

Colorado Human Service Workers Deserve a Voice at Work

Allowing Colorado's public-sector county and local employees to join unions will improve services, reduce worker injuries, and address the employee turnover crisis in Colorado's human services programs.

Executive Summary

Public-sector human services employees employed by counties and localities in Colorado administer critical services such as child and adult protection, job training, food assistance, Medicaid and other programs,

However, these workers but often toil under conditions that are hazardous to their own safety and health and contribute to high turnover that can disrupt service provision for their clients. In fact, our analysis shows that **Colorado's human services workers are injured on the job at double the rate of workers overall in the state.** In addition, a comparison of turnover data between states shows that **the turnover rate for these workers in Colorado is among the worst in the country.**

■ Jobs are not safe: high rates of injury

- Public-sector human services workers have more than twice as many serious injuries (injuries serious enough to involve days away from work) as workers overall in Colorado (See **Figure 1.**)¹
- The work-related serious injury rate for human service workers in Colorado is one of the highest for workers of any industry—public or private—in the state and is higher than injury rates for construction and manufacturing.² (See **Table 1.**)

■ High turnover

- More than 1 in 4 of Colorado's human services employees leave their jobs each year (**Table 2.**)³
- Colorado's turnover rate for human services is 27.5 percent, as compared to 23.5 percent, the median rate for human services workers among all states.⁴
- Colorado has ranked in the bottom third of states for turnover for this group of public-sector workers in every year except one since 2010 (**Table 2.**)⁵

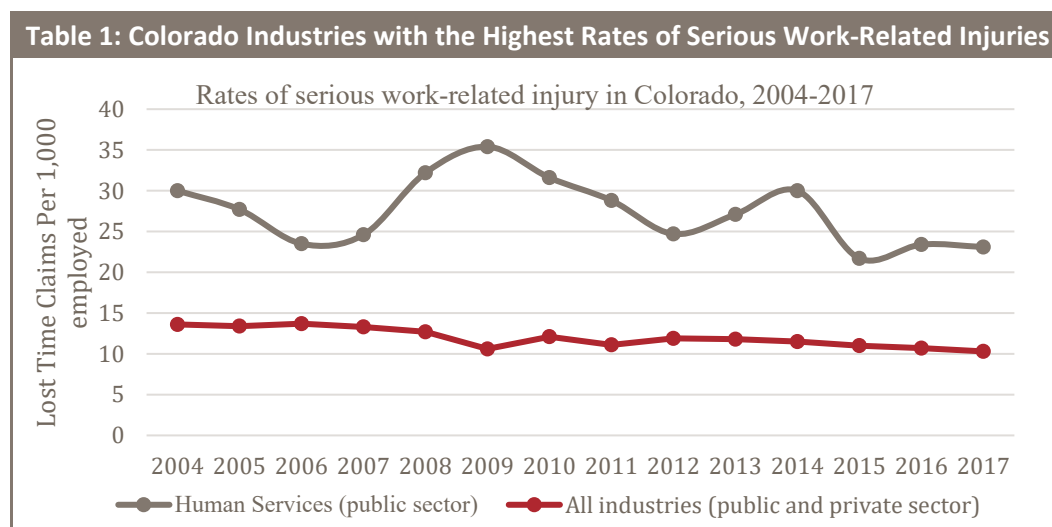
- Most human services workers in Colorado are female (66.7 percent) and the turnover rate among female workers (27.5 percent) is about five percentage points higher than the rate among male workers (22.8 percent).⁶

Compounding these problems is the fact that many Colorado public-sector employees—unlike public employees in most U.S. states—lack the basic freedom to come together to negotiate about their workplace conditions through a union. In addition, unlike private sector workers, Colorado human service workers are not covered by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and therefore have no OSHA protections regarding basic workplace safety and health standards—making union representation even more important. Without a meaningful avenue to speak up about poor and dangerous job conditions, many have no recourse but to leave their jobs—destabilizing services and driving up costs for counties and localities. Allowing these valued public servants to have democratic representation on the job will result in safer workplaces and greater job satisfaction and is crucial to ensuring a high quality of services for Coloradans who depend on them.

