complaints; and actively work to address implicit bias.

Ensure that recognition, opportunity, and advancement are available to all employees.

Supervisors should be careful not to assume that a need for flexibility reflects a lesser commitment to work. This can result in women being overlooked for promotions or high-visibility projects. Review policies and practices to make sure that decision-making processes for advancement don’t rely on informal recommendations and referrals. This can make it more likely that opportunities go to those who are the best qualified, and not those who are “in the know.”

Solicit the opinions and concerns of employees and factor them into policies.

To be more inclusive to women of color in particular, ask them what they need and want. Pay attention to factors such as families living in multigenerational households, for instance, as do many Asian American Pacific Islander women. They may have some of the biggest challenges related to caregiving and returning to an environment where their co-workers may be unvaccinated.

Allow a realistic timeline for implementation of any changes.

Asking women who are currently working remotely while managing other responsibilities to increase their time in the office and commuting will mean making new arrangements for many of them. Waiting lists for child care, home health care, and elder care are very long, and it may take months to make changes for some employees.

10/15/2025

Summary of State of Vermont Employee Concerns re: New Hybrid Work Standard

DRAFT

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Introduction

This report summarizes the concerns and feedback of State of Vermont employees regarding the new [Hybrid Work Standard](#). Comments and feedback were analyzed for themes using the U.S. Surgeon General’s [Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being](#).

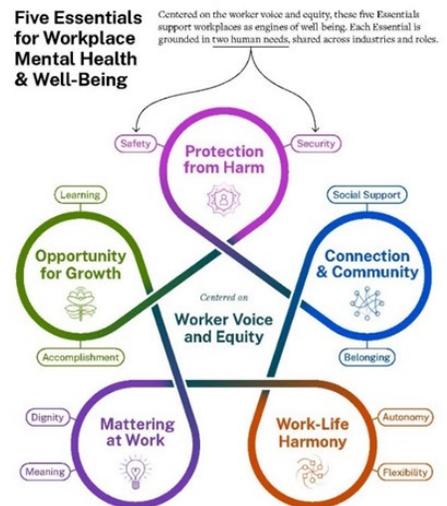
This report does not include every concern raised but is rather a summary of the most common themes. Over 750 SOV employees contributed the feedback that led to the creation of this report.

The State of Vermont routinely receives recognition as a great employer. Staff come to us because of our benefits and our culture of treating people like they matter, and they stay for the opportunities to meaningfully contribute to the wellbeing of all Vermonters. **Our reputation as a great employer is at risk.**

We are deeply concerned about the impacts of the rushed implementation of new Hybrid Work Standard. Our workforce has elevated many ways in which this will represent a dramatic and disruptive change in their lives. **It is our recommendation that you pause the implementation of this standard to allow for thoughtful consideration of the concerns documented in this report.** We are ready to come to the table as subject matter experts to support you in figuring out how to implement this standard in a way that works for the state as well as State of Vermont employees.

Methodology: Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being

The Surgeon General’s Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being is a federally validated model that is centered around the foundational values of equity and inclusion of worker’s voices. It includes five “Essentials”; each rooted in two basic human needs. This framework makes a business case for centering staff well-being in workplace decisions, arguing that worker-centered organizations enjoy increased productivity, higher levels of worker satisfaction, reduced turnover, and more regular innovation.



There are more than 8,500 people who are part of the State of Vermont’s Executive Branch workforce.¹ Work is one of the most vital parts of life, powerfully shaping our health, wealth,

¹ [DHR-Workforce Report 1.pdf](#)

and well-being.² At its best, work provides us the ability to support ourselves and our loved ones, and can also provide us with a sense of meaning, opportunities for growth, and a community. When people thrive at work, they are more likely to feel physically and mentally healthy overall, and to contribute positively to their workplace.³ This creates both a responsibility and unique opportunity for leaders to create workplace environments that support the health and well-being of workers.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic may have accelerated the evolution of work and the conversation around workplace mental health and well-being, broad recognition and appreciation for the relationship between the work environment, culture, community, and our health preceded the pandemic.⁴ While many challenges outside the workplace may impact well-being—from economic inequality, food insecurity, and housing insecurity to household, educational, and medical debt—there are still many ways that organizations can function as engines for mental health and well-being.⁵ Organizational leaders, managers, supervisors, and workers alike have an unprecedented opportunity to examine the role of work in our lives and explore ways to better enable all workers to thrive within the workplace and beyond.

Feedback from State of Vermont employees was analyzed using a deductive coding model rooted in this framework. Staff concerns were identified for each of the five Essentials.

