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## **Analyzing Employment Trends Among Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Z, and Millennials in Yellowstone National Park**

Yasmine Tom

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**Analyzing Employment Trends Among Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Z, and Millennials in  
Yellowstone National Park**

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EMPA 396 - Capstone Research Project

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction Background .....</b>	<b>6</b>
Statement of the Problem.....	7
Purpose of the Study .....	8
Significance of the Study .....	8
Research Question, Sub-questions, and Hypothesis .....	9
Theory of Change and Assumptions .....	9
Limitations .....	10
Operational Definitions.....	11
Expected Impact of the Research.....	11
Summary .....	12
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review .....</b>	<b>13</b>
Theme 1: Government Shutdowns and Employee Retention .....	14
Theme 2: Succession Training and Employee Retention.....	16
Theme 3: Affordable Housing and Employee Retention .....	18
Summary .....	19
<b>Chapter 3: Research Methods.....</b>	<b>21</b>
Research Question and Sub-questions .....	21
Theory of Change and Assumptions .....	22
Operational Definitions.....	22
Population Sampling Strategy.....	23

Research Procedures ..... 23

Data Processing and Analysis ..... 24

Internal and External Validity ..... 24

Research Limitations ..... 24

**Summary..... 25**

**Chapter 4: Results and Findings ..... 26**

Introduction..... 26

Assumption One (A1) ..... 29

Quantitative Results ..... 29

Qualitative Results ..... 31

Findings ..... 34

Assumption Two (A2)..... 34

Quantitative Results ..... 34

Qualitative Results ..... 38

Findings ..... 39

Assumption Three (A3) ..... 40

Quantitative Results ..... 40

Qualitative Results ..... 43

Findings ..... 44

Additional Findings ..... 44

**Summary..... 46**

<b>Chapter 5: Conclusions, Recommendations, and Areas of Further Research.....</b>	<b>48</b>
Introduction.....	48
Conclusions.....	49
Recommendations.....	52
Table 1: SMART criteria for each recommendation .....	57
<b>Areas for Further Research .....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Appendix A – Gantt Chart .....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Appendix B – Data Collection Instruments.....</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>Appendix C – Interview &amp; Survey Responses.....</b>	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>

## Abstract

Employee retention has been a struggle for the National Park Service. In a 2023 survey, the NPS ranked 385 out of 432 federal agencies in terms of employee satisfaction (Partnership for Public Service, 2023). Even in its formative years, employees complained about disparities in parks like Yellowstone (Albright, 1985). Yellowstone was established in 1872 and today boasts a cross-generational workforce. In 2023, several major concerns were identified in the State of the Park compendium (State of the Park, 2023). Further research may improve employee retention. In this project, a mixed methods research (MMR) approach was used to identify employment trends in Yellowstone. The variables, government shutdowns, affordable housing, and succession training programs, were examined. Other issues related to employee retention were also discovered. Data was collected from over 100 employees ( $n=101$  quantitative;  $n=12$  qualitative). The results, derived from the inputs, processes, and outputs (IPO), will hopefully provide Park managers with data-driven solutions to improve employee retention.

**Keywords:** *Employee Retention, Cross-Generational, Succession Training, Government Shutdown, Affordable Housing.*

## Chapter 1: Introduction Background

Yellowstone National Park is an icon of American history. It is the world's first national park, covers 2.2 million acres of wilderness, and includes the largest concentration of geysers in the world. Yellowstone is known as the 'crown jewel' of the National Park Service system (Zebrowski, 2023). Researchers, conservationists, and wildlife enthusiasts come to work and live here from all around the world. Additionally, Yellowstone attracts over 4 million visitors a year. Retaining and recruiting the best employees to manage such a huge operation will be essential to Yellowstone's future success (Number of visitors to Yellowstone National Park in the U.S. 2008-2023, 2024). Many employees develop a deep love, sense of purpose, and affection for this place. Even so, it has always required resilient individuals to work and live here. Conditions can be harsh. The temperature regularly falls below 0, and Yellowstone is far away from major cities.