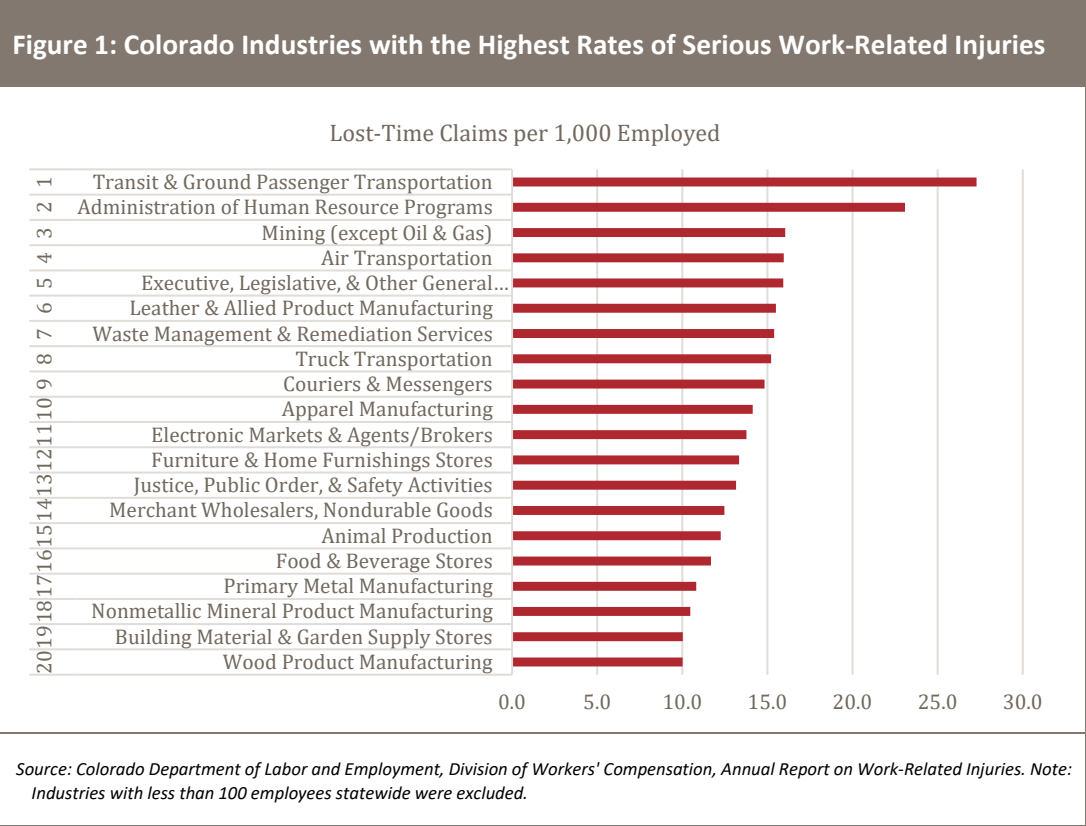
Human Services Employees Frequently Get Hurt on the Job.

Coloradans working in human services often risk their own health and safety to help others. In particular, workers in the child welfare profession are particularly highly vulnerable to workplace-related violence.⁷

An analysis of data from Colorado shows an alarmingly high rate of serious work-related injury for public-sector workers. The Colorado Division of Workers Compensation compiles reports of “lost-time claims” which reflect work-related injuries serious enough to require the worker to seek medical attention and miss days of work. These data show that human services workers in Colorado have more than twice as many serious injuries (involving days away from work) as workers overall in Colorado. In 2017, the latest year for which data are available, human services workers had a rate of 23.1 lost time claims per 1,000 employed as compared to a rate of 10.3 for all workers in all industries in Colorado (**Figure 1**).⁸



Below, **Figure 1** ranks industries in Colorado by the number of lost-time claims per 1,000 employees, showing that the serious work-related injury rate for human services in Colorado is one of the highest for workers of any industry—public or private—in the state, and is higher than injury rates in industries such as construction, mining, manufacturing, and truck transportation. The rate of serious injury for human services workers (23.1) is second only to that of ground transport workers (27.3) and is 30 percent higher than that of mining (16) which is the industry ranked directly below it.⁹



Unionization Reduces Job-Related Injuries.

Research has also shown that a key factor in workplace safety is unionization and that when workers have unions, the rate and seriousness of injuries drops dramatically.¹⁰ The converse is true as well. One academic study found that a 1% decrease in unionization in states implementing anti-union public policies resulted in a 5% increase in occupational fatalities.¹¹

How do unions create safer workplaces? First, with union representation, workers can draw attention to dangerous conditions for themselves and for their clients without fear of retaliation or losing their job. Workers are best positioned to alert employers to potential safety hazards that could negatively impact quality of care, but if they fear losing their own livelihoods as a result these critical perspectives can be lost and everyone suffers.

Second, with collective bargaining, workers can join with their co-workers to effectively advocate for proper equipment, training and safety measures required by OSHA and recommended by NIOSH.¹² Working together gives workers more resources, information and influence than they would have if they had to face the situation alone.

