



Oct. 6, 2021

Dear Chairman Larry Martin and SHaPE SC task force members:

As requested by the task force, please see attached cross-agency staff turnover analysis and salary comparison from the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC). This report reflects all DHEC classifications and provides the most recent turnover rates for Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 and a 3-year average turnover rate.

The report also provides a comparison of average salaries per classification at DHEC compared to the average salaries for the same classification within other South Carolina state government agencies. **It's important to note that the FY 2022 State Budget Appropriation included approximately \$2.7 million for salary increases in critical service positions with higher turnover. This funding allows DHEC to take the first step towards addressing salary concerns.**

A few key data points from this analysis include:

- 76 percent of DHEC employees are in classifications where the salary average is less than other state agencies in South Carolina
- 31 percent of classifications used by DHEC have a 3-year average turnover rate greater than 15 percent
- 23 percent of classifications used by DHEC have a 3-year average turnover rate greater than 20 percent
- On average over the last 3 years approximately 475 full-time employees (FTEs) leave DHEC per year

In addition to the cross-analysis provided, DHEC's deputy areas of Environmental Affairs, Healthcare Quality, and Public Health have provided several examples impacting the agency's ability to provide core services and compete with the private sector, as well as other public sectors. These examples are provided below

Environmental Affairs

Scientists work in all Environmental Affairs Program areas performing many different responsibilities to include:

- Inspecting permitted facilities
- Conducting ambient monitoring of air and water
- Providing compliance assistance
- Conducting enforcement actions
- Issuing food and septic tank permits
- Responding to foodborne outbreak investigations
- Providing mosquito-borne disease surveillance

- Responding to citizen complaints about actual or potential releases of pollutants into air, land, or water
- Providing validated data for environmental decision-making
- Providing response to chemical and oil spills, fish kills, and radiological emergencies
- Providing environmental Lead Risk Assessments of homes for children who have elevated blood lead levels
- Investigating animal bites
- Performing analyses on air, land, water, dairy, and other samples for bacteriological, chemical, physical, and radiological samples
- Certifying environmental laboratories
- Performing microbiological and chemical analysis of drinking water, wastewater, streams, lakes, ocean water, soil, fish, leachate, chemical waste, shellfish, milk, and other dairy products
- Analyzes radiological samples of drinking water systems and of water, air, milk, fish, vegetation, and soils on and around the Savannah River Site

Much of this work is very specialized and requires many years of on-the-job and specialized training to become proficient and productive. This training and experience make these staff extremely valuable to private industry and other government agencies. In these other settings these individuals are making significantly more money than they can at DHEC. For example, a recent resignation was from a 10+ year employee who was managing an area with many staff and programs who left to go to the private sector making over \$10,000 more a year but with only inspection responsibilities in one program and no supervisory responsibility.

Onsite Wastewater

The onsite wastewater program is another area experiencing significant employee turnover and burnout. The current vacancy rate is 20 percent with a five year high of 40 percent in 2018*. It takes 12 to 18 months to hire and train a new employee to perform the soil evaluations required by regulation. Because we do not have enough staff or the funding needed to adequately support the program, the program has a significant backlog of permit applications and permitting timeframes are currently exceeding 38 calendar days.

Former onsite wastewater staff that are now in other jobs are having to be used to help with the applications, non-onsite wastewater staff are investigating complaints and we have reduced the final inspections to less than 17 percent to try to issue the permits as quickly as possible to accommodate constituent demand. Our inability to conduct 100 percent of final inspections has a negative environmental impact due to the increased potential of raw sewage on the ground and/or in water table and a financial burden and stress to customer associated with improperly installed system. Another critical area is our environmental lab.

** DHEC had a significantly higher turnover than average in this year because the Teacher and Employee Retention Incentive (TERI) program ended for the State of South Carolina.*

Environmental Affairs Laboratory

The Environmental Affairs Laboratory (EA Labs) has three classifications it uses to perform the laboratory services. They are chemist, microbiologist, and the environmental health manager series. It is extremely difficult to hire and retain staff. This is partially because there are not as many

qualified candidates available with the skills to perform these jobs. This creates a very competitive market. The EA Lab is sandwiched between the Public Health Lab (PHL) and the private sector with regards to the salary being offered. The current salary normally posted for the PHL for comparable positions is around \$50,000 as compared to an EA Lab salary of \$42,000. The private sector salaries are even higher than the PHL salaries. The difference in salaries between the EA Lab and the PHL create internal competition which always results in the EA Lab staff moving on to work for the PHL. During the last 10 years the entire EA Labs metals laboratory staff has been hired by the PHL twice.

