

HOW TO RETAIN CROSSING GUARDS: STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING SHORTAGES AND BOOSTING JOB SATISFACTION



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NEW JERSEY Safe Routes



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The New Jersey Safe Routes Program, supported by the New Jersey Department of Transportation, is a statewide initiative with a mission to partner with schools and communities to prioritize and implement opportunities for people to walk, bike, or travel by other wheeled devices. By focusing on improvements to support active travel by youth, we can create safe, healthy, equitable, and appealing conditions for all.

The New Jersey Safe Routes Resource Center assists public officials, transportation and health professionals, and the general public in creating safer and more accessible walking and bicycling environments for children in New Jersey through education, training, and research.

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Introduction

Crossing guards play a vital role in ensuring the safety of students as they navigate busy streets and difficult crossings on their way to and from school each day. Crossing guards provide not only protection to students but also peace of mind to parents as their presence reinforces traffic safety, promotes awareness and visibility of students, and fosters a safer walking and bicycling environment in school zones.

However, despite their critical role, municipalities face significant challenges when it comes to recruiting and retaining crossing guards. The position is often part-time and seasonal, which can limit its appeal to potential applicants. The physical demands of the job, the early hours, and the unpredictable nature of traffic can also deter individuals from applying or remaining in the position long-term. As a result, communities throughout the country have reported a shortage of crossing guards, leading to staffing shortages and gaps in coverage that often require police officers to fill these open positions at key crossings. (Lauten, 2023; Gomez, 2022; Stoltz, 2021).

Given the important role crossing guards play in our communities, municipalities need to find effective ways to attract and retain qualified crossing guards to ensure these essential positions are filled by dedicated individuals committed to keeping children safe.



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Approaches to Attract New Applicants and Retain Existing Crossing Guards

I. Programming Overview

Municipalities can increase wages to make the position more competitive. Offering health benefits, paid time off, and retirement savings options can also help attract new applicants and retain current staff. Sign-on bonuses or referral bonuses can be offered to existing crossing guards who bring in new recruits. Encouraging current crossing guards to engage their friends, families, and other community contacts to join the team can help recruit crossing guard supervisors to fill vacant positions.

One local example is provided by Summit, NJ, who increased their crossing guard pay rate to \$50 per day to attract new candidates to fill open positions. “We’ve recently increased it because we didn’t have enough crossing guards to fill posts,” says Officer Jeffrey Deets. “When there is no crossing guard on post, unfortunately, we as police have to take over, which pulls us away from emergency calls.” (News 12 Staff, 2022).

II. Providing Effective and Inclusive Training

Providing comprehensive training programs that include expectations and duties, traffic safety information, crossing procedures, and emergency procedures can help ensure guards feel confident, prepared, and equipped for their role. Annual training of all crossing guards, not just new guards, is a recommended best practice.

Crossing guard training is guided by law, and in New Jersey, training shall consist of a minimum of two hours of classroom instruction, including information on traffic control methods and the duties and responsibilities of adult school crossing guards. New crossing guard training must also include at least twenty hours where the trainee guard is supervised by an experienced adult school crossing guard or regular police officer.

Resource

Resources to assist crossing guard supervisors in planning and developing their crossing guard training are available through the New Jersey Crossing Guard Training and Resources Program, supported by the New Jersey Department of Transportation and the New Jersey Division of Highway Traffic Safety.

Numerous useful resources are available through the program website, www.njcrossingguards.org. The program offers a Train the Trainer course designed to equip police crossing guard supervisors with the tools and knowledge to provide consistent, high-quality training for their crossing guards, which help them perform their duties safely and effectively.

After completing the Train the Trainer program, officers gain direct access to training resources, including videos and PowerPoint presentations with training notes, which they can use to train their crossing guards.

Tailored Training

While the training materials offered through the New Jersey Crossing Guard Training and Resources Program provide an excellent foundation to make the training more impactful, Crossing Guard Supervisors should look for opportunities to tailor their training to their community. Trainings should note local concerns or issues and include specific information pertaining to the community.

A study by researchers from the University of Pittsburgh recommended that field training be conducted at various crossings within the community (Larson et al., 2015). This type of training will expose new hires to multiple crossing situations, leading to a better understanding of the job. Training crossing guards to work in different situations makes it easier for officers to move them between positions in case of absences or emergencies. Communication and departmental process expectations should also be addressed as part of the training.

According to the study, over three-quarters of the surveyed crossing guards “think that they are not adequately equipped to communicate directly with the police in the event of an emergency” (Larson et al., 2015). To address this, the study recommends establishing direct lines of communication between crossing guards and the local police. By including communication expectations and procedures as part of the training, supervisors can help make crossing guards feel more confident in their ability to do their job, especially in an emergency situation.