Nevertheless, Yellowstone is special, and many employees feel connected to this resource, wildlife, and historical legacy. The stories, of early employees and their adventures, has left its mark on this place too. For example, employees recount the mischief of former park rangers, superintendents and more. Horace Albright, Yellowstone's Superintendent between 1919 – 1929, recounted a story about one of his colleagues blowing up an illegal sawmill in Glacier National Park (Albright, 1985). The colleague, Stephen Mather, was Albright's boss and had been frustrated with the railroad company for not dismantling the sawmill sooner. Hotel guests were surely shocked. The struggles and people of the NPS, in its early years, embody a professional legacy that may be referenced for future stewards. Mather and Albright may serve this purpose. The NPS Organic Act of 1916 established the NPS, and Mather became its first Director. Albright succeeded him, becoming the second Director of the NPS in 1929.

The National Park Service is largely the legacy of Mather and Albright. These individuals, who had starkly different backgrounds, successfully merged their unique skills, dispositions, and expertise to build up the agency. Mather was born in 1867, an eccentric millionaire, and later in life became a staunch conservationist. Albright was a poor kid born in Bishop, California in 1890. He was studying law at UC Berkeley, coincidentally Mather's alma mater, and had been interning at the Department of the Interior in 1915. (Albright, 1985). Because of recurrent health issues, Mather often selected Albright (who was 20 years his junior) to be acting director through the 1920s. Mather and Albright established a remarkable cross-generational alliance.

In modern times, succession training, housing, and contingency plans surrounding government shutdowns are significant struggles that impact Yellowstone employees. Yellowstone, and more widely the National Park Service, is struggling to appeal to new employees, especially Gen Z and Millennial applicants. Like many other sectors, Yellowstone struggles to absorb the institutional knowledge from senior staff and deliver it to newer employees. Funding cannot be ignored, either. Congress will need to provide a greater budget and more resources to ensure long-term solutions in Yellowstone and other national parks. This study tackled the illusive question of how Yellowstone's Park managers can improve employee retention.

### **Statement of the Problem**

**Problem 1 (P1)** Government shutdowns significantly disrupt and negatively impact employee retention in Yellowstone National Park.

**Problem 2 (P2)** There are insufficient succession training programs that leave footprints of employee high turnout ratio.



**Problem 3 (P3)** There is a shortage of affordable housing, which primarily affects Gen Z and Millennials applicants, and leads to high employee turnover.

There are many variables that affect employee retention in Yellowstone. This study, conducted in 2024, focused on how contingency plans for government shutdowns, lack of affordable housing and limited succession training programs. Furthermore, while the research was conducted with an emphasis on phenomenological observation and interpretation, a multi-generational approach was also valued. As described in the book *Practical Research Planning and Design*, a phenomenological study focuses on understanding the subjective perspectives regarding a certain phenomenon, such as employee retention (Leedy and Ormond, 2019). The data was saturated with similar themes, stories, and accounts. The data and methods will be presented, in this paper, with as limited researcher bias as possible.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to analyze employment trends in Yellowstone National Park. As discussed, the NPS ranks poorly among the various federal agencies. This study examined the various generational identities within Yellowstone, how they interact, and support one another. While examining these perspectives, respondents were, also, asked to evaluate the impact of government shutdowns, housing, and succession training. The purpose of this study was to provide data driven solutions to improve employee retention in Yellowstone.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study will inform Park managers about employee motivations, struggles, and thoughts on employee retention. By understanding the nuances, motivations, and desires of different generational groups, management may be better able to support long term missions. Park managers have, already, identified housing as a critical employee issue (Yellowstone's

State of the Park, 2023). The park is already doing the work to improve conditions. This study provides additional data on the importance of housing for employees. The significance and effect of government shutdowns and succession training is also examined. Furthermore, while the research explored how to retain, and manage employees, this study also attempted to explain how different generations interact in Yellowstone. Based on the data, and shared by respondents, this study has identified data driven strategies to improve employee retention in Yellowstone.