The example below is a timeline of how this impacts the EA Lab as it tries to restaff. It is a long process of reposting multiple times, multiple interview processes, adjusting and adding additional duties to other staff to survive until jobs can be filled, and training new staff once hired.

*Position 61069601 - **metals chemist job posted 2/2020** > job extended 5/2020 > job extended 7/2020 > **Job reposted 9/2020** > job extended 11/2020 > **job reposted 2/2021** > job extended 3/2021 > **job filled 8/2021***

In the above example timeline, the position was posted a total of three times and extended multiple times. This timeline is reflective of the process currently for many positions in Environmental Affairs. The lengthy hiring process results in an accumulation of vacancies which in turn consumes an extraordinary number of resources – including administrative and management staff as well on other staff to cover workload demands because the work expectations and deadlines remain.

	Post 2017 Hires Average Years of Service Upon Resignation	Avg. Turnover Since FY19-21
EHM I	1.2	23%
Micro II	2.4	26%
Chem II	2.96	20%

- Since 2017, new hires who have since resigned only stayed an average of two years.
- EA Lab staff frequently leave for the PHL for the higher starting salaries they offer.

Healthcare Quality

Healthcare Quality has identified three critical positions which if gone unfilled could have a potential serious impact on core agency services. These include facility inspectors, nurse inspectors, drug inspections.

- **Facility Inspectors (Program Coordinator I):** Healthcare Quality's Bureau of Community Care and Bureau of Healthcare Systems and Services employ inspectors to ensure healthcare facilities are complying with the regulations the General Assembly charges DHEC to establish and enforce. These two bureaus have a centralized organizational structure with operations and staff based in DHEC's Columbia office and responsible for inspecting more than 1,000 healthcare facilities and services across the state. At the same time, these bureaus have many vacancies and a lot of turnover with the inspector positions. This means DHEC is unable to conduct inspections within routine timeframes. As a result, DHEC is then unable to ensure facilities are in compliance and providing the care and services that patients need.

To better support recruitment and retention efforts, these positions were reclassified from Inspector III to Program Coordinator I in recent years. However, the positions continue to experience vacancies and turnover. DHEC's facility inspectors, which now have an average starting salary of \$35,500, have to compete with other state agencies (e.g., LLR, EMD) that offer comparable or higher salaries, but also offer more work schedule flexibility and do not require extensive travel.

- **Nurse Inspectors (Nurse Administrator Manager I):** Healthcare Quality's Bureau of Community Care has RN positions that conduct onsite inspections at healthcare facilities. In fact, some of the federal surveys that DHEC conducts on behalf of CMS require Registered Nurses (RNs). These positions require three to four overnight stays each week and have low salaries compared to the salary for this position in other parts of DHEC, other state agencies, and the private sector. It is also often challenging in general to find qualified RN inspector candidates, let alone candidates who also poses healthcare facility experience. The nurse administrator manager I position within Healthcare Quality's Bureau of Community Care has a starting salary range of \$55,000 to \$60,000. By comparison, a similar position at DMH pays \$75,000, including the base salary and \$20,000 annual bonus. MUSC lists the minimum starting salary for a nurse manager position as \$89,752.48.
- **Drug Inspectors (Pharmacist I):** Healthcare Quality's drug inspectors are licensed pharmacists and graduates of South Carolina's Criminal Justice Academy's (SCCJA) law enforcement officer program. Currently, Healthcare Quality's Bureau of Drug Control has five vacant Pharmacist I position, which have been reposted many times over the past three years. The candidate pool is limited due to a less than competitive salary. Throughout the years, the bureau has been challenged to find qualified individuals that are pharmacists, who are willing and able to pursue certification as a law enforcement officer through SCCJA, at the agency's base salary.

