The Overlooked Backbone of Public Service: How Support Unit Staff Sustain Public Agencies

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A practitioner reflection on the unseen contributions that keep public agencies functioning.

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Abstract

This article draws on my lived experience and commitment to bringing an often-unseen public service workforce into view: support unit staff. As a former support-services administrator in public agencies, I examine the critical roles these employees play in advancing organizational goals, preserving continuity, and keeping daily operations running. I argue that the success of support units depends heavily on their staff's organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs): the adaptability, initiative, and commitment employees extend beyond their formal job requirements to protect an agency's reputation, prevent operational disruptions, and sustain its mission (Podsakoff et al., 2000; Organ et al., 2005). Yet government structures and reward systems frequently fail to recognize these contributions and the knowledge and judgment they require. Interviews with human resources professionals in the county-level local offices of the Maryland Department of Human Services point to three themes: support staff feel undervalued despite their essential contributions, face disparities in pay, promotion and educational assistance, and carry much of their agencies' operational responsibility and institutional knowledge. Over time, the extra effort they give goes unseen and becomes the baseline others expect.

This article emphasizes two priorities: equity and continuity. Equity requires fair recognition, meaningful professional development opportunities, appropriate compensation, and access to employment benefits. Continuity requires preserving institutional knowledge and sustaining services through leadership transitions, policy changes, staffing shortages, and emergencies. Support unit staff carry much of this responsibility. Their story extends beyond the workplace to public trust, human dignity, and the health of our institutions. I recommend that policymakers review classification and incentive structures that favor some job series over others, give managers more room to recognize exceptional performance, expand acting-capacity pay for employees who cover vacant roles, and protect institutional knowledge as a strategic asset. Whether this extra effort is entirely voluntary or compelled is a question requiring further scrutiny outside the scope of this discussion. Here, my purpose is to document the systemic neglect of support workers and to encourage deeper reflection within public administration and public-sector employee relations. Ultimately, I ask whether effective public service should

continue to depend so heavily on employee devotion without building organizational structures worthy of that devotion.

I. Introduction - The Work We See and the Work We Do Not

Work is never naturally visible or invisible. Instead, we recognize labor through contextual cues, like physical strain or tangible outcomes (Star & Strauss, 1999). We must address the concerns of employees who feel disadvantaged by government policies yet continue to sustain and improve organizational effectiveness. I know this reality firsthand from walking the corridors of public agencies and serving in various support unit roles. I understood the weight of carrying essential responsibilities, filling operational gaps, preserving continuity, and helping other divisions achieve organizational goals. I witnessed the tireless efforts of my staff and felt the sting when their contributions were treated as routine or remained invisible.

Within the limits of my administrative authority, I addressed job dissatisfaction, emotional strain, and employee retention challenges within the units and divisions I once managed. I offered small gestures of appreciation or provided refreshments to encourage my staff and make up for little or no formal incentives. At other times, I echoed one of my dad's mantras and urged them to "soldier on." Yet encouragement could not resolve the deeper concerns created by limited recognition, unequal opportunities, and the persistent expectation that committed employees would continue giving more without receiving meaningful acknowledgment.

Public service is more than the achievement of internal business results. Our work directly affects people who are displaced, grieving, unemployed, endangered, elderly, disabled, hungry, or otherwise vulnerable. Frontline employees are the visible face of government agencies. They include caseworkers who listen to residents' concerns, social workers who visit families, eligibility specialists who explain decisions, and program representatives who connect people with needed resources. Behind this visible act of service, however, is work the public rarely sees: support unit functions. Support employees provide the administrative and operational foundation upon which direct services depend, and they remain an often-overlooked backbone of public service (Menakaya, 2022).

Within public agencies, support work often requires taking on extra roles. Support employees' citizenship behavior often occurs quietly through routine interactions, seamless internal operations, and daily problem solving. Support employees recruit and equip personnel, manage fiscal and administrative responsibilities, maintain records, resolve operational and systemic conflicts, and serve the employees, vendors, and managers upon whom agency operations depend. In many instances, they also report on site when other employees can work remotely. Their contributions sustain operations, strengthen service delivery, and enable agencies to fulfill their missions.

