Everyone who has been a state employee in Idaho state government for a decade or more knows firsthand how compensation practices have changed over the years.

Not too many years ago, most state department directors could give employees a longevity raise. This didn't happen every year. For most state employees it was a raise given after every five additional years of employment. So that meant you'd get a little raise on your fifth anniversary of state employment, and again on your tenth year of state employment, and so on. This is typically considered a "best practice" to keep good employees. Those longevity raises were coupled with regular cost of living raises that every employee received on a regular basis.

But those longevity raises went away quite some time ago when Idaho state government decided to use a "merit-based" compensation plan. Governor Otter has been a prime promoter of the merit-based compensation plan, and the majority Republican legislature has been happy to go along with this plan. The problem is that merit-based compensation systems just don't work. Especially the way Idaho implements its merit-based system. You can read this IPEA newsletter article: The truth about Idaho government's "merit system" to learn more.

IPEA has been leading the charge against the merit-based compensation and we have been working with the Chairs of the Senate and House Commerce and Human Resources committee (that's where all laws about state employees are introduced) and with the CEC (Change in Employee Compensation) committee chairs to change the compensation system in the state.

At IPEA, we believe the best compensation system is a true longevity system that incorporates cost of living increases and longevity raises. Merit raises can be part of the system, but only as additional incentive for outstanding performance, and not as the only basis for any raise in pay. But at IPEA we also realize we are fighting an uphill battle to get there. That's why we take smaller steps each year in our lobbying work. For instance, in the height of the recession, back when the Governor wasn't allowing raises at all, IPEA worked with a couple of key legislators to get a 2% across the board raise. It wasn't much, but at least it was distributed to all state employees who had at least a "meets expectations" job performance.

The next year, the CEC decided it would give some raises, but they wanted the small 2% raise to be completely performance based and as one time bonuses rather than on-going raises. We were able to persuade them to at least split that 2%, and give 1% one-time, and 1% on-going. This was better than what they were planning, but it was still not good. Department Directors simply have too much power when it comes to distributing these merit-based raises, especially the one-time bonus raises. Some Directors are fair and even-handed, but many are not.

Fortunately, last year, when the CEC was considering a 3% raise, our conversations with the legislators, plus our FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) requests, showed how unfairly the one-time bonus raises were distributed, and the CEC decided to make the entire raise on-going. That was another small victory, and it moved us one baby-step closer to where we want to be.

Another small step last year was when our work with the CEC Chairs resulted in a change in the employee classification system. State employees understand what the "policy" pay rate is for each classification. The classified system identifies a pay range for each position. Usually, the midpoint is considered the policy rate, or what a person who has been in the job for a while and is performing adequately should be making. There is a top level, that is 125% of the policy rate, and what is considered an entry level pay at the bottom. During the recession, that bottom rate was consistently moved down, and it had landed at 68% of policy. The problem is, when all raises are based on merit and the Director has unlimited discretion on how to distribute those raises, that means people tend to stay at or close to the bottom level. In fact, 85% of state employees are at 85% or less of their policy rate. In 2015, the CEC raised that bottom level of the policy rate to 70% of policy, and they gave us their commitment to continue to raise a little each year until it gets back to 75% of policy. This will make a difference in every classified position, because people at all levels will need to be moved up to prevent salary compression.

So the point is this: IPEA is able to make changes in the state's policy around compensation. And we're able to make these changes because we are able to call on our members to email and call the appropriate legislators when the changes are being considered. We also have the ear of legislators because we represent hundreds of state employees.

But just consider how much more effective we could be in making these changes if we had thousands of members to call on for help, rather than hundreds. That's why we need you as much as you need us. You can join IPEA for as little as $5 a month for a Supporting Membership; $10 a month for a Retiree Membership, or $20 a month for a Standard Membership.

Click here to find out more about our membership categories and how to join.