Essential 1: Protection from Harm

The first Essential, **Protection from Harm**, is rooted in the human needs for **safety** and **security**. More than two-in-five workers surveyed by the American Psychological Association in 2022 reported that health and safety concerns negatively affected their stress level at work.⁶

² Well Being In the Nation Network. (n.d.). Vital conditions. Retrieved from <https://winnetwork.org/vital-conditions>

³ Kleine, A.-K., Rudolph, C. W., & Zacher, H. (2019). Thriving at work: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 40(9-10), 973-999. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2375>

⁴ Adams, J. M. (2019). The value of worker well-being. *Public Health Reports*, 134(6), 583–586. Sagepub. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033354919878434>

⁵ Lovejoy, M., Kelly, E. L., Kubzansky, L. D., & Berkman, L. F. (2021). Work redesign for the 21st century: Promising strategies for enhancing worker well-being. *American Journal of Public Health*, 111(10), 1787–1795. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306283>

⁶ American Psychological Association. (2021). *The American workforce faces compounding pressure*. Retrieved from: <https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/work-well-being/compounding-pressure-2021>

This Essential proposes to address that challenge through four related components:

- Prioritize workplace physical and psychological safety,
- Enable adequate rest,
- Normalize and support mental health, and
- Operationalize diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) norms, policies, and procedures.

SOV staff feedback raises concerns that can be correlated to all four of these components.

Physical and Psychological Safety

SOV staff report that the mandate to report to a physical duty station three days per week will negatively impact their physical and psychological safety. Common concerns raised in this theme include:

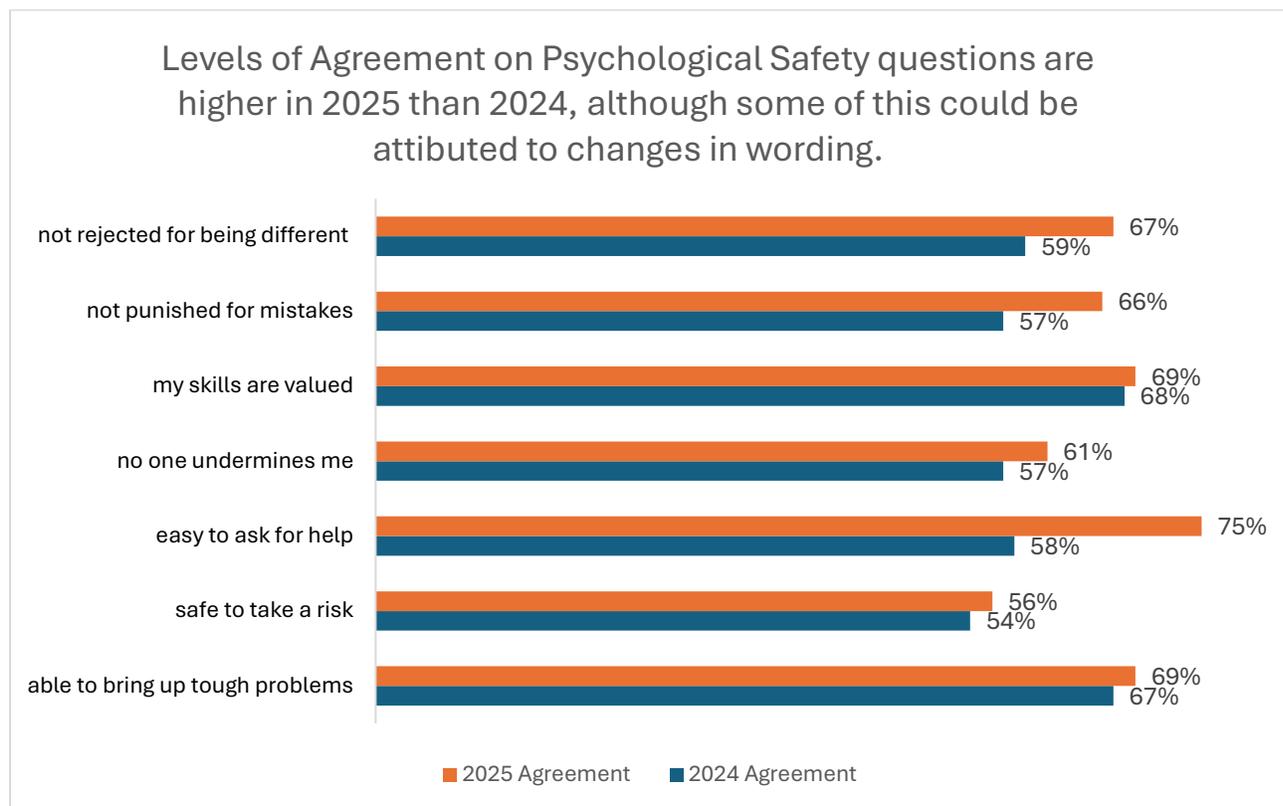
- Staff are concerned about the **lack of security measures in place at state office buildings**. On Friday, August 8th, a gunman fired over 500 bullets into the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) headquarters in an act of violence precipitated by public rhetoric around the role of public health in our society. It is also worth noting that the initial return-to-office announcement happened the day after the ten-year anniversary of the death of Lara Sobel, a DCF case worker who was shot and killed leaving her assigned duty station in Barre. Staff have expressed fear that there is not sufficient security in place to prevent violent attacks in or around state office buildings.
- Staff are concerned about the **safety implications of asking thousands of extra people to commute during the worst of the winter months**. Extra cars on the road commuting through places where driving conditions are famously poor in the winter (such as Bolton Flats), may lead to an increase in accidents. Staff have raised related concerns about **the adverse health impacts and fatigue associated with long commutes**,⁷ particularly in the winter months when the sun sets before the end of the official state workday and inclement weather often increases drive times.
- Staff are concerned about the **implications of enforcing this mandate right at the beginning of cold and flu season**. We have many staff members who are immunocompromised, or live with an immunocompromised family member, and they run the risk of carrying an infection home if they are exposed to sick colleagues who have been mandated to report to their duty station.