### **Research Question, Sub-questions, and Hypothesis**

#### **Main Research Question:**

How can Park management improve employee retention in Yellowstone National Park?

**Sub-questions:** The research main question was further divided into sub-questions, which were:

**Question 1 (Q1):** How do contingency plans surrounding government shutdowns affect employee morale?

**Question 2 (Q2):** How do succession training programs affect employee retention?

**Question 3 (Q3):** How does affordable housing affect organizational commitment?

#### **Theory of Change and Assumptions**

The theory of change applied a 3/1 formula, meaning that there were three independent variables and one dependent variable. The three main assumptions were that Yellowstone's Park management can improve employee retention:

**Assumption 1 (A1)** If, there are contingency plans for government shutdowns, THEN employee retention will improve in Yellowstone National Park.

**Assumption 2 (A2)** If there is a succession training program, THEN employee retention will improve.

**Assumption 3 (A3)** If, there are affordable housing options for employees, THEN employee retention will improve.

### **Limitations**

This research did not reflect all the possible influences and struggles that face Yellowstone's employees. Many factors, some personal and others situational, affect whether a person will continue to work in Yellowstone or not. Isolation, mental health, and family obligations are all common issues that negatively impact Yellowstone employees and may cause them to leave. Sometimes the real reason a person leaves is unknowable, purposefully hidden, or obscured by other motivations. This research only compared and analyzed variables associated with different generational identities within Yellowstone. Gender, race, class, personality traits, and previous experience, among other variables, were not included. The study strived to prevent confirmation bias while interpreting data. For example, when explaining the study to respondents, value-based language was limited. The goal was to gather honest, forthright, and authentic answers, which was achieved.

Nonetheless, participants may have unconsciously answered the way they 'think' they should have. Additionally, this research acknowledges that time may change many variables, outcomes, and findings. Recently, for example, Yellowstone received a huge donation of over 50 million dollars to improve and add employee housing. In the future, affordable housing may not be an issue for employees. Hopefully, more anonymous donors step forward.

## Operational Definitions

1. **Employee Retention:** Reducing the employee turnover rate in Yellowstone.
2. **Government Shutdown:** Forced cessation of most non-essential government activities due to a lapse in funding (Furlough Guidance, 2023).
3. **Affordable Housing:** Housing that is less than 30% of an employee's gross annual income.
4. **Succession Training:** Training that focuses on passing down institutional knowledge from senior employees to newer staff.
5. **Yellowstone Employee:** Only staff employed, either seasonally or permanently, by the National Park Service.
6. **Baby Boomer:** Persons born during the period of marked boom in birth rate, specifically between the years of 1946 – 1964 (Baby Boomer, 2024).
7. **Gen Xer:** Persons born in the 1960s and 1970s (Generation X, 2024).
8. **Millennial:** A person born in the 1980s and 1990s who came of age during the millennium (Millennial, 2024).
9. **Gen Z:** Persons born in the late 1990s and early 2000s and the newest employees to join the workforce (Generation Z, 2024).

## Expected Impact of the Research

The findings from this research will help prospective Yellowstone employees and Park Managers improve employee retention. This study provided managers with better short-term and long-term solutions to some outstanding problems in Yellowstone. Yellowstone needs new employees to accomplish its mission. Legacy employees, including Boomers and Gen X, will

soon retire soon, leaving a huge void. Their institutional knowledge is priceless and should be harnessed before they leave. The next generation, Gen Z and Millennials, will soon carry the metaphorical torch that previous generations once held. Through better cross-generational collaboration and strategies to improve government shutdowns, affordable housing, and succession training, Yellowstone may be able to improve employee retention.

