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'Mass exodus:' Durham County employees leaving at higher rate than last year

Sarah Krueger, Vinnie Boccanfuso, Heather Leah : 3-3 minutes : 12/6/2021

Durham, N.C. — Durham County is seeing what one commissioner described as a “mass exodus” of employees. More than any other city or county in central North Carolina, Durham has seen a large spike in resignations.

One commissioner attributes the increased resignations to burnout from the pandemic.

"Burnout is very real. It is very real," said Durham County Commissioner Nimasheena Burns in an October meeting.

Employees, she said, are leaving left and right.

"We can sit here and say things about one individual department, but we are seeing a mass exodus from all departments," said Burns.

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WRAL News' research found that Durham County has seen the largest increase of people leaving their jobs this year, compared to last – a 57% increase.

Departures are happening elsewhere, but not to the same degree as Durham County.

Percentage of increase in city and county employees leaving jobs in 2021

- Durham County: 57%
- Orange County: 36%
- Raleigh: 32%
- Chapel Hill: 29%
- Fayetteville: 24%
- Wake County: 13%

How the pandemic is spurring the 'great resignation'

North Carolina Central University economist Henry McKoy says the pandemic has taken an emotional toll that's impacting work.

"Some folks are re-assessing who they are and what they want to do with their lives and whether they want to pursue other options," he said.

In the broader scheme of things, he says this era is becoming known as the "great resignation" with many people exiting the workforce in ways and numbers the country hasn't seen in a long time – maybe ever.

However, McKoy says people aren't leaving the workforce. They are leaving specific jobs – with the shift to remote work allowing people broader horizons than ever before.

"So employers have to compete with companies nationwide," he said.

At the same time, McKoy says the pendulum has shifted to provide more leverage to workers and laborers, allowing them more bargaining power to demand more pay.

"The perfect storm has been created," he said.

The pandemic-created economy is pushing companies to have to compete to retain workers.

Durham County is doing a pay study to assess if salaries need to go up in order to retain their own workforce.