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Government is most likely to be responsive to people's needs when those serving in it represent a wide range of Americans. But historically, only some are able to overcome significant obstacles like low pay that deter everyday folks from running for and holding office. Pulling down those barriers to make legislatures reasonable, accessible places for more to work is essential if we want democracy to better deliver for our communities.

Colorado in recent years has emerged as a true leader in improving its legislature as a professionalized, accommodating workplace that works for candidates from many walks of life. Former legislative leadership notes that these policies have worked best as a package to create an "ecosystem" that can attract and retain leaders with the best ideas, no matter their circumstances.

PROVIDING SUFFICIENT PAY FOR ALL TO SERVE

- In 2024, the Colorado Legislature enacted [HB 24-1059](#) to address longstanding underpayment of lawmakers. The Legislature meets for a maximum of [120 days](#) each year, and its members serve full-time during those four months. Yet pay has been so low that effectively only the wealthy could serve without financial sacrifice.
 - HB 24-1059 created an independent commission to set salaries for lawmakers along with other officials including the governor every four years, beginning in September 2025. Members are appointed by the governor and leaders of each chamber, which can reject or modify the compensation set by the commission.
 - The law also adjusts compensation annually during those four year cycles to account for inflation.
 - The law increased the per diem (daily compensation for expenses other than travel) to be 25% of the federal per diem rate set for Denver for metro Denver state lawmakers, resulting in a \$26 increase to \$71. The law increased the per diem to be 90% of that federal rate for state lawmakers living elsewhere, resulting in a \$14 increase to \$254 (higher than the metro per diem to account for rental housing in Denver during session).
- [Currently](#), representatives in the House have been paid \$43,977 annually in salary. Senators have received that salary or \$41,499, depending on when they were elected.
- [Previously](#), state lawmakers in the metro Denver area had been receiving the same per diem since 1990: \$45. While the cost of living on average in this region grew by 171%¹ over those 34 years since, that per diem stayed the same. The per diem for state lawmakers not living in the Denver area did increase several times over these decades but still left some lawmakers feeling undercompensated, at \$240.

¹ [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), the U.S. Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U), not seasonally adjusted, for the Denver-Aurora-Lakewood, CO, area. That CPI-U in 1990 was 120.9 and in 2024 was 327.572. The difference is 206.672. Calculating 206.672/120.9 yields 170.9%.

STRENGTHENING HR FOR A PROFESSIONALIZED WORKPLACE

- In 2025, the Colorado Legislature passed [HB 25-1333](#) to expand human resources (HR) services for its members.
 - Renaming OLWR to the Legislative Human Resources Division, the bill is designed to add the standard functions of “benefits administration, compensation and classification, hiring and recruitment, and new employee onboarding” to what the division must now do.
- The assurance of these typical workplace services stands to promise a well-functioning workplace and thereby encourage candidates from all walks of life to run, serve, and lead.
- Previously, more limited HR services were available to legislators.
 - Those services have been provided by the [Office of Legislative Workplace Relations](#) (OLWR), an entity created in 2019 within the [Office of Legislative Legal Services](#) operating at the direction of the joint [Committee on Legal Services](#).
 - In addition to OLWR, Colorado currently decentralizes critical HR functions across a broad array of platforms and agencies.
 - As a result, legislators and staff have been forced to spend precious working hours wading through a less efficient system to address workplace issues when they could have been solving problems through legislation or responding to constituents.

ALLOWING REMOTE VOTING TO ACCOMMODATE NEEDS TO STAY LOCAL

- Tapping powers established by [state law](#), the Colorado Legislature established (first in 2020, with updates since then) [rules](#) for itself that allow for lawmakers to join their colleagues remotely. Specifically, these rules permit the House speaker and Senate president to promulgate regulations that allow lawmakers to vote and otherwise participate remotely in legislative sessions and to testify remotely in committee sessions. These [regulations](#) have now been issued, most recently updated in 2025, and allow participation via Zoom for any lawmaker:
 - Whose physical presence would endanger others’ health;
 - Who is caring for a new child due to a birth, adoption, or foster placement; and/or
 - Who is experiencing a serious health condition, or caregiving for a relative with one.
- The House also allows for remote participation for any lawmaker who is attending a funeral or memorial service or experiencing a “period of bereavement” for the passing of an immediate family member.
- Being able to serve without traveling to Denver allows for legislators to more easily tend to these local needs. That flexibility stands to encourage parents and those earning lower or middle incomes to run, serve, and lead.
- Previously, lawmakers would have to travel excessive distances and stay for long stretches away from their families in order to serve in the General Assembly, even in the midst of the circumstances that now trigger permission to participate remotely. From some towns in Colorado, it takes over six hours one way to reach Denver – 12 hours roundtrip!

PROVIDING PAID LEAVE FOR BIRTHS AND LONG-TERM ILLNESSES

- In 2022, the Colorado Legislature became the [first](#) in the U.S. to provide paid leave to parents serving as lawmakers when it enacted [SB 22-184](#).

- Specifically, it allows lawmakers to be paid for up to 12 weeks for parental leave and an additional four weeks for complications from pregnancy and childbirth. The law also permits the Senate president or House speaker to grant paid leave for long-term illness, additional parental leave, or similar needs.
- Offering paid leave is a common workplace benefit. It allows more people to run, serve, and lead in legislatures without financial penalty when they grow their family or experience bad health luck while also protecting the health, in some cases, of fellow lawmakers.
- Previously, lawmakers who welcomed a new child into their family or experienced a serious health issue would have to choose between their baby's needs or those of their own health and their legislative paycheck.

ENDING CHILDCARE DISCRIMINATION IN CAMPAIGN FINANCE LAW

- In 2019, the Colorado Legislature passed [SB 19-229](#) to allow donations to a candidate's campaign to pay for childcare for the candidate's child(ren) that is required for the candidate to engage in campaign activities. Building on this change, in 2023, the Legislature passed [SB 23-276](#) to allow elected officials to use those campaign donations to pay for childcare needed to facilitate work as an elected official.
- Contributions to campaign committees are meant to cover the expenses that are necessary in order to facilitate a run for office. Childcare for young children is a primary responsibility for parents that must be addressed in order to enable a person to engage in campaigning and public service as an elected official. Allowing campaign committee donations to cover childcare costs closes a loophole that allows more people to run for and serve in office.
- Previously, campaign finance law allowed donations to a candidate's committee to cover some but not all expenses that are necessary for a candidate to pursue election and serve in office. This loophole that had excluded childcare from eligible uses of campaign committee funds effectively discouraged a major demographic from becoming candidates for, and serving in, elected office and continuing offering service by running for reelection.

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