### **Summary**

Yellowstone National Park needs to develop better strategies to improve organizational commitment, employee retention, and morale. This research examined three variables that impact Yellowstone employees: contingency plans surrounding government shutdowns, affordable housing, and succession training programs. The analysis included contradictory findings that do not support all assumptions. Many respondents did however agree with some of the assumptions put forward. In the next section, a literature review examining government shutdowns, affordable housing, and succession training, will be discussed.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The mission of the NPS, and thereby Yellowstone, is to “preserve the natural and cultural resources of the NPS system for the enjoyment of this and future generations” (What We Do, 2023). Additionally, Yellowstone seeks to employ the best, most dedicated workers. The park cannot do that, though, without managing variables that make it difficult to live and work here. There is a substantial turnover in Yellowstone National Park, mirroring the evidence from surveys that rank the NPS poorly (Repanshek, 2023). This paper and the following literature review explored how government shutdowns, succession training, and affordable housing impact employees in Yellowstone.

There was no study in this review that exactly examined employment trends in Yellowstone National Park. Many articles and resources provided excellent analysis on human capital, organizational development, employee morale, employee retention, lack of affordable housing, the Baby Boomer generation (vs everyone else), and succession training. The research that was discovered is acceptable within the confines of organizational development and were compared to the conditions faced by National Park Service employees.

Most research related to Yellowstone has to do with resource preservation and wildlife management. For example, the Park’s Bison Management Plan is a highly controversial and politicized issue. The Management Plan, which numerous articles examine, aims to reduce the overpopulation of bison in the park, and keep the species from spreading Brucellosis to nearby cattle and ranches (French, 2022). Yellowstone implemented a program to ship bison to nearby Native American tribes. This program was thought to support tribes’ historical connection and utilization of bison. The plan’s unfortunate consequence is that hundreds of bison are “shipped

to slaughter.” Unsurprisingly, conservationists do not approve of this park policy. Therefore, much of the research available is related to wilderness tenets and controversies in Yellowstone.

Most sources, unrelated to Yellowstone and having to do with employee management, substantially supported this study’s assumptions and theory of change. The literature supported the idea that government shutdowns, succession planning, and housing greatly influence employee retention. The literature supported the assumption that government shutdowns are a huge stress on federal employees. Shutdowns decrease levels of organizational commitment. Research that was conducted on succession planning, found it to be a highly valued trait in organizations. Succession planning was found to increase employee retention. Lastly, the availability of housing greatly affects employment. Employees cannot be recruited if there is no housing. The following review will go into greater detail on each of these assumptions.

### **Theme 1: Government Shutdowns and Employee Retention**

Experts agree that government shutdowns occur too frequently and are an unflattering stain on modern day U.S. politics. A government shutdown, also known as an emergency shutdown, occurs when there is a lapse in appropriations or funding (Furlough Guidance, 2023). Usually, Congress misses a deadline and lets an appropriations bill languish. Often, there are political motives and divisive posturing for letting the government shut down. During the past few decades, shutdowns have abruptly and negatively impacted federal employees. The following review will explore how the most recent government shutdowns (2013, 2018-2019) have affected federal employees and their families.

The review found that government shutdowns result in a great disruption to Yellowstone’s Park operators and local economies. Residents in gateway communities such as Bozeman, Montana, Cooke City, Montana, and Gardiner, Montana, feared the looming shutdown

in 2023 would have disastrous economic consequences (Hicks, 2023). In 2023, a government shutdown appeared imminent, but was avoided. Federal employees are often caught in the crosshairs between government legislation and their friends, or locals, in the gateway communities. Yellowstone's gateway communities have lost up to \$70 million dollars in revenue for every day the government, and Yellowstone, is closed (Hicks, 2023).

In 2019, the government experienced the longest shutdown in U.S. history. Known as the "holiday shutdown," government operations ceased on Dec 22, 2018. Federal employees missed more than two paychecks before the government reopened in February 2019 (Agur & Gan, 2021). Unfortunately, the research found that many federal employees experienced work-family conflict and emotional burnout after the shutdown. Experts discovered that federal employees suffered from extended, long-term burnout and financial distress (Reichel, 2019).