⁷ Chen, Y. H., Lin, J. J., Yang, C. W., Tang, H. M., Jong, G. P., & Yang, T. Y. (2024). The effect of commuting time on burnout: the mediation effect of musculoskeletal pain. *BMC Health Services Research*, 24(1), 468.

The unilateral enforcement of a requirement to report to a state office building three days per week will also have a disproportionate impact on members of minoritized racial and ethnic groups. Employees of color are at a higher risk for workplace injuries, which has led to an increased frequency and prevalence of work-related disabilities for Black and foreign-born Latine workers.⁸

Psychological Safety

Many state agencies have chosen to dedicate intentional effort to promoting the psychological safety of their employees. This work was prompted by the 2024 DHR Employee Engagement Survey, which highlighted significant room for growth in this area. Data from the 2025 Employee Engagement survey suggests that we might be making some improvements to staff psychological safety, although it's important to acknowledge that there were wording changes between 2024 and 2025 which could have contributed to increased levels of agreement.



SOV staff have reported that the rollout and communication surrounding the return-to-office mandate is negatively impacting their sense of psychological safety at work. Staff have highlighted that this decision feels like punishment for undisclosed mistakes and that

⁸ Seabury, S. A., Terp, S., & Boden, L. I. (2017). Racial and ethnic differences in the frequency of workplace injuries and prevalence of work-related disability. *Health Affairs*, 36(2), 266–273. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2016.1185>

communication around this decision is making them feel like they are not valued for the talents and skills they bring to the organization.

Adequate Rest

Insufficient rest can stem from lack of sleep or lack of quality rest, long work hours, night shift work, stress, anxiety, pain, health conditions, or lack of breaks during the workday, among other things. Workers who do not get adequate rest are 1.62 times more likely to have a workplace injury⁹ and are at a higher risk for burnout.¹⁰

Many state of Vermont staff live more than one hour away from their assigned duty station. We have many more staff who have commutes in the 45–60-minute range, before factoring in external influences such as traffic and winter driving conditions.

The additional time that staff will have to spend driving to and from their assigned duty station will reduce the amount of leisure time available to staff, which may lead to increased burnout and reduced productivity.¹¹

Worker Mental Health

In conjunction with our work to improve psychological safety, many state agencies are also working to prioritize worker mental health in the service of building a more resilient workforce.

Feedback from staff suggests that the mandate to return to a duty station will introduce barriers to the work we're doing in this area.

- **Staff have shared that the need to make major adjustments to their lives on very short notice is having a significant mental health impact.** With less than two months until the stated December 1st start date, staff still do not have access to the basic information they need to plan for this shift, which is causing substantial stress.
- Many SOV employees take advantage of our culture of flexibility to schedule appointments with mental health care providers during business hours. These appointments are scheduled in alignment with the State of Vermont's policies about alternative work schedules, unpaid breaks, compensatory time, and sick leave. **Staff are concerned that they will not have access to private spaces to attend telehealth appointments that must occur during business hours.** Staff will need to use

⁹ Uehli, K., Mehta, A. J., Miedinger, D., Hug, K., Schindler, C., Holsboer-Trachsler, E., Leuppi, J. D., & Künzli, N. (2014). Sleep problems and work injuries: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Sleep Medicine Reviews*, 18(1), 61–73. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2013.01.004>

¹⁰ Maslach, C., & Leiter, M. P. (2016). Understanding the burnout experience: Recent research and its implications for psychiatry. *World Psychiatry*, 15(2), 103–111. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20311>

¹¹ Wiese, C. W., Li, Y., Tang, Y., & Brown, T. I. (2024). The unique impact of commuting time, quality, and predictability on worker well-being and performance. *Occupational Health Science*, 8(1), 127-159.

additional leave time to take care of their mental health when they lose the ability to flex their hours around appointments.