The sacrifices of support employees often exist in the space between formal responsibility and operational necessity. Position descriptions and formal job expectations are essential, but they cannot anticipate every crisis, vacancy, policy change, technological disruption, or human need. Neither can they capture every moment that requires judgment, compassion, initiative, resilience, or courage. Because public employees work within interconnected teams and with many stakeholders, their contributions frequently extend beyond what they can accomplish

individually. Understanding the value of support work requires examining the professional, motivational, and personal context behind that commitment.

II. Behind the Scenes: The Extra Work That Sustains Public Service

Throughout my years in public service, I observed support workers routinely step beyond their assigned duties to ensure that agency operations continued without interruption. Behind-the-scenes citizenship behavior is the quiet force connecting people, processes, and public service outcomes. Organizational citizenship behavior is generally understood as discretionary employee conduct that is not formally required but contributes to organizational effectiveness. It fills the gaps created by rigid job descriptions, restrictive policies, staffing shortages, and insufficient resources (Organ, 1988; Menakaya, 2022).

Invisible Work Beyond Assigned Duties. Organizational citizenship behavior rarely announces itself through grand gestures. Instead, it appears in familiar expressions heard across support units: “I will take care of it,” “Keep it moving,” “We will make it work,” or “We will hold down the fort.” These statements represent more than a willingness to help. They reflect a culture of commitment in which employees voluntarily assume responsibilities beyond their formal duties to preserve continuity and support organizational success. When a colleague leaves unexpectedly and critical deadlines remain, someone quietly accepts the additional work. A fiscal technician notices and resolves a discrepancy before it becomes a compliance problem. An experienced employee mentors a new hire, sharing the unwritten procedures and institutional knowledge that prevent costly mistakes.

Operational Buffering. Support workers serve as vital intermediaries among departments, supervisors, frontline staff, external partners, and customers. Because support functions are deeply interdependent, one unfinished task can create a bottleneck that delays several teams. A recruitment file processed on time may appear routine, but when delayed, it can leave an already strained unit understaffed. Support staff know which office controls a process, which form is current, which approval is missing, which deadline cannot be extended, and who can resolve a difficult problem. Successful support work often makes complications disappear before anyone else knows they existed. Purchase orders, facility requests, compliance reviews, and data reports may appear removed from an agency’s public mission, but mishandling them can obstruct multiple units and compromise broader outcomes.

Emotional Labor. Public service work is fundamentally human because delays in government services can directly affect individual wellbeing. A delayed payment, for example, may threaten a family’s housing stability. When essential staff are unexpectedly absent and adequate coverage has not been arranged, support employees must absorb the additional work to prevent service interruptions. They regularly navigate stressful situations, resolve conflicts, manage the frustrations of others, and maintain a calm and professional presence. Emotional labor helps protect colleagues, customers, and the organization from operational strain, yet it often remains invisible (Hochschild, 1983). When recurring crises are combined with unclear or expanding responsibilities, employees may experience role ambiguity, mental strain, and emotional exhaustion. This risk increases when temporary accommodations gradually become permanent performance expectations (Ingrams, 2020).

Competence, Sacrifice, and Organizational Limits. Support workers often serve as an agency's safety net when staffing and operational challenges arise. I experienced this reality when I managed my assigned unit while simultaneously overseeing additional units because management positions remained vacant for extended periods. As support unit personnel, we regularly performed the duties of absent colleagues, completed the work of subordinate staff, and accepted responsibilities outside our units because deadlines could not be postponed and services could not stop. Staff protected the entire agency even when it would have been easier to say, "It is not my job." Experienced employees shared hard-earned knowledge rather than guarding it as personal power. These acts directly supported coworkers, protected operations, and strengthened organizational effectiveness (Menakaya, 2022). Public agencies benefit greatly from such commitment, but they must not mistake employee sacrifice for an unlimited organizational resource.