Third, research has demonstrated that when union workers have no need to fear retaliation for reporting safety issues or injuries, they are more likely to report not only injuries but so-called “near misses,” situations in which workers were almost injured. This type of reporting can in turn lead to important changes in the workplace to reduce work hazards.¹³

No OSHA protections for public-sector workers in Colorado

Granting access to union representation for county and local workers is especially important in Colorado, where public-sector workers do not have OSHA protections and thus their workplaces are not subject to OSHA inspections. Colorado public-sector workers can’t file a complaint for an OSHA inspection when they are facing serious dangers on the job. Further, Colorado public-sector workers cannot file complaints with OSHA if they have been retaliated against for raising safety concerns.¹⁴ A union can be the voice through which workers raise safety issues to assure they are identified and corrected.

Human Services Employee Turnover in Colorado Surpasses That of Other States.

Table 2. Employee Turnover Rates for Administration of Human Resource Programs, Colorado

Year	Average Annual Employment	Annual Turnover Rate	Rank Among States
2017	7,570	26.1%	35
2016	7,464	24.8%	28
2015	7,384	27.0%	36
2014	7,509	26.0%	34
2013	7,470	28.1%	38
2012	7,448	26.5%	36
2011	7,376	32.8%	45
2010	7,883	29.1%	41

Source: NELP analysis of Quarterly Workforce Indicators (QWI) data from the Census Bureau.

With such hazardous work conditions, it may not come as a surprise that Colorado human services workers are leaving their jobs at high rates. At least one out of four public servants working in human services leaves their job each year, which represents a higher turnover rate than the national average for this group of workers. From 2010 to 2017, Colorado’s turnover rate for human services was 27.5 percent, as compared to 23.5 percent, the median rate for human services workers among all states.¹⁵

While turnover rates can fluctuate from year to year, Colorado’s turnover rate has remained persistently elevated in comparison to other states for almost a decade. Colorado has ranked in the bottom third of states for turnover for this group of public-sector workers in every year except one since 2010 (**Table 2**).¹⁶

The majority of human services workers in Colorado are female (66.7 percent) and the turnover rate for female workers (27.5 percent) is about five percentage points higher than that of male workers (22.8 percent), suggesting that female workers may have poorer job satisfaction possibly related to compensation or hazardous work conditions.

Turnover can be related to various factors including the age distribution of the workforce and local macroeconomic conditions. However, the particularly high rate for this group of workers in Colorado as compared to the rate for similar workers in other states suggests that poor job quality in Colorado plays a key role in workers' decisions to leave their jobs.

A Vicious Cycle: Dangerous Jobs, High Turnover and Understaffing Threaten the Quality of Services and Drive Up Public Costs.

Dangerous jobs and high turnover lead to a vicious cycle. Workers leave their jobs because they are injured, because dangerous job conditions and low pay become unbearable. High turnover, in turn makes the job more dangerous because of understaffing and a prevalence of less experienced workers.

These dynamics have profound implications beyond the workers and their families, jeopardizing critical services that so many Coloradans rely on.

High turnover also has significant fiscal impacts for public coffers, when public revenues that could be dedicated to better care must instead be spent constant recruitment and training of new staff. A 2019 analysis by the Economic Analysis and Research Network shows that high turnover cost the State of Colorado at least \$48 million dollars in fiscal year 2017-18.¹⁷

And while disruptions and high worker turnover in public services affect Coloradans of all races, they disproportionately impact Coloradans of color because of racial disparities in the state. Families of color in Colorado are more likely to be in poverty: Nineteen percent of Black families and 13.5 percent of Latinx families in the state live under the poverty line, compared to 7.5 percent of White households.¹⁸ Children of color in the state are also more likely to be victims of domestic abuse and neglect and become involved in the child welfare system.¹⁹ While Colorado's population is currently about 70 percent White, the Colorado Demography Office predicts that non-Whites will comprise about 46 percent of Colorado's population in 2050. Latinx will represent over one-third of the non-White population in the state by 2050. Ensuring stable and high-quality public services for Coloradans is a crucial step towards addressing the racial disparities in the state as its population changes.

A Growing Movement for a Voice on the Job: Benefits Flow to All Coloradans

Granting workers a voice and democratic representation on their job doesn't only benefit workers; it can help stabilize service delivery through reducing costly employee turnover and ensuring a higher quality of service for clients and their families. Several studies have found that unions are associated with lower quit rates and employee turnover.²⁰ More specifically, research has shown that public employees represented by unions have lower turnover rates.²¹ These studies cite not only improved compensation, but greater voice in day-to-day operations as reasons for reduced turnover.²² In addition to reducing turnover,

unionization of human services workers has been shown to improve outcomes for their clients.²³

Colorado recently granted the right to join a union to state-employed workers. However, in Colorado, many critical services—such as child welfare—are administered through the counties. Extending this right to Colorado’s county and local human services workforce to a l is likewise essential if Colorado counties and localities are to deliver dependable, quality care in the years and decades to come.