Operationalize DEIA Norms, Policies, and Procedures

Prioritizing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) norms means “operationalizing relevant policies and programs in ways that ensure safety. This includes confronting structural racism, microaggressions, ableism, and implicit bias.”¹²

Mandatory in-office work often impacts staff differently based on their identities. For example:

- Women are more likely to quit in response to strict return-to-office policies. Women with childcare responsibilities are 32% less likely to leave their jobs when remote work options are available.¹³
- Sexual harassment, microaggressions, and workplace bias are less likely to occur in a hybrid/remote environment. In one study, 88% of women reported that hybrid work arrangements have contributed to a more equitable workplace.¹⁴ This is more pronounced for women of color; in a 2021 Future Forum survey, 97% of Black respondents in the U.S. said they preferred a fully remote or hybrid workplace.¹⁵
- In a 2023 UCLA School of Law study, 47% of LGBTQ respondents reported being discriminated against or harassed at work, and 58% reported engaging in “covering” behaviors (such as altering their physical appearance or avoiding using public restrooms) to avoid harassment. The need to engage in covering behaviors is amplified in physical office environments.¹⁶

¹² [Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being | HHS.gov](#)

¹³ [Remote-Work Options Can Boost Productivity and Curb Burnout](#)

¹⁴ [IWG Report - March 2023 Women Hybrid Workers Survey - Fact Sheet.docx - Google Docs](#)

¹⁵ [Slack survey finds 97% of Black knowledge workers want the future of the office to be remote or hybrid - Future Forum](#)

¹⁶ [LGBTQ People's Experiences of Workplace Discrimination and Harassment - Williams Institute](#)

“In addition to other concerns shared, earlier this month, the Supreme Court issued a temporary order that allows federal immigration agents to use race, ethnicity and other factors (i.e. language spoken) in deciding who may be stopped and questioned. As a person of color, this is frightening. Staff of color on my team have also expressed reasonable concerns of how this current climate impacts safely commuting to and from [my duty station] unnecessarily.”

-a State of Vermont employee

Staff of color and LGBTQ+ staff members expressed fear about the need to spend increased time moving through public space in the context of our current political climate.

Additionally, **neurodivergent staff have expressed concern about whether we can accommodate their access needs in state office buildings.** Many staff need access to reduced distraction workspaces to complete their best work, and we do not have enough private spaces to offer those accommodations in our current state.

Protection from Harm: Recommendations

Feedback from SOV employees suggests that we’re not currently doing enough to protect our staff from the harm caused by this mandate. The following suggestions would allow us to reduce the harm caused to individuals, while still honoring the spirit of the new Hybrid Work Standard:

- Consider slowing the implementation or adopting a phased approach for staff who will experience significant barriers to compliance, such as long commutes or caregiving responsibilities.
- Establish exemptions for staff who live outside of a reasonable commuting distance to their assigned duty station. We would define a reasonable commute as anything less than one hour, inclusive of regular or expected traffic slowdowns.
- Empower staff with the flexibility to work from home on days when they are ill but not too sick to work remotely.
- Empower staff to make their own decisions about whether they can safely commute through inclement weather.
- Increase security measures in all state buildings.
- Ensure access to private or reduced distraction workspaces for all staff who have a need.
- Offer staff additional clarity around the expectations of this policy as quickly as possible.

- Take steps to mitigate the risk of increased harassment and microaggressions when staff are together in person. Invest in robust training opportunities and equip supervisors and managers with the tools to identify and interrupt microaggressions as they are occurring.
- Create a structure that empowers staff to opt out of in-person days when they feel that traveling to their duty station may put their safety at risk.

Essential 2: Connection and Community

The second Essential, **Connection & Community**, is rooted in the human needs for **social support** and **belonging**. Fostering a sense of belonging and connection within the broader communities they are a part of has the potential to improve the health and well-being of workers and communities, and the prosperity of organizations themselves.¹⁷ This Essential suggests we support workers in deepening relationships with their communities through three related components:

- Create cultures of inclusion and belonging,
- Cultivate trusted relationships, and
- Foster collaboration and teamwork.

SOV staff feedback raises concerns that can be correlated to all three components.

Culture of Inclusion and Belonging

Strong organizations offer staff opportunities to build social connections and community at work.¹⁸ The Office of the Surgeon General (OSG) recommends that organizational leaders cultivate environments and cultures where connection is encouraged, and workers of all backgrounds are included. This may also include support, without fear of retaliation, for workers to have their voices and concerns heard for local policy and program change.

Overwhelmingly, **SOV staff report feeling a sense of belonging in our current hybrid-remote state**. In the 2025 DHR Employee Engagement Survey: 83% of staff who are eligible for telework agree that they feel connected to their teams while working remotely.

Staff have expressed concern that a strict return-to-office policy will inhibit the development of community, not improve it. Staff are concerned that the unstructured and rushed rollout of this policy will impede their ability to maintain existing connections with colleagues

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General. (2021). *Community health and economic prosperity engaging businesses as stewards and stakeholders - A report of the surgeon general*. Retrieved from: <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/chep-sgr-full-report.pdf>

¹⁸ Sandstrom, G. M., & Dunn, E. W. (2014). Social Interactions and Well-Being: The Surprising Power of Weak Ties. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40(7), 910–922. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167214529799>

because they will need to redirect their energy towards managing the logistical hurdles that the implementation of this standard has created. With inadequate time to address the major logistical challenges that state agencies will face in operationalizing this directive, we will not be able to direct our attention to creating structures for community building until well after the change has taken effect.

