

MCEA Opening Statement, 2022 Negotiations

Since the last time we negotiated our contract in 2019, the world has been turned upside down. In the middle of a global pandemic, skyrocketing inflation, school and office closures, and a seemingly never-ending series of other crises like wildfires and ice storms, the employees of Marion County have never wavered in their commitment to provide the best, highest-quality public services to the people of Marion County. We have showed up, we have come to work, we have been flexible, we have gone above and beyond to keep the County running. On top of this, many of us also have a responsibility as caregivers for people around us—we are caring for children when schools and daycares close, and family members who are medically vulnerable. Many of us have seen people in our lives, sometimes our coworkers, pass away during this pandemic. As a result of working in these conditions for several years now, many of us are experiencing compassion fatigue or other mental health challenges. Employees are tired, burned out, and frustrated.

We are entering these negotiations with clear direction from our coworkers at Marion County. Employees are concerned about recruitment and retention, safety issues related to COVID, and—possibly more than anything else—employee morale. Our members expect movement on all of these issues in these negotiations. We also strongly believe that these are issues that affect management and labor alike, and we hope we will be able to have constructive dialogue leading to mutually agreeable solutions.

We also cannot ignore the elephant in the room, which is the broader economic climate we are negotiating in. As I'm sure everyone here already knows, the Consumer Price Index (aka inflation) rose to 7% last month. Salem housing prices in December were up 15.7% year-over-year. The average cost of renting a 1-bedroom apartment in Salem is \$1,049, up 5% this year. The average 3-bedroom apartment is \$1,875, an 18% increase. To the employees of Marion County, these are not abstract statistics—we notice their effects every single time we go to the grocery store, fill up at the pump, or pay our rent. We know that our paychecks aren't going as far as they used to and that our real earnings are declining. We also know that minimum wage is increasing, which is leading to wage compression. From the perspective of employees, this is not a tolerable situation and it's one that we will seek to address in these negotiations.

Finally, we want to talk about how we intend to conduct ourselves in these negotiations and what we expect in return. First and foremost, we are committing to—and we expect to see in return—genuine, good faith efforts to reach an agreement that not only works for both parties, but one that addresses the underlying problems both sides are seeking to resolve. From our point of view, this would mean that we would not just see the rewording of what’s already in our contract or just proposing what exists in policy but that there would be genuine effort to truly hear the concerns underlying the proposals being brought up and to work to address them in this contract. It also means that we are committing to truly listening to the issues and concerns you are raising at the bargaining table. While we know there will be disagreements about issues, sometimes very deep disagreements, we will maintain respectful communication at the bargaining table and will seek to collaboratively solve problems wherever possible. We are also making a commitment to be communicative, to be honest and forthright, and to be as efficient as possible during our time together. Again, we hope that the County is able to make a similar commitment in these negotiations.

Thank you.