III. Why the Support Staff Step Up: Professional and Personal Motivation, and Human Experience

Support staff do not step up simply because they are "nice people" or because their job descriptions require it. OCB scholars have associated behaviors such as civic virtue, sportsmanship, organizational loyalty, individual growth, initiative, and conscientiousness with employees' willingness to contribute beyond their assigned responsibilities in ways that support organizational effectiveness (Podsakoff et al., 2000). Within the public sector, scholars have further connected this commitment to Public Service Motivation (PSM) and the Public Service Ethos (PSE)**,** concepts that describe the values, sense of purpose, and desire to advance the public good that motivate many individuals to enter and remain in public service (Perry et al., 2010; Rayner et al., 2012; Tang et al., 2024).

As observed throughout my career and reinforced through my interviews, many support employees take pride in performing their work well, care deeply about their colleagues, and recognize that delays within the agency may create hardship for citizens who depend on public services. Consequently, it is not uncommon for support staff to miss lunch breaks, provide spontaneous coverage for absent colleagues, work beyond scheduled hours, report to work on weekends or public holidays, and assume responsibilities that extend beyond their formal assignments. For those in management positions exempt from overtime compensation, the commitment often includes forgoing compensatory time despite the additional hours worked.

For many support employees, motivation is both professional and personal. Their efforts extend beyond accomplishing organizational goals; they are often necessary for accomplishing their own work successfully. Most support functions are highly interdependent, meaning one employee's ability to complete a task frequently depends upon the timely completion of another's. Although these extra efforts are rarely mandated, failing to provide them can disrupt workflows, delay outcomes, and impede the employee's own performance. Employees who decline to fill in for vacant roles can also be labeled "not a team player," so many feel compelled to step in.

Another factor influencing support employees' willingness to contribute beyond their formal responsibilities is the constrained resource reality of many behind-the-scenes functions. Support units often operate with limited budgets that primarily cover salaries and basic operating expenses,

whereas direct service functions often operate on larger budgets supplemented by grants. In some organizations, priority for state vehicle usage, specialized incentives, or operational support is directed toward employees serving in public-facing roles. As a former volunteer bank runner for my agency's finance unit, I used my personal vehicle to complete agency business, seldom claimed mileage reimbursement, and frequently remained at the bank beyond regular work hours to ensure financial transactions were completed. Such actions were not required by policy but were often necessary to ensure that agency operations continued without interruption.

These contributions are rarely captured within formal job descriptions, yet when such efforts do not produce a successful outcome, they become highly visible during performance evaluations. In many public organizations, behaviors commonly associated with OCB become normalized and absorbed into expectations of procedural compliance or minimum performance standards (Pandey et al., 2008). Employees are then judged on outcomes alone, not on the discretionary effort behind them.

Menakaya (2022) suggested that for support workers, whose individual performance is structurally linked to the collective output of multiple teams, employee motivation may extend beyond the usual elements of OCB, PSM, and PSE. In such environments, safeguarding the organizational ecosystem may also function as a strategy for maintaining job security, workplace stability, and psychological safety.

Despite decades of research on OCB in public organizations, scholars continue to debate the factors that motivate public employees to engage in discretionary behaviors that benefit their organizations (de Geus et al., 2020; Ingrams, 2020). At the same time, evidence suggests that many public sector employees experience disengagement and feel insufficiently appreciated for their contributions (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2021). This tension raises an important question: if support workers are among the employees most relied upon to sustain organizational continuity, what motivates them to keep stepping forward?

IV. What My Interviews Revealed About Support Staff

About the Study

This discussion draws on interviews conducted for my 2022 doctoral study of OCB in public administration. The study used a small, purposively selected sample and provides qualitative insight rather than findings that represent every support employee or state agency (Menakaya, 2022). I interviewed 12 human resources officers and HR staff from the 23 county-level local offices of the Maryland Department of Human Services; 10 of the interviews were usable for analysis. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, I analyzed the transcripts thematically, with NVivo software supporting the coding. In the quotes below, participants call support staff "LGA" staff, after the local general administrative units that handle finance, procurement, human resources, information technology and general administration. As custodians and implementers of personnel systems, they brought professional knowledge of employee relations, personnel actions, recruitment, compensation, benefits, classification, retention, performance evaluation, and workforce development. Their accounts revealed three interconnected themes: limited recognition, disparities in opportunity, and the operational responsibility and institutional knowledge support staff carry.