Further, **staff have noted that increased time in the office will decrease the time they have to spend in their home communities.** Staff have shared many ways that remote work has given them the flexibility to show up and participate in their communities. One SOV staff member shared that she has been working an alternate schedule so that she can leave work at 4:00pm to go coach a local Girls on the Run team. The need to commute one hour from her home to her assigned duty station would make her participation in this program logistically impossible and require her to discontinue this important volunteer work that contributes to the health and well-being of her home community.

Other staff members have raised similar concerns about the impact increased time in a state office building will have on their ability to volunteer with local fire departments or EMS crews. 95% of the fire departments in the state of Vermont are volunteer run, and **reduced access to volunteer labor could have a significant impact on the disaster resiliency of small communities in the state.**

Trusted Relationships

Having clear and consistent communication between workers and leaders is foundational in building trust.¹⁹ Promoting trust among leaders and workers begins with listening to worker concerns and explaining why key decisions are made within an organization.²⁰ **The announcement and rollout of the return to office mandate have broken staff trust in the State of Vermont as an employer.** One of the most common questions we hear from staff is,

"I am grappling with whether I belong at an organization that operates with as much disregard as this administration has demonstrated so far – it feels like we are doing a lot of work to name these negative consequences and the administration seems to be enforcing this policy that doesn't seem to follow standard policy development (use data to determine necessity, involve those impacted, check available resources).

I'm wondering if I really belong at an organization that operates like that, it doesn't make me feel affirmed or heard or like I matter enough to be incorporated in that process."

¹⁹ [Why Trust Matters at Work](#)

²⁰ [2021-Trust-Outlook-Executive-Edition.pdf](#)

“what data were used to inform this decision?” In the absence of data, staff are left to write their own stories about the true intent behind this decision.

Collaboration and Teamwork

State of Vermont staff have drawn attention to the **disconnect between Governor Scott’s stated intention to increase collaboration in the workplace and the Agency of Administration’s workforce data, which clearly illustrates that meaningful collaboration is already happening.**

The 2025 DHR Employee Engagement Survey suggests that **staff who are currently able to telework are successfully collaborating with their teams.** Among respondents who indicated that they did any amount of telework:

- 93% of employees agree that they can collaborate effectively with their teams while working remotely.
- 91% agree that communication with their teams is clear and effective in a remote work setting.
- 88% agree that remote work positively impacts their individual performance.

Staff have colleagues spread across the state. **Most meetings will still need to be hybrid or fully online to include staff and community partners who are not based in the same state office building,** which will lead to an environment where staff are commuting to an office to sit in online meetings that could have easily been conducted from home.

As an additional challenge, **the Waterbury State Office Complex does not currently have enough conference rooms to support a dramatic increase in in-person or hybrid meetings.** Agency of Human Services staff report experiences of being kicked out of conference rooms that were booked months in advance because someone else has a need for the space that supersedes the existing reservation. Staff also report challenges in identifying and booking available conference rooms that meet their needs, even when looking for space well in advance. It is reasonable to expect that this challenge will only increase as the number of people seeking rooms for in-person or hybrid meetings increases.

Connection and Community: Recommendations

- Dedicate significant resources towards supporting staff in building in-person community. This will not happen organically without material and structural support (i.e. permission to spend work time building relationships with coworkers).
- Discontinue and rollback previous messaging about the return to office order being beneficial to businesses in Waterbury and Montpelier. A change in work location does not increase the amount of money staff are spending in small businesses, it just

moves resources from the communities where staff live to the communities where they work.

- Collect ongoing and robust data about the impacts of the return to office policy on staff relationships and adjust the policy in a data-informed manner. Share the results of your assessment widely and transparently along with information about who the decision making parties are.
- Support departmental leadership in re-calibrating workflows to create more space for meaningful in-person collaboration. Acknowledge that this transition will mean a dip in productivity.
- Ensure that all staff have access to conference rooms and collaboration spaces.
- If workforce data beyond what is publicly available are being used to inform this decision, share those data with staff.
- Ensure that all decision-making bodies include voices that can speak directly to the equity concerns that may arise from this initiative.

Essential 3: Work-Life Harmony

The third Essential, **Work-Life Harmony**, is rooted in the human needs for **autonomy** and **flexibility**. Organizations that increase worker autonomy, or how much control one has over how they do their work, and whose workplaces provide greater flexibility, or the ability to work when and where is best for them, see workers who are more likely to succeed and retain staff for longer.²¹ This Essential suggests that we support workers in achieving greater work-life harmony through four related components:

- Provide more autonomy over how work is done,
- Make schedules as flexible and predictable as possible,
- Increase access to paid leave time, and
- Respect boundaries between work and non-work time.

