



PUBLIC FINANCE WORKFORCE | CASE STUDY

CITY OF WEST PLAINS, MISSOURI

Attracting New Talent and Accelerating Hiring

➔ How the City of West Plains fast-tracked hiring and focused on employee advancement

For the City of West Plains, Missouri attracting applicants for most positions has not been difficult. Given that it is the largest city in the area, positions have traditionally been attractive to applicants. However, like much of the nation, the city had a particularly difficult time recruiting for public service roles, specifically in the Police Department. Here is the story of how city staff filled these vacancies.

CITY OF WEST PLAINS, MISSOURI

POPULATION: 12,500



The City of West Plains is located in south-central Missouri. The city is rather isolated, being the largest city within a 100-mile radius.

GFOA spoke to Earlene Rich and Beccie Williams. Earlene Rich has been the finance director for the city since 2021. She has extensive previous experience in municipal finance. Beccie Williams is the human resources director for the city, also since 2021. Prior to her current position, she worked for over 15 years in the public sector.

THE SITUATION

Police force recruitment difficulties, underqualified candidates, and delays in hiring

In West Plains, certain positions had no problem attracting over 100 applicants per opening, which highlighted the need for a more efficient hiring process. However, a lack of qualified candidates and employee training options removed many potential applicants from the pool. Another issue the city faced was the need for more qualified officers for the Police Department, which was vocal about the need for a stronger candidate pool.

THE SOLUTION

Proactive scheduling during hiring, employee training, and advancement program

To solve the hiring inefficiency, Beccie came up with an organized procedure to fast-track the hiring process. To manage the pool of applicants, directors get an email once a week (sometimes more frequently depending on the position) with the chance to flag candidates they would like to advance. With specifically remarkable applicants, the interviews are conducted while the position is still open. If there is no unique exemption, interviews are set up after the position closes. During the beginning stages of the review, directors preemptively block out time for the interviews. Beccie says this proactive scheduling fast-tracks the entire process. In fact, applicants will get a notification of hiring as soon as a few days after the interview. For example, according to Earlene, "The last finance hire started five days after the interview."

In 2022, the current city administrator, Sam Anselm, brought in an impressive employee training and advancement system called the Career Progression Program. The nine-step program is set up so that each employee could potentially be eligible for a pay increase twice a year. One increase is a market-driven adjustment to the pay scale and the other is a 'merit increase' that employees qualify for based on the criteria of



CITY OF WEST PLAINS, MISSOURI

PROBLEMS TO SOLVE

- ? Cut time to hire
- ? Reduce vacancy rates
- ? Provide development and advancement opportunities

MOTIVATING THE CITY OF WEST PLAINS' WORKFORCE

- ✓ Biannual pay increase eligibility, including merit
- ✓ Competitive pay
- ✓ Robust retirement benefits
- ✓ Early retirement incentives
- ✓ Defined employee development and advancement

receiving relevant job training. "This program allows employees to reach the top of their pay scale in nine years if they work towards it," Earlene emphasized. The 'relevant job training' has some job-specific qualifications, but ultimately relies on the employee to document and manage their own process: which encourages a culture of constant communication for success. Beccie summarizes the advantages of the program by saying, "If you want to get to the top of your pay scale, here is the road map to do it... it allows more employees to be in the driver's seat." This is a very attractive quality that the City of West Plains uses for

recruitment and to combat turnover.

Beccie also saw this program as an avenue to solve the Police department's vocal need for more qualified officers. Now, the city allows the candidate pool for these positions to be open to applicants without certification, and individuals can be hired to be trained at the academy. West Plains sponsors their training as well as paying the officer around \$16/hour during that process. The cost of sending a cadet to the academy is partially paid for through grants (some individuals apply for scholarships), but the rest of the cost is taken care of by the City.

THE RESULTS

The City of West Plains has been able to keep up with the fast-paced demand for new hires and address the underqualified candidate pool in underfilled departments with Beccie's proactive initiatives.

Additionally, Earlene has managed the budget to not only support Beccie, but also to implement practices to take care of their employee's entire career journey. West Plains has recently upgraded its retirement benefits to the best offered by the State of Missouri. The defined benefit plan does not require employees to make any personal contributions but is generous enough to allow an individual who starts early in their career with the city to work their way up the ranks and retire earlier than their peers in other industries and governments. (Some recent retirees have celebrated their last day of work between the ages of 50 and 55.)

All these changes have been clarified in the recently revised employee handbook. Earlene and Beccie pointed to this formalized change as very helpful with the retention rate. Overall, the formalized process not only improves hiring time via proactive planning for interview schedules and targets promising candidates, but also offers unique features during employment that maintain a motivated workforce.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Workforce 2023: Solving Hiring Challenges

GFOA has heard consistently from members about the difficulties of hiring in local government. In search of solutions, we identified eight municipalities across the country that have grown their applicant pools and reduced hiring times through process change. Their solutions are lessons to inspire other local governments to solve their hiring challenges.

Learn more: gfoa.org/workforce2023