Feeling Undervalued Despite Essential Contributions

The first theme was the limited recognition given to employees performing essential work. HR participants described support staff as the agency's "nuts and bolts," "engine," "heartbeat," and "backbone." These metaphors conveyed how the participants viewed support employees within the organization. An engine remains hidden, yet the vehicle cannot move without it. A steady heartbeat may go unnoticed, but life cannot continue without it. According to the participants, support employees were essential to daily operations, but their contributions were often overshadowed by more visible roles and noticed primarily when something went wrong. Nine of the ten participants knew of no formal system, beyond the performance evaluation, for rewarding employees who went above their duties. As one participant explained, "Because technically, as long as you're working inside of your classification, then really there's no monetary value to going over and above what's expected" (Participant 1). Another said, "often we are overlooked, underpaid and unacknowledged for what we do in the agency" (Participant 5). A third observed that "you rarely see LGA being acknowledged and recognized for providing the means for us to do the things that we're doing" (Participant 6). Two participants qualified this view: one felt the agency's greater investment in social workers was justified because "Our social worker positions are harder to recruit for" (Participant 7), and another believed the agency viewed both groups "About the same" (Participant 9).

Participants also reported that support employees frequently filled vacancies, performed duties above their classifications, and assumed additional responsibilities for extended periods during staffing shortages and employee turnover. These duties were not always accompanied by additional compensation or formal recognition. In some instances, experience gained while performing advanced work did not satisfy the qualifications required to obtain the position permanently. The HR respondents described a troubling contradiction within the personnel system: employees could be trusted to perform higher level responsibilities without receiving the classification, compensation, or advancement associated with them. According to the participants, this disconnect contributed to frustration and discouragement among employees whose work remained essential but insufficiently acknowledged. As one participant explained, "When they work in an acting capacity because someone quits, they often will not get the job because of things like education for qualifications for the open jobs or the former boss's position" (Participant 2).

Experiencing Disparities in Pay and Opportunity

The second theme concerned disparities in compensation, advancement, and professional opportunity. HR participants described differences between support classifications and positions involving direct public service, as well as variations across divisions, occupational groups, and job classifications. They identified differences in starting grades, salary scales, educational assistance, advancement opportunities, and recruitment and retention incentives. Participants associated these conditions with support employees' perceptions of being undervalued, underpaid, and skipped for advancement. Nine of the ten participants described pay disparities between support staff and their peers, eight said support staff lacked access to higher education assistance, and seven described a weaker promotion system for support staff than for social workers. One participant noted that "social workers (salary) are higher sometimes, three or four grade levels higher than that of LGA workers" (Participant 2). Another said, "I feel like social workers have a better promotion system than the LGA workers" (Participant 4). Virtanen and Elovainio (2018) argue that work heavily relies on teams and

divisions where decisions and processes are socially constructed, when work practices target specific groups, it makes organizational justice doubtful.

According to the respondents, many front-line classifications benefited from clearer advancement pathways and specialized incentives for positions designated as difficult to recruit or retain. Comparable opportunities were not always available to support employees. Participants also described support staff training as primarily focused on immediate job duties and general compliance requirements rather than broader professional development. Although supervisors sometimes offered praise or informal recognition, participants reported that these gestures did not consistently lead to promotion, compensation, reclassification, or other meaningful employment opportunities. Symbolic appreciation may acknowledge effort, but it cannot substitute for equitable employment practices and access to advancement (Menakaya, 2022). Participants singled out Maryland's Employee Tuition Assistance Program (ETAP; Maryland Department of Budget & Management, 2024) as one example: "LGA staff does not have anything available to them for tuition to go to school or anything like that" (Participant 1), and "it's specific to the social worker group than other groups; it assists social workers only" (Participant 10). Not every participant saw a gap in advancement; one said promotion channels were "about the same in my agency" (Participant 9).