In addition, there has been a substantial number of staff departures early in employment due to the harsh reality of the reduction in take-home pay compared to their previous public salaries. As the private sector salaries have continually increased, the agency rate has remained constant. Retail pharmacies, such as CVS and Walgreens, offer a salary in South Carolina ranging from \$125,000 to \$148,000. Additionally, there is often an opportunity for bonus and incentive pay over their base salary. For example, the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC) has hospital pharmacist positions posted from \$133,000 to \$145,000. Meanwhile, the average range for a DHEC drug inspector (pharmacist) is \$94,085 to \$102,010.

Meanwhile, DHEC is also competing with other state agencies that offer higher salaries with fewer responsibilities. The pharmacist inspectors are state law enforcement officers but are often left out of any additional legislative budget compensation for other state law enforcement officers, such as South Carolina Law Environment Division, the South Department of Probation, Pardon and Parole, and the South Carolina Department of Public Safety.

Public Health

Public Health shared the following impacts of the agency's inability to compete to fill certain core service positions in the regions.

- **Lowcountry APRN (i.e., nurse practitioner) positions:** Over the past year, DHEC's Lowcountry Preventive Health clinics have processed 16,465 visits. Of those, 10,964 were APRN visits, including 1,283 procedure appointments. The APRN position provides front line preventive health services to include procedures (primarily IUD/implant insertions and removals), birth control pills/injections and sexually transmitted infections. This position is also critical to the maintenance and growth of the Preventive Health caseload for the sites in the Lowcountry region. However, over the past four years, 14.67 months is the average length of retention for an APRN working in one of the agency's largest clinics. Each APRN vacancy results in approximately 60 missed potential appointments weekly. Additionally, the average South Carolina state salary for an APRN I is \$85,995 with the opportunity for bonuses or raises based on performance while APRNs hired at DHEC begin at \$76,500 with little potential for incentives.
- **Pee Dee WIC nutrition vacancies.** Currently the Pee Dee Region has a total of eight vacant WIC nutrition positions, including:
 - Two Registered Dietitians. The oldest, vacant since July 2020.
 - Four Nutritionist positions. The oldest, vacant since April 2021.
 - Two Licensed Practical Nurses (LPN). The oldest, vacant since July 2020.

Over the past 13 months, (June 1, 2020 – June 30, 2021) Pee Dee Region provided 99,200 WIC services. These vacancies resulted in approximately 14,800 missed opportunities to include: Initial, priority, six month (mid-point), and annual certifications, nutrition education (general and high risk), and verification of certifications.

The current starting salaries for these positions are as follows: Registered Dietitians \$53,069, Nutritionist II's \$33,874, and LPN's \$34,331.

Recruitment and retention of nutrition positions is challenging due to the rural nature of many Pee Dee counties and the base salaries for these classifications. Several postings of these nutrition positions resulted in no qualified applications and/or no applications at all.

- **Upstate RN positions:** Five out of Five and a half Family planning/STD nurse positions in the Upstate turned over this last year. Meanwhile, one position is still vacant and has been vacant for seven months. The average RN2 salary regionally is \$72,347 with the local hospital paying new nursing graduates \$60,320. These vacancies represent 9,100 "lost" appointments due to staffing.

It's also important to note that Greenville is currently experiencing an increase in STD numbers. The Oconee nurse position has been trained to provide family planning, STD, Immunization services. Position has been vacant for two years. Multiple postings have resulted in little/no interest in the position. The agency's current pay rate is \$50,833. At the same time the local hospital is paying new nursing graduates is \$60,320. The two years this position has been vacant represents the potential for 3,640 appointments "lost" due to staffing.

- **Upstate Administrative positions:** Administrative staff are an essential part of all services that the agency provides. Yet, seven out of nine positions in family planning/STD in the Upstate are currently vacant. The agency's current pay rate is \$23,190 or \$11.14/hour. Currently, in Greenville, multiple retailers such as Burger King, Target, Aldi, and Ross Dress for Less are advertising positions for \$13-17/hour, many with health benefits, 401K and tuition assistance. This has created a revolving door in our admin positions, and the agency is currently unable to maintain services and meet demand.