Work-Life Harmony is the theme where we received the highest volume of feedback. Staff feedback raises concerns that can be correlated to all four components.

Worker Autonomy

Organizations can make meaningful changes to staff well-being by providing greater autonomy over how work is done. Organizations that increase worker control over how,

²¹ Lovejoy, M., Kelly, E. L., Kubzansky, L. D., & Berkman, L. F. (2021). Work redesign for the 21st century: Promising strategies for enhancing worker well-being. *American Journal of Public Health, 111*(10), 1787–1795. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2021.306283>

when, and where work happens can mitigate life/work conflicts, engender more trust, and improve worker health.²²

In our current state, **many SOV staff have a great deal of autonomy to structure their work in ways that work for their lives.** We are a high-functioning executive branch with well-developed systems to balance employee autonomy with the needs of the organization. **The new Hybrid Work Standard represents a dramatic shift in our culture of autonomy for many SOV departments and agencies and will require significant change management work if this transition is to be successful.**

Flexible and Predictable Schedules

Many SOV staff report that they need flexibility and predictability to structure their work around their lives. Staff have shared many concerns about the ways this change will complicate their lives by removing flexibility and predictability. The most common challenges that staff will experience when they are asked for more time at their duty station are:

- Accommodating school drop-off and pick-up times, which are generally fixed and inflexible.
- Finding access to additional daycare on short notice.
- Navigating daycare and school requirements that require a parent remain close enough to retrieve a sick child within a fixed amount of time.
- Finding access and maintaining proximity to additional eldercare support on short notice.
- Finding access and maintaining proximity to pet care support on short notice.

Many State of Vermont employees are responsible for the care and well-being of others, whether from their family of origin or chosen family. There is a dramatic shortage of care resources in Vermont²³ and staff need time to figure out how to accommodate their families' needs.

Access to Paid Leave

Staff are **concerned that this policy will result in a dramatic increase in the use of sick time.** In our current state, many staff who are ill or potentially contagious have the option to work some or all their scheduled hours remotely. Staff are also able to take advantage of flex time

²² Joyce, K., Critchley, J. A., & Bamba, C. (2009). Flexible working conditions and their effects on employee health and Wellbeing. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*.
<https://www.cochranelibrary.com/cdsr/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD008009.pub2/full>

²³ [Recent Trends in Vermont Childcare: A Decrease in Capacity, Increases in Cost and Quality, and Policy Responses - Federal Reserve Bank of Boston](#)

to attend short healthcare appointments in the middle of the day without needing to use any paid time off. A loss of flexibility will force staff to more quickly deplete their available sick time banks. **This will disproportionately impact staff who are responsible for the care of family members as well as staff who are managing chronic illnesses.**

Staff have also expressed concern over how this policy change will impact the accrual of Personal Leave time for employees in the Non-Management Bargaining Unit, where access to paid personal leave is contingent on a staff person's ability to not use sick leave in each quarter.

Work-Life Boundaries

When leaders and supervisors set, respect, and model clear boundaries time on and off the job, *without penalizing workers for the flexibility needed*, workers report a greater sense of well-being.²⁴ Staff are concerned that **strict guidelines around time in a state office building will force employees to choose between maintaining their current standards of productivity and blurring the boundaries between their work and their life.**

Employees have also highlighted the ways in which the flexibility we currently offer staff has benefited the State of Vermont. People across the state worked long hours, 6-7 days per week, from home, and at great personal cost during our formal response to the Covid-19 pandemic. As one staff member describes it: "It's hard not to look at this through the lens of 'you can have all the flexibility you want when it benefits us, but not when it benefits you.'"

Work-Life Harmony: Recommendations

- Consider adopting a phased implementation approach to accommodate staff who need time to make major life adjustments.
- Identify strategies to offer staff autonomy over how their work is done in ways that honor the spirit of the new policy.
- Empower Department-level leadership to do their own change management work. They know their people best and are best equipped to support them in this transition.
- Empower staff with the flexibility to work from home on days when they are ill but not too sick to work remotely.

²⁴ Pluut, H., & Wonders, J. (2020). Not Able to Lead a Healthy Life When You Need It the Most: Dual Role of Lifestyle Behaviors in the Association of Blurred Work- Life Boundaries with Well-Being. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 607294. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.607294>

- Adopt a standardized approach for accruing Personal Leave Time across all bargaining units.
- Empower staff to make their own decisions about using flex time on in-person days to best balance their work and their life.

Essential 4: Mattering at Work

The fourth Essential, **Mattering at Work**, is rooted in the human needs for **dignity** and **meaning**. Studies have shown that having meaning and purpose reduces the risk for health complications such as heart attacks and stroke,²⁵ and when connected to work, can lead to improved productivity and innovation.²⁶ This Essential suggests that we support workers in feeling like they matter at work through four related components:

- Provide a living wage,
- Engage workers in workplace decisions,
- Build a culture of gratitude and recognition, and
- Connect individual work with organizational mission.

Staff feedback raises concerns that can be correlated to all four components.

