

# State has trouble attracting workers to city

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ALBANY — Recruiting and retaining workers in the New York City region is a problem facing nearly every state agency, and the shortage is affecting the way government does its job.

The problem is simple: The state can't pay enough in salaries to attract professionals to work in high-priced New York City.

In short supply are transportation engineers, nurses, secretaries, and environmental specialists, among others.

More than 18 percent of the state government workforce is based in New York City providing a variety of services, said Lois Uttley, a spokeswoman for the Department of Civil Service. About 40 percent of the state's residents live in the five boroughs.

The state provides a \$600 across-the-board salary differential in union contracts for state employees working in city offices. But union officials and even state officials acknowledge this added amount doesn't fully compensate for the higher cost of living in the city.

The problem is considered most acute in attracting engineers in the state Department of Transportation's New York City office. Not only does DOT face stiff competition for engineers, but it must also compete with the state's public authorities — the Port Authority and Metropolitan Transportation Authority — which have the resources to offer more generous salaries.

"It's a vicious circle going on over here," said Ronald Kermani, spokesman for the Public Employees Federation (PEF), whose members include 300 state traffic engineers in the city.

"It's a unique problem to DOT in New York City. It affects the state's ability because it can't do any work in-house down there," he said.

Kermani said most of the DOT engineering work is contracted out to private consultants and a recent union study estimated it costs the state 30 percent to 60 percent more to get the work done.

PEF also contended the state would save \$24 million annually by doubling DOT's engineering staff in the city. About \$40 million or 90 percent of the state's engineering work is contracted out in the city

region, Kermani said.

A DOT spokeswoman did not dispute this assessment. "We have to work around the state staffing problem to get the work out," said Phyllis Hirschberg, spokeswoman for DOT's city office. "We contract out more than other region of the state."

But state DOT is beginning to tackle the staffing shortage. The civil service department last year waived fixed salary titles to attract junior engineers out of school. Minimum salaries jumped from \$24,000 to \$27,600. Before this change, PEF said the private sector's starting salaries were 26 percent more, before the change.

Hirschberg added that of 42 junior engineers hired since 1987, all but six are still working out of the city office. DOT expects to hire 14 more this year.

Hirschberg indicated, however, that retaining engineers will be a continual struggle. "We do have a fairly high turnover rate with the middle management people," she said.

Uttley of civil service said Gov. Mario M. Cuomo's administration will be drafting a workforce plan to

deal with changes in the labor market. One aim is to examine all salary ranges to recruit and retain state workers.

She said a "baby bust" may bring a smaller pool of prospective applicants to choose from in the future, and more remedial training needed to improve their skill levels, particularly for clerical positions.

Although it is too early to tell, Uttley said a new ethics law that went into effect Jan. 1 could have a long-term effect on the state's workforce. Former state employees are barred for two years from doing business with the state in their former area of expertise.

Recruiting nurses is a national problem, but the shortage is even worse in the city, said Steve Madarasz, spokesman for the 250,000 member Civil Service Employees Association (CSEA). He said staff turnover and low pay is a major problem in state mental health facilities throughout the city and Long Island.

"The working conditions are better in Burger King," he said.