According to the article "Politics, Bureaucracy, and Employee Retention" researchers found that the 2013 shutdown greatly deterred potential federal employee applicants, as well. The instability deterred specifically younger generations, such as Millennials and Gen Zers. Potential applicants reportedly were unmotivated to work for a government that appeared unstable (Ali, 2018). The study also found that many long-term, careerist federal employees described the 2013 shutdown as the final straw, triggering them to leave the federal workforce once and for all (Ali, 2018).

Alternatively, while much of the stress and toll due to government shutdowns is understood, it could be argued that federal employees should not complain because they ultimately get back pay. Margaret Weichter, Acting Director of OPM, mandated that all furloughed employees would receive back pay in a 2019 official memorandum. Furthermore, federal employees that are furloughed during a government shutdown are eligible to apply for



unemployment benefits. Researchers found that unemployment benefits should have reduced short-term financial distress, though that was not always the case (Weichter, 2019). Arguably, federal contractors and local communities face a much greater economic burden than government employees. Local businesses, federal contractors, and independent tour guides do not receive back pay after a government shutdown. For many of Yellowstone's employees, then, being furloughed is not always considered a negative, though it ultimately does defer pay.

One unexpected positive outcome, from a government shutdown, has been that the wildlife and Yellowstone Park resources receive a much-needed break from the high visitation, destruction, and wildlife harassment. Many times, tourism causes resource damage, which is an insidious process, and must be carefully prevented by park managers (Bach, p. 236, 2005). A government shutdown unintentionally gives the park a rest.

Lastly, this literature review could not provide an analysis of government shutdowns as interpreted from a multi-generational perspective. For example, an older Yellowstone employee with a big family, expensive mortgage, and many bills may feel more negatively by a government shutdown than a younger employee who has fewer responsibilities and fewer financial burdens. Overall, almost 850,000 employees were furloughed during the 2013 shutdown (Reichel, 2019). Clearly, there is a range of subjective experiences related to government shutdowns.

## **Theme 2: Succession Training and Employee Retention**

Succession training is the practice of passing down institutional knowledge from senior employees to new hires. It may seem, however, that succession training is the exception and not the rule in many agencies. Often, new employees have no guide or instruction on how to do their jobs. The older more senior generations, such as Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, have retired or

soon will be retiring in Yellowstone National Park. They hold great institutional knowledge in Yellowstone. According to experts, the consequences of the older generational exit will be one of the greatest challenges to human capital in the public sector (Chatigny, 2005). Therefore, the literature review supported the assumption that employee retention is tied to succession training.

Succession training can sometimes be treated when senior or older employees are fearful that new recruits will supersede them professionally. The tension can cause an information gridlock, especially if management does little to mitigate it. The literature review presented the finding that leadership sets the tone and is ultimately supportive or dismissive of succession training. Unfortunately, this may lead to a ‘tug of war’ effect that arises due to feelings of professional supremacy and insecurity among older staff (Walker, 2010). Even though Baby Boomers and Gen Xers may feel hesitant to share what they know, Yellowstone’s success will depend on their openness, adaptability, and efforts to collaborate with their younger counterparts. Much like Mather and Albright’s relationship, cross-generational alliances support employee retention.

Furthermore, the literature advocated for the creation of a “leadership pipeline.” This pipeline would be fueled by institutional knowledge and expertise in Yellowstone (Chatigny, 2005). The literature did not specify exactly how to draw out institutional knowledge. This study will dive deeper into bad versus good succession training. One may expect that a bad succession training plan is worse than having no plan at all. If we encourage senior employees to share their knowledge but offer no reward for doing so, they may resist sharing what they know as well. Or worse, sabotage new recruits and offer the wrong information. More research should be done to identify what exactly successful succession training is and what motivations could

encourage it. Again, the literature was very supportive of this study's assumption that a succession program will improve employee retention.

### **Theme 3: Affordable Housing and Employee Retention**

Housing is crucial to supporting a healthy workforce. In Abraham Maslov's "Theory of Human Motivation," a form of shelter is a crucial physiological need (Maslov, 1943).