Living Wage

Staff have noted that **the requirement to report to a physical duty station three days per week is functionally a pay cut**. Among the additional expenses that staff members will accrue in response to a significant change in their working conditions:

- Commuting expenses: gas, wear and tear on vehicles, tolls or ferry fees, increases to car insurance premiums.
- Care expenses: increased cost of childcare, eldercare, and/or pet care.
- Lifestyle expenses: additional money spent on convenience items to account for the hours lost commuting.

This loss of income will come at a time when many state employees are already struggling financially in the wake of rising health insurance costs, inflation, and skyrocketing food prices.

²⁵ Kim, E.S., Sun, J.K., Park, N. et al. Purpose in life and reduced risk of myocardial infarction among older U.S. adults with coronary heart disease: a two-year follow-up. *J Behav Med* 36, 124–133 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10865-012-9406-4>

²⁶ Valcour, M. (2014, April 28). The power of dignity in the workplace. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from: <https://hbr.org/2014/04/the-power-of-dignity-in-the-workplace>

Engage Workers in Workplace Decisions

When workers are engaged in workplace decisions, they report higher levels of enthusiasm, commitment, and dedication to the workplace.¹⁷ While it is too late to involve frontline workers in a conversation about the decision, **it is not too late to engage workers in a conversation about the implementation.**

State of Vermont employees are thoughtful, dedicated public servants. Through a variety of feedback mechanisms, staff have offered valuable insights into how we might implement this vision in a way that meets both state and worker needs. **Listening to the voices of those most impacted by a decision is a crucial step in ensuring the future success of a new initiative or policy.** It is not too late to invite staff to the table for a conversation.

Culture of Gratitude and Recognition

The welcome video that is distributed to new State of Vermont employees begins with the sentence, “Welcome to the State of Vermont: where you and your work matter.”

Departments and agencies across the state have worked very hard to build cultures of gratitude and recognition. When staff feel appreciated, recognized, and engaged by their leaders and coworkers, their sense of value and meaning increases, as well as their ability to manage stress.²⁷ Data from the 2025 DHR Employee Engagement Survey suggests that we have been successful in building this culture:

- 77% of state employees believe that the people they work with care about them.
- 73% are satisfied with the recognition they receive from their supervisor.
- 82% agree that their supervisor treats employees fairly and respectfully.

When we restrict those results to only include staff who are eligible for some amount of telework:

- For questions about peer relationships, there is a 3-point increase from the statewide average for staff with hybrid schedules, and a 5-point increase from the statewide average for staff who are 100% telework.
- For questions about supervisor relationships, there is a 2-point increase from the statewide average for staff with hybrid schedules, and a 3.5-point increase from the statewide average for staff who are 100% telework.

SOV staff report that the announcement, rollout, and implementation of this decision have made them feel like they don’t matter to the organization. As we move forward with the

²⁷ O’Flaherty, S., Sanders, M. T., & Whillans, A. (2021, March 29). Research: A little recognition can provide a big morale boost. *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved from: <https://hbr.org/2021/03/research-a-little-recognition-can-provide-a-big-morale-boost>

rollout and implementation of this new directive, it is crucial that we double down on

“It feels really dehumanizing the way this has been rolled out; it feels like we’re cogs in a system and that they can just make a decision to change all of our lives. The way their responses have been coming in feels condescending... there is no compassion coming from higher up about the impact this will have on people’s lives. I don’t want to lose half of my team; I’ve worked with people for almost a decade that we’re about to lose. It feels like we’re not people to them.”

-a State of Vermont employee

reminding our staff that they are valued, appreciated, and supported.

We must re-invest in modeling for our staff that they matter to us, in ways that are both meaningful and worker driven.

Connection to Organizational Mission

People choose to build careers with the State of Vermont because our work is mission-driven and values-aligned. In the 2025 DHR Employee Engagement Survey, an astounding 92% of respondents agree that the work they do is connected to the goals and mission of their department or agency. However, staff belief in the mission of our work will not be enough to sustain and retain our workforce through this transition.

Many employees have expressed that the rollout of this new Hybrid Work Standard feels like an attempt at a passive RIF. Whether or not that is part of the intent behind this initiative, the fact that so many staff believe it to be true indicates a significant loss of trust and belief in the values of the organization.

Mattering at Work: Recommendations

- Consider offering commuter stipends to staff who regularly commute more than one hour to their assigned duty station.
- Engage frontline workers in conversations about how to make this change in working conditions feasible for them.
- Collect feedback from staff at all levels of state government, who hold a variety of identities, about the barriers they will face because of this change and their ideas for potential solutions.
- Identify strategies to demonstrate to staff that they are valued and appreciated by the organization.

- Create new pathways to recognize and celebrate staff achievements and contributions.
- Speak honestly and directly about the motivations behind this initiative.