It is a matter of basic fairness that workers who take these jobs—many of whom put their bodies on the line in order to help others—are granted the right to collectively voice their concerns about not only their jobs, but about the quality of services provided. Giving public-sector county and local employees a voice on the job is the right thing to do for all Coloradans.

Endnotes

- ¹ Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE), Division of Worker Compensation. (2017). Work-Related Injuries - Table 10 Distribution of Lost-Time Claims, and Rate of Lost-Time Claims, by North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) Sub-Sector, Date of Injury, 2004-2017. <https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cdle/node/20326> Data were provided to NELP upon request.
- ² Colorado Department of Labor and Employment, Division of Worker Compensation.
- ³ NELP analysis of Quarterly Workforce Indicators (QWI) 2010-2017, U.S. Census Bureau. Note: QWI groups state and local employees together in public sector industries.
- ⁴ Excluding South Dakota and Washington, D.C. for which data were unavailable.
- ⁵ NELP analysis of QWI.
- ⁶ NELP analysis of QWI.
- ⁷ Burry, C. L. (2002). Working with potentially violent clients in their homes: What child welfare professionals need to know. *Clinical Supervisor*, 21(1), 145-153.
- ⁸ CDLE, Division of Worker Compensation.
- ⁹ CDLE, Division of Worker Compensation.
- ¹⁰ Morantz, A. D. (2013). Coal Mine Safety: Do Unions Make a Difference? *ILR Review*, 66(1), 88-116. <https://law.stanford.edu/press/study-finds-fewer-fatalities-injuries-at-union-mines/>
- ¹¹ Zoorob M. (2018). Does 'right to work' imperil the right to health? The effect of labour unions on workplace fatalities. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*. 2018;75:736-738. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29898957>
- ¹² OSHA, (2015b).
- ¹³ Amick, Benjamin et al. (2015), "Protecting Construction Worker Health and Safety in Ontario, Canada: Identifying a Union Safety Effect," *Journal of Occupational and Environment Medicine* vol. 57, no. 2 (December 2015), 1337-42.
- ¹⁴ OSHA. (n.d.) State Plans. <https://www.osha.gov/stateplans> Note: Federal OSHA only covers the private sector and Federal workers. If a state wants to offer OSHA coverage to its state employees workers, it can implement a state OSHA plan. Colorado does not have a special state OSHA plan to cover its public employees. Currently 22 states and territories have State OSHA plans to cover the public and private sector, and an additional six states and territories that only cover public sector workers.
- ¹⁵ Excluding South Dakota and Washington, D.C. for which data were unavailable.
- ¹⁶ NELP analysis of QWI.
- ¹⁷ Jones, Rich. (2019). Collective Bargaining can Reduce Turnover and Improve Public Services in Colorado. Economic Analysis and Research Network. <https://earn.us/pubs/EARN-RJones%20Collective%20Bargaining%20can%20Reduce%20Turnover%20and%20Improve%20Public%20Services%20in%20Colorado.pdf>
- ¹⁸ American Community Survey, (2016). U.S. Census Bureau.
- ¹⁹ Colorado Department of Human Services: Division of Child Welfare. Minority Over Representation in the Child Welfare System Report. September 19, 2002
- ²⁰ Abraham, S., Friedman, B., Thomas, R. (2005). The Impact on Union Membership on Intent to Leave: Additional Evidence on the Voice Face of Unions, *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, December 2005, Volume 17, Issue 4, pages 201-213. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10672-005-9049-0>; and, Doellgast, V. (2008). Collective Bargaining and High-Involvement Management in Comparative Perspective: Evidence from U.S. and German Call Centers. *King's College London Industrial Relations*, 47(2), 284-319. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-232X.2008.00521.x>
- ²¹ Selden, S. C., & Moynihan, D. P. (2000). A Model of Voluntary Turnover in State Government. *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 20(2), 63-74., <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0734371X0002000206>
- ²² Lee, Soo-Young and Whitford, Andrew. Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Pay: Evidence from the Public Workforce, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, Volume 18, Issue 4, October 2008, Pages 647-671. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mum029>
- ²³ Dube, A., Kaplan, E., & Thompson, O. (2016). Nurse Unions and Patient Outcomes. *ILR Review*, 69(4), 803-833. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0019793916644251>; and Lazes, P., Figueroa, M. and Katz, L. (2012). OW Labor-Management Partnerships Improve Patient Care, Cost Control and Labor Relations.