Accordingly, adequate and affordable housing is a requirement that lays the foundation for all other human needs, such as professional and personal fulfillment. Research has shown, for example, that there is a correlation between intra-family violence, stress, and markers of poor home environment and habitability, such as overcrowding, extreme temperatures, and excessive noise (Corral-Verdugo et al., 2011). Within Yellowstone and in its gateway communities, there is a significant shortage of affordable and satisfactory housing (State of the Park, 2023). The lack of housing and poor conditions, such as the presence of mold and asbestos, have caused a substantial burden on employees. For example, in a recent interview, Superintendent Cam Sholly stated that five critical positions could not be filled due to a lack of housing (Mott, 2024).

Thankfully, there has been significant pressure to improve and add affordable housing in Yellowstone and National Parks nationwide. In February of 2024, the NPS Director, Charles Sams III, issued an Executive Order on Housing Management (Directors Order #36, 2024). Sams instructed park managers to remove obsolete trailers and unfit housing units (many filled with mold and asbestos) from all national parks. Yellowstone also has identified employee housing as one of the Park's core, major, and strategic goals (Yellowstone State of the Park, 2023). Unfortunately, many houses come from Missions 66 infrastructures and are in increasingly poor condition. Mission 66 was a National Parks' infrastructure rehabilitation program, proposed in 1955 with an end date of 1966 (Mission 66 Background and History,

2023). Homes built in the Mission 66 model have been a greater burden on parks to get removed and rehabilitated.

The review found that experts support the assumption that housing improves employee retention. Yellowstone's Park Management acknowledges that employees do not make enough money to rent or buy in neighboring communities as well. Employees simply cannot compete with local housing costs (Yellowstone State of the Park, 2023). Housing is a well-known impetus to employee retention. Additionally, many local landlords have made the transition to short-term vacation rentals. This move has only exacerbated the housing crisis, though it is understandable because landlords can make much higher profits (Molla, 2023). Therefore, based on the review and recent mandates, affordable housing will improve employee retention.

## **Summary**

In summary, the literature review strongly supported many of the study's assumptions. As National Parks increase in popularity, with over 279 million visitors a year, management will need to prioritize retention, recruitment, and improving overall conditions for employees (DeClerk, M, 2013). Researchers agreed that variables such as succession training, affordable housing, and reducing government shutdowns will improve employee retention.

For example, famed psychologist Abraham Maslov determined that housing is a critical and basic human need (Maslov, 1943). Understandably, Yellowstone will be unable to recruit high-quality applicants if they have nowhere to live. This study examined Yellowstone's housing crisis, as perceived by respondents. Additionally, previous studies strongly supported the assumption that government shutdowns demoralize federal employees and lead to higher turnover. Ensuring social trust between employees and their employers is crucial for organizational success (Ciobanu, 2019). Studies found that frequent government shutdowns

compromise trust and lead to poor levels of employee retention. Shutdowns also place a substantial economic burden on surrounding communities. A business associated with tours in Yellowstone will suffer greater economic distress if the park is closed than a federal employee because of the 2019 Employee Fair Treatment Act that now guarantees backpay. Further research is required to understand how these, as well as other external factors, affect employee retention at Yellowstone.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methods**

This study analyzed employment trends among Baby Boomers, Millennials, Gen X, and Gen Z employees in Yellowstone National Park. Specifically, this study gathered data about employee retention. The research analyzed generational identities, the impact of government shutdowns, the lack of affordable housing, and succession training programs. The study, therefore, assumed that affordable housing and succession programs will improve employee retention, while poor planning around government shutdowns will decrease employee retention.

This section will further explain the research methods, research questions, sub-questions, and operational definitions of this project. This study applied a mixed-methods research (MMR) approach to data collection. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected, analyzed, and interpreted to either accept or reject the research hypotheses. In this study, over 300 surveys were distributed, and 101 surveys were returned. The study conducted 12 in-depth interviews and 3 focus group discussions. Respondents were allowed to elaborate outside the interview questions so that all issues impacting employment trends and retention were captured. The study sought to obtain enough applicants to provide a diverse representation of the workforce and interpret employee needs, motivations, and perceptions of employee retention.