Essential 5: Opportunity for Growth

The fifth and final Essential, Opportunity for Growth, is rooted in the human needs for learning and accomplishment. When organizations create more opportunities for learning, accomplishment, and growth, workers become more optimistic about their abilities and more enthusiastic about contributing to the organization.²⁸ This Essential suggests that we support worker growth through three related components:

- Offer quality training, education, and mentoring,
- Foster clear and equitable pathways for advancement, and
- Ensure relevant, reciprocal feedback.

Staff feedback raises concerns that can be correlated to all four components.

Quality Training and Mentoring

Access to mentoring relationships is a crucial aspect of supporting staff career growth and development.²⁹ Because we do not yet have clear information about how this return to office mandate will be operationalized or what flexibility will be made available to employees based on their life circumstances, many state employees report actively looking for other work or preparing for early retirement. **This loss of institutional knowledge and skill could be devastating to the work that we do serving Vermonters.** As a secondary impact, a large exodus of seasoned state employees will also leave fewer opportunities for mentoring and on the job training. As one employee put it: “I am concerned that a large number of employees will either take other positions or reduce their FTE. I haven’t heard a lot about how we’re doing succession planning for that, but we’ve already seen more (and early) retirements since this was announced.”

As employee-centered leaders, it’s incumbent on us to support our staff in making the decisions that are best for their health and well-being, even if that means pursuing opportunities elsewhere. However, considering the probability that we will see widespread

²⁸ Mašková, I., & Kučera, D. (2021). Performance, achievement, and success in psychological research: Towards a more transparent use of the still ambiguous terminology. *Psychological Reports*, 125(2), 1218–1261. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033294121996000>

²⁹ Goerisch, D., Basiliere, J., Rosener, A., McKee, K., Hunt, J., & Parker, T. M. (2019). Mentoring with: reimagining mentoring across the university. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 26(12), 1740–1758. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2019.1668752>

turnover in response to this mandate, **we must immediately begin succession planning and ensure that at-risk knowledge and critical business processes are well-documented.**

Clear and Equitable Pathways for Advancement

In Departments and Agencies that oversee satellite locations, most available paths to promotion are in the Agency's Central Office. **Staff who work in one of our district offices will lose access to promotion and career advancement if they are required to live a reasonable commuting distance to Waterbury or Montpelier before they pursue one of those positions.** This will result in the loss of early career talent—people who might have built careers working for the State of Vermont if we had not closed off their available pathways to promotion.

“One of the cool things that has been created as a result of remote work is getting talented, dedicated people moving up the career ladder while not having to relocate to the Waterbury/Montpelier area. I have chosen not to have a career path at the SOV because the drive to Waterbury is not worth stealing three hours of my day from my family, and what I love about living in Vermont. It makes me angry that those who did make the leap up the career ladder are now getting penalized for filling the huge hole left by the COVID exodus.”

-a State of Vermont employee

Staff have also noted that the Covid-era changes to our approach to telework have been hugely beneficial for both our ability to do our work and the talent pool available to us:

Opportunity for Growth: Recommendations

- Ensure that all available retention avenues have been explored to prevent widespread turnover.
- Establish exemptions for staff who live outside of a reasonable commuting distance from their assigned duty station. We would define a reasonable commute as anything less than one hour, inclusive of regular or expected traffic slowdowns.
- Begin identifying and documenting at-risk knowledge immediately.
- Begin identifying and documenting processes that are owned or managed by a single individual.
- Begin cross-training additional staff in critical business functions.

Discussion and Conclusion

When the feedback received from State of Vermont employees is analyzed through the lens of the U.S. Surgeon General’s Framework for Workplace Mental Health and Well-Being, **it becomes clear that the State of Vermont’s reputation as a great employer is at risk.**

In the 2025 DHR Employee Engagement Survey, state employees rated **14.0 on the Employee Net Promoter Score (eNPS)**.³⁰ This scale is based on the question “How likely is it that you would recommend the State of Vermont as a place to work?” 39% staff were “Promoters” of the State of Vermont, which means they chose 9 or 10 on a 0-10 scale. Only 25% of staff were “Detractors,” which is defined as anyone who chose 6 or lower.

There is still an opportunity to bring state workers back to state office buildings in a way that is responsive to employee feedback and honors the health and well-being of the dedicated public servants who have chosen careers in civil service. This document is offered as a starting point to a conversation about what it would look like to reduce the harm caused to the state workforce as we roll out and implement this change.

The feedback compiled in this report represents the fears and concerns of committed public servants who are proud of the work they do to serve our state. Our employees are excellent problem solvers and critical thinkers, and they have come forward with many excellent suggestions for how we might operationalize this policy in a way that meets both organizational and staff needs. There is still an opportunity to center the voices of those most impacted by this decision and learn from the expertise of those who are on the ground doing the work that keeps the State of Vermont consistently ranked as one of the best employers in the state.

³⁰ The eNPS is calculated by subtracting the total percentage of detractors from the total percentage of promoters. This yields a score from -100 to 100. A positive score indicates a higher number of promoters than detractors.