Peer-to-Peer Learning

Supervisors should also seek to incorporate opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and group discussion within their training program. While police officers are very experienced with traffic safety, they experience traffic and the crossing process differently from crossing guards. Drivers may stop for an officer in uniform wielding a stop paddle, but a crossing guard with a stop paddle at the same location with the same driver may have a different experience.

Providing crossing guards with the opportunity to share experiences and learn best practices can be beneficial. This exchange gives supervisors insights into crossing guard concerns and solutions to those concerns that are being implemented on the street that they may not have been fully aware of. In addition, supervisors and crossing guards can discuss the effectiveness of ongoing and proposed solutions to ensure they are adequate.

The study from the University of Pittsburgh also discussed a mentorship program between experienced and new crossing guards. In this program, experienced crossing guards help train the newly hired guards, provide shadowing/supervision in the training process, and act as a resource for the new crossing guards regarding questions and concerns. Having this support system for newly hired guards can help increase confidence and allow guards to feel more supported.



III. Providing a Supportive Work Environment

As with any job, providing a supportive work environment can help increase morale and help with retention efforts. There are a variety of ways crossing guard supervisors and their partners can help to provide a supportive work environment, including ensuring access to uniforms for crossing guards, listening to concerns to ensure crossing guards feel “heard,” and increasing the effectiveness of communication between the crossing guards and their supervisors.

Uniform Requirements in New Jersey

Ensuring the safety of all crossing guards is paramount, and one way to help achieve this is by providing them with and ensuring they wear proper uniforms. Crossing guard uniforms and equipment increases the visibility of the crossing guard, allowing them to effectively perform their duties. The uniform gives the crossing guard an air of professionalism, thereby contributing to the public perception of them as authority figures deserving of respect.

New Jersey law requires crossing guards to have a retroreflective safety vest, a STOP paddle, and breast and hat identification badges. Crossing guards must wear the vest at all times, outside of any other clothing worn, and must have “Crossing Guard” displayed across the vest. Additionally, if a high visibility jacket for crossing guards is issued, it must display “Crossing Guard” across it, or the vest must be worn over the jacket. While the retroreflective safety vest, the STOP paddle, and identification badges are the named pieces of the uniform required by law, the law states that the crossing guard uniform “shall include but not be limited to” these items. Several other pieces of equipment can be provided to help crossing guards while they work.



Uniform Best Practices

The New Jersey Crossing Guard Training and Resources program offers examples of “best practice” and “useful equipment” for crossing guards.

Examples of “best practices” include a baseball hat with a brim to work as a visor for protecting eyes from the sun, a whistle to allow crossing guards to easily grab the attention of nearby drivers and pedestrians, a rain jacket, and proper footwear for crossing guards as they are on their feet for an extended period of time. Examples of “useful equipment” include reflective gloves, an LED STOP paddle, a “stop and stay stopped sign, and orange cones. Additionally, there is also guidance on what should never be provided. Items that can be a safety hazard for crossing guards include an umbrella, earbuds, open-toed shoes, and a lawn chair. A detailed description of crossing guard equipment rules and regulations can be found [here](#).

Although not all communities may be able to provide every crossing guard with all of the recommended equipment, crossing guard supervisors should seek opportunities to acquire additional equipment and ensure that the equipment in use is in good condition. Crossing guards should know who to contact if they have uniform issues and supervisors should maintain an accurate inventory of guards’ equipment and any items needing attention. Ensuring that crossing guards have access to both required and “best practice” uniforms and equipment can help to protect them from the cold, rain, or snow, keeping them safer and leading to a more supportive and satisfying work environment.

Departmental Support

Making sure that crossing guards feel supported can lead to a better and more fulfilling work environment.

One way to support crossing guards is to establish and document clear reporting procedures for crossing guards to follow when concerns arise. Implementing clear reporting procedures will lead to a more direct method for crossing guards to report issues.

Prompt response times from supervisors will reassure crossing that their concerns are being heard and taken seriously. Even where no immediate resolution is available, a reporting process that helps to keep crossing guards updated on the status of their concerns can still be an effective way to ensure support.

By keeping crossing guards updated on the steps being taken to address their concerns, even if issues can’t be solved quickly, they will be prevented from feeling like nothing is being done to address the issue.

Departmental Support Protocols

In order to effectively address concerns, crossing guard supervisors may need to establish protocols for communication with other municipal departments including the public works, planning, and engineering departments.

Through communication protocols, crossing guard supervisors can work with municipal departments to ensure that crossing guard posts are prioritized within the municipality for repairs and maintenance, helping ensure the safety of crossing guards and the students and parents they cross.

Crossing guards work their posts daily, so they are often the first to experience hazards and issues when they arise. Ensuring there is a mechanism to address these issues quickly allows crossing guards to do their jobs more effectively and helps them to keep students safe.