#### **Research Question and Sub-questions**

##### **Main Research Question:**

How can park management improve employee retention in Yellowstone National Park?

**Sub-questions:** The research main question is further divided into sub-questions, which are:

**Question 1 (Q1):** How do contingency plans surrounding shutdowns affect employee morale?

**Question 2 (Q2):** How do succession training programs affect employee retention?

**Question 3 (Q3):** How does affordable housing affect employee organizational commitment?

## Theory of Change and Assumptions

The theory of change applied a 3/1 formula, three independent variables: government shutdowns, housing, and succession training, and one dependent variable that is employee retention. Here are the assumptions.

Yellowstone's Park management can improve employee retention -

**Assumption 1 (A1)** If there are contingency plans surrounding government shutdowns, THEN employee retention will improve at Yellowstone National Park.

**Assumption 2 (2)** If there is a succession training program, THEN employee retention will improve.

**Assumption 3 (3)** If, there are more affordable housing options for employees, THEN employee retention will improve.

## Operational Definitions

1. **Employee Retention:** Reducing the employee turnover rate in Yellowstone.
2. **Government Shutdown:** Forced cessation of most non-essential government activities due to a lapse in funding. (Furlough Guidance, 2023).
3. **Affordable Housing:** Housing that is less than 30% of an employee's gross annual income.
4. **Succession Training:** Training that focuses on passing down institutional knowledge from senior employees to new and incoming staff.
5. **Yellowstone Employee:** Only staff employed, either seasonally or permanently, by the National Park Service.
6. **Baby Boomer:** Persons born during the period of marked boom in birth rate, specifically between the years of 1946 – 1964 (Baby Boomer, 2024).

7. **Gen Xer:** Persons born in the 1960s and 1970s (Generation X, 2024).
8. **Millennial:** A person born in the 1980s and 1990's who came of age during the millennium (Millennial, 2024).
9. **Gen Z:** Persons born in the late 1990s and early 2000s and the newest employees to join the workforce (Generation Z, 2024).

### **Population Sampling Strategy**

The population sampling strategy included observations, surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. There are about 700 employees who work seasonally or permanently in Yellowstone. Yellowstone has five major divisions including the Division of Interpretation, Facilities, Communications, Natural and Cultural Resources, Law Enforcement, Wildland and Structural Fire, Information Technology, and Concessions Management. Respondents were, therefore, diverse, ranging in age, job title, and managerial status, and they fairly represent the Yellowstone workforce.

### **Research Procedures**

The study supplied surveys to over 300 employees and utilized Microsoft Outlook and MS Forms as well as hard copy forms, which expedited the data collection process. There are many field staff without regular access to a government computer, so they were provided a hard copy survey. Research questions were developed in MS Forms and were deployed through the organizational leadership structure, in person, and online. As discussed above, interviews with SMEs from every division were conducted as well. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 45 minutes.



## **Data Processing and Analysis**

After the data was collected, several variables and pieces of information were statistically measured using pivot tables in Excel. In-depth interviews were transcribed and analyzed either via Microsoft Teams or the iPhone App Otter. The hypotheses in this paper were compared to the trends observed in both the surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions. After surveys were collected, the responses were tallied and grouped into categories. If the survey respondents identified themselves, they were contacted for further in-depth data collection too. Qualitative data was collected through in-person interviews, either one on one or in group settings. In the analysis, common themes, conclusions, contradictions, were examined and discussed. There were two other colleagues that helped interpret the data.

## **Internal and External Validity**

Several aspects may have impeded the internal or external validity of this study. For example, respondents knew they were involved in a study about employment trends in Yellowstone. Respondents may have responded inauthentically or biased in some ways due to that bias (Leedy and Ormond, 2019). Furthermore, it was difficult to keep the surveys or interviews secret. Nevertheless, this study collected a diverse enough data set that the findings can be applied to employment trends at other national parks. However, the study's external validity would probably only apply to parks that are similar to Yellowstone, such as Yosemite, Grand Canyon, and Glacier National Parks.