Carrying Institutional Memory and Operational Responsibility

The third theme was the extent of institutional knowledge and operational responsibility carried by support staff. All ten participants described the broad role support staff play in keeping their agencies running, making this the most widely shared theme in the study. Participants said support staff "have a hand in all the other divisions and, as you know, sometimes know their (other units) policies and procedures" (Participant 2) and called the unit "the support engine that drives the administrative functions of the agency" (Participant 9). Support staff also kept offices running in person: "everybody is working from home and don't have to come in, but the LGA unit keeps the agency running; we knew we had to come in" (Participant 1). Research shows that much of a public organization's institutional memory resides in its long-serving staff rather than its records, and is lost when they leave (Corbett et al., 2018; Pollitt, 2000). Much of this knowledge is tacit, residing in experience, judgment, relationships, and problem-solving abilities that are difficult to document or replace (Argote, 1999; Dalkir, 2011).

Taken together, the HR participants' accounts revealed a structural vulnerability. Support employees helped preserve continuity, yet the knowledge and additional responsibilities they carried were not always matched by recognition, compensation, or opportunity. When experienced employees departed, filling their positions did not automatically restore the institutional knowledge that left with them. Participants' observations also showed how restricted access to training and advancement could deepen perceived stratification and inequities within personnel systems. In my reading, their accounts conveyed a painful organizational message: we trust you with the responsibility, but not the opportunity. When repeated, that message can turn dedication into discouragement and place both employee commitment and organizational continuity at risk.

The interviews confirmed what many support unit employees have long felt: the extra effort that keeps an agency running goes unseen, and over time it becomes the baseline everyone expects. That reality should trouble every leader, particularly when loyalty, initiative, and institutional knowledge are critical to mission success. Star and Strauss (1999) characterize invisible work

as a "hidden infrastructure" that supports collaboration across cultural, communicative, and organizational boundaries. For agencies, the lesson is clear: the more they rely on citizenship behaviors to sustain performance, the more intentional they must be about protecting, recognizing, and investing in those who provide them.

V. Where Public Sector Policymakers Can Start

Public policies are shaped and constrained by supervisory boards and political influences; decision-making frequently involves difficult trade-offs as competing values collide within environments defined by budgetary limits, regulatory mandates, political pressures, and public accountability (Ertl et al., 2014). I recommend that agencies recognize patterns of extra effort and correct the conditions that normalize continuous sacrifice.

Policymakers must critically evaluate human resource practices that generate unequal access to compensation, career advancement, training, and recognition. For example, agencies may designate certain positions, often direct-service roles, as hard to hire or hard to retain, and attach incentives such as higher entry grades, faster advancement, tuition assistance or student loan repayment that most support unit staff do not receive (Maryland Department of Budget and Management, 2021). Research shows that employees who perceive development opportunities as adequate are more likely to engage in OCB as a form of reciprocity (Manenzhe & Ngirande, 2021).

Classification systems that reserve incentives for certain job series may not be designed to exclude anyone, but they raise questions of organizational justice when support positions are routinely left out (Brewer & Kellough, 2016). While labor shortages can justify targeted recruitment incentives, these disparities require periodic review to ensure they do not systematically undervalue support employees whose daily work sustains core agency operations. Furthermore, performance evaluations should serve as an honest record of individual contributions rather than a routine administrative formality or a reactive tool for discipline.

One area requiring attention is the public sector performance evaluation system. Managers often encounter significant procedural barriers when attempting to reward exceptional employee performance. Rigid and opaque procedural barriers that discourage managers from awarding outstanding ratings, recommending reclassifications, or acknowledging advanced work should be streamlined. Promotions should be anchored in demonstrated individual performance rather than tied automatically to job classifications that leave out support units. When advancement follows the job series instead of the work, the classification system rewards position over contribution. That is a flaw in how jobs are classified, not a shortcoming of the frontline staff who hold those positions. I recommend giving managers greater flexibility to recognize exceptional performance, recommend reclassifications, and advance employees who consistently perform duties beyond their current classifications.

