

# Law Enforcement Employment: Significant Trends

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## Key Takeaways

**States are experiencing public sector worker shortages and are introducing new creative ways to fill the gaps in public safety personnel.**

**Significant trends include retention bonuses, shifting hiring requirements, and implementing more strategies for officer safety and wellbeing.**

Public employers are experiencing a worker shortage across the United States, and law enforcement agencies are no exception. According to a survey disseminated by the International Association of Chiefs of Police, 65% of agencies [reported](#) having too few candidates apply to be law enforcement officers. This trend is a result of multiple social, political and economic forces which have shaped the state of recruitment and retention strategies across the United States. Notable enactments within NCSL's [Legislative Responses for Policing Database](#) have highlighted the ways states are tackling shortages and thinking creatively to fill the gaps in public safety personnel.

## Recruitment and Retention Strategies

State legislatures have the ability to influence recruitment by providing grants for the hiring of quality candidates. A few states, including [Illinois](#), [Louisiana](#) and [New Mexico](#), have all created law enforcement recruitment and retention funds to support the hiring and retaining of new officers. The Illinois bill provided \$10 million for the statewide training standards board to award grants to units of local government, public institutions of higher education and qualified nonprofit entities for the purpose of recruiting new officers.

Another strategy includes the creation of financial incentives like hiring bonuses and tiered retention bonuses for those who remain within law enforcement. Nebraska's [Law Enforcement Attraction and Retention Act](#) is an example of a tiered retention bonus based upon the length of full-time employment. Recipients of the bonus may earn up to \$3,000 for five years of service within a law enforcement agency with less than 75 officers.

States have also begun to broaden the applicant pool for potential law enforcement officers. Shifting pre-hire requirements like citizenship, education, and residency are a few of the ways that states are making these roles more accessible to a wider group of candidates. For example, [Tennessee](#), [California](#), [Illinois](#) and [Colorado](#) have expanded eligibility to include non-citizens.

The Tennessee law allows any permanent legal resident of the U.S. who applies for or obtains U.S. citizenship within six years of their hire date to be employed as a police officer.

In [Colorado](#), a recent bill removed the residency requirement entirely for peace officers. Going forward, a person will no longer need to be a resident of the state of Colorado at the time of their appointment as a peace officer.

States have also included retired officers in the expansion of their hiring strategies. [Kentucky](#), for example, authorizes urban-county governments to reemploy police officers who have retired, provided the retiree participated in the Law Enforcement Foundation Program, was a service retiree and had separated from employment for at least 30 days with no prearranged agreement to return to work.

## Officer Safety and Wellbeing

Recent state efforts have also brought a renewed focus on officer safety and well-being. New practices are being implemented to identify, address and mitigate stresses that are unavoidable in the law enforcement field. This includes legislation authorizing or encouraging peer counseling initiatives, mental health screening and support for officers, and insurance coverage for mental health treatment.

In 2022, 196 pieces of legislation were introduced on this topic and 30 of those bills passed across 20 different jurisdictions. In 2023, NCSL has only seen this trend continue to grow.

[Utah](#) established a grant program for mental health resources for first responders and requires those resources to be available to all employees, spouses, children, and retirees as well. Additionally, [Alaska](#), [Arizona](#) and [Florida](#) all made efforts to implement licensed counseling programs or peer-to-peer counseling for public safety officers.

In terms of benefits and coverage, [Florida](#), [Virginia](#), and [Connecticut](#) all began defining post-traumatic stress disorder as a compensable occupational disease for first responders **in 2023**. These states vary in their approaches, but most provide workers' compensation from the time of the qualifying event or diagnosis.

If a traumatic event does occur in the line of duty, it can create or exacerbate a physical or mental condition for the officers involved. Therefore, [Montana](#) has ensured protection for law enforcement personnel by specifying that a peace officer's certification may not be revoked solely on the basis of a mental illness.

## Decertification

States have continued to refine their certification processes and implement new processes for decertification, following the initial surge of legislative changes in 2020.

New Jersey is the latest state to implement a decertification process, something nearly every state has a law to address. [NJ S 2742](#) allows the Police Training Commission (PTC) to suspend, revoke, or deny a license if an individual does not meet any standard or requirement prescribed by the commission. The denial of a license can extend to renewals as well. The law also requires the PTC to revoke an officer's

license if they are convicted of an act of domestic violence, an offense that would preclude them from carrying a firearm, or a crime in any other state.

[New Jersey](#) and [Nevada](#) have also included provisions mandating that state police officer standards and training boards submit information to the National Decertification Index (NDI) on any decision to revoke an officer's certification. Nationally, participation in the NDI is voluntary and each state may opt in or out, but several states have acted recently to codify their participation. The NDI can be a powerful tool for hiring authorities to avoid hiring officers who lost their badges due to gross misconduct, illegal activity, or other serious offenses.

## **Other Notable Actions**

To foster positive community perception of policing, states are also becoming more cognizant of the culture within agencies. There is significant interest in departments conducting a "cultural assessment," or allowing third parties to observe the culture of individual police departments and provide a report from focus groups, interviews with officers and civilians, custodial staff, and prosecutors.

Along with this "community perception" trend, [Rhode Island](#) has mandated the creation of a strategic plan to increase cultural competency by requiring all state employees to annually receive a cultural competency training program. These programs can train officers to respond more respectfully and effectively to people from all cultures, economic statuses, races, disabilities, religions and genders.