## **Research Limitations**

Some limitations may have arisen in the collection of data for this study. Respondent hesitancy was one anticipated outcome. There were employees who did not want to take the survey or be part of the interview process for personal reasons. Though I ensured anonymity was

in place, some employees ignored requests for interview or to take the survey. Another limitation was that respondents may have answered in a biased way. They may have felt they should answer in a certain way, because of identity or fears of retribution. This study is also limited in its replication to other federal agencies, such as the education, health, or nonprofit sectors.

### **Summary**

In summary, this study utilized a mixed-methods research (MMR) approach to examine employment trends in Yellowstone. The data was collected through qualitative and quantitative means with an emphasis on quality and quantity. This study explains how respondents experience the relationship between the dependent variable, employee retention, and three independent variables: government shutdown, affordable housing, and succession training programs. The research examined additional reasons for poor employee retention, which will be conveyed in this paper. This study recommends additional research be conducted on employment trends and employee retention in Yellowstone National Park. The data in this study unraveled tangential and parallel struggles that will require a multifaceted approach to solve.

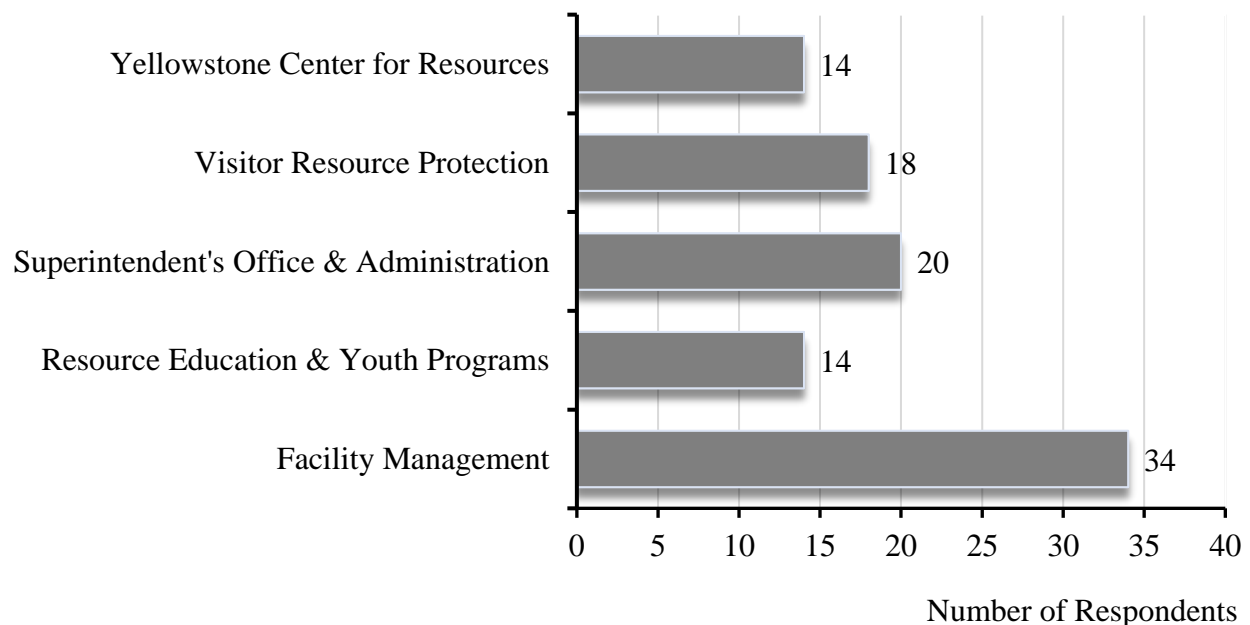
## Chapter 4: Results and Findings