Institutional knowledge must be protected as a strategic asset. Organizations should actively incentivize non-managerial and subordinate support staff who preserve operational history, mentor colleagues, and facilitate cross-training. While cross-functional agility is valuable, support unit workers should not be forced into becoming "jacks-of-all-trades" due to systemic

understaffing. Clear organizational roles are essential; they enable employees to effectively direct their efforts and regulate their performance.

Experienced support staff who consistently take on discretionary, extra-role responsibilities deserve transparent pathways to career advancement. To address this, policymakers should expand job classification frameworks within support units, mirroring the structured upward mobility available to their frontline counterparts.

Furthermore, existing acting-capacity pay adjustment policies should be expanded to fairly compensate subordinate workers and managers who assume expanded responsibilities. When staffing shortages compel employees to absorb additional duties for extended periods, agencies must initiate formal reviews of workloads, job classifications, compensation structures, and long-term staffing needs. Temporary operational coverage must not quietly morph into a permanent, uncompensated obligation without a formal organizational response and appropriate recognition. Fairness is not just about pay; it is about equal respect for one's duties (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005).

VI. Conclusion: Rebalancing Public Agency Systems for a Fairer Future for Back-Office Staff

Public agencies are sustained by both visible and invisible forms of work. Increasing scholarly attention has been directed toward recognizing overlooked labor, with researchers noting that as organizational contexts evolve, the boundary between what is visible and what remains unnoticed must be continually renegotiated (Star & Strauss, 1999). Support staff are not merely functional components of an organization; they are individuals whose contributions carry significance and meaning. No employee wants to feel undervalued, marginalized, or perceived as less worthy because of their position.

Every role contributes to organizational effectiveness, and no job classification should be inherently regarded as more valuable than another. Likewise, reward systems should promote equity rather than create or reinforce disparities that lack a justifiable basis. Repeated exclusion, disregard, or limited opportunity may gradually weaken an employee's connection to both the work and the organization (Howard, 2019).

Fairness is essential for government organizations, because the taxpayers who fund them expect them to operate with equitable values and considerations (Butitova, 2019). Support employees are not adjacent to the mission. They are part of the mission. Frontline and support services are not competing functions but interdependent parts of public service. Employees should not have to exhaust themselves to prove their devotion, resign before their value is discovered, or remain excluded from decisions about opportunity, recognition, and development. Workplace inclusiveness also aligns with federal workforce law, including the nondiscrimination and equal opportunity provisions of Section 188 of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014 (Menakaya, 2022).

Rebalancing public agency systems will require more than symbolic recognition. It calls for the integration of compliance-based ethics with values-based ethics so that public sector policies,

operational processes, and employment practices reflect a clear relationship between institutional decisions and their human consequences (Perlman et al., 2023).

Rebalancing public agency systems asks a public sector that expects employees to serve communities with integrity, compassion, and endurance to return the favor. Public institutions must be prepared to offer those same qualities to the people within them. Employees are also citizens, and their dignity should not become secondary to the systems they sustain.

Limitations

This article includes a co-constructed research process that featured a hermeneutic phenomenological selection of interview participants, demographics, and a heuristic discovery of the author's lived experience; thus, scope of data used was narrow. The vast nomological OCB concepts were limited to just organizational learning and organizational justice (Menakaya, 2022). Additionally, some of the arguments may not fully capture the current political, fiscal, administrative, technological, and generational conditions influencing workplace environments and employee perceptions, such as Maryland's Fiscal Year 2026 budget cost-saving measures, including hiring freezes, position reductions, and voluntary separation programs (Olaniran, 2025); the 2025 Federal Public Law 119–21, The One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which shifted significant program costs from the federal government to states (U.S. Congress, 2025); and millennial and Generation Z factors, evolving generational shifts reshaping public sector employment, and post-COVID technology-driven retirement wave of older and senior workers (Freeman, 2022; Russo et al., 2025). However, this article still provides meaningful, context-specific qualitative insight on the topic rather than a universal conclusion.

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