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Promote a Safer Workplace

When crossing guards go to work, their office is the roadway. Therefore, it is essential to prioritize roadway maintenance at crossing guard posts, especially during winter snowstorms. Accumulated snow and ice can create slippery conditions, increasing the risk of car crashes, slips, trips, and falls. Prioritizing snow removal at crossing guard locations ensures safe, clear pathways for both guards and students.

Infrastructure improvements should also be prioritized at crossing guard locations. Well-designed and maintained infrastructure, including traffic calming measures, well-marked crosswalks, adequate lighting, and proper signage, help to ensure that crossing guards can perform their duties effectively.

These enhancements not only protect the crossing guards but also safeguard the children and other pedestrians they assist daily. By investing in these improvements, local authorities demonstrate their commitment to creating a safer environment for everyone, fostering trust and cooperation within the community.

IV. Community Recognition and Appreciation

Recognition and community appreciation are fundamental in creating an environment where crossing guards feel supported. Increasing community recognition and appreciation for crossing guards can help to build a culture of respect that can assist in retention efforts. Crossing guards can be acknowledged and thanked effectively through both appreciation events and inclusion of crossing guards in other community events.



Programs

Throughout the country, there are many examples of unique events and programs to recognize and thank crossing guards.

In Wisconsin, there is an entire week in February designated to show appreciation for crossing guards. While some communities use proclamations and events at council meetings to show appreciation, other communities sponsor “Thank a Crossing Guard” day, involving students to make cards and thank the crossing guards for being there to help them on their way to and from school each day. Other communities implement a “Guard of the Month” or “Crossing Guard of the Year” program that recognizes and provides a small reward like a coffee shop gift card to a crossing guard who has excelled or gone “above and beyond” in their duties.

Whatever recognition program a community chooses to use, its best if the school and students can be involved. During focus groups and interviews, crossing guards repeatedly indicate that the best part of their job is working with the children and that is why they keep coming back (New Jersey Safe Routes Resource Center, 2012). Programs like these are relatively easy and low cost ways to increase morale and make crossing guards feel valued for the work they do for the community.

School Initiatives

In addition to crossing guard-specific recognition events, crossing guards could also engage in community safety or school initiatives to highlight their positive impact on the community. Crossing guards could be included as a part of school events, such as back to-school nights or school fun fairs, allowing them to introduce themselves to the parents and the wider school community.

These events can give crossing guards a sense of purpose beyond their primary duty of helping children cross the street and help parents recognize the important role crossing guards play in the community.

V. Finding New Crossing Guards and Making the Job More Appealing

Outreach

Being a crossing guard is not an easy task and finding interested and qualified candidates for this challenging role can be difficult. Municipalities should leverage local partnerships to engage in marketing and outreach campaigns to attract more applicants.

A targeted recruitment campaign to increase awareness of open crossing guard positions should include advertisements in multiple community groups, such as schools and school districts, PTAs or PTOs, municipal committees and organizations, non-profit groups, and local businesses. Municipalities should utilize every form of media available to them and their partners, including social media, local news, radio, newspapers, and flyers posted at community centers, schools, and libraries.

Additionally, crossing guard positions should be promoted in languages other than English. For example, in communities with a high Spanish-speaking population, positions should be posted in Spanish as well as English. By expanding partnerships to strengthen outreach, municipalities can broaden their pool of applicants.



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Mentorship

Municipalities should also consider adopting a mentorship program for crossing guards to ensure that new recruits feel supported and connected in their new position.

Under such a program, new hires would be paired with veteran crossing guards who can assist with training, provide tips based on their experience, and offer support as new guards acclimate to the position. Such a program could be invaluable in retaining crossing guards, as it gives new hires an immediate resource for questions or concerns and fosters a supportive work environment.

Other Opportunities

While the split schedule and short hours associated with most crossing guard positions appeal to candidates seeking flexibility rather than full-time employment, these limited hours and pay may discourage others from applying or remaining in the role.

To secure additional hours for crossing guards, municipalities should explore opportunities for guards to fill other positions within the municipality or school district when not at their post. For example, crossing guards could work as aides within schools between their AM and PM shifts, providing additional opportunities and compensation that some potential applicants may seek.

Strategies and Conclusion

While there is no single answer or perfect solution, municipalities can significantly enhance their ability to attract and retain crossing guards by focusing on several key strategies. Offering competitive compensation and benefits ensures that the role is financially appealing. Providing effective and inclusive training helps crossing guards feel prepared and valued.

Creating a supportive work environment fosters job satisfaction and job loyalty. Recognizing and appreciating the contributions of crossing guards boosts morale and community engagement.

Finally, leveraging partnerships with local organizations and schools can expand recruitment efforts and provide opportunities to make the position more attractive. By implementing one or all of these approaches, municipalities can build a dedicated and motivated team of crossing guards, helping to ensure the safety and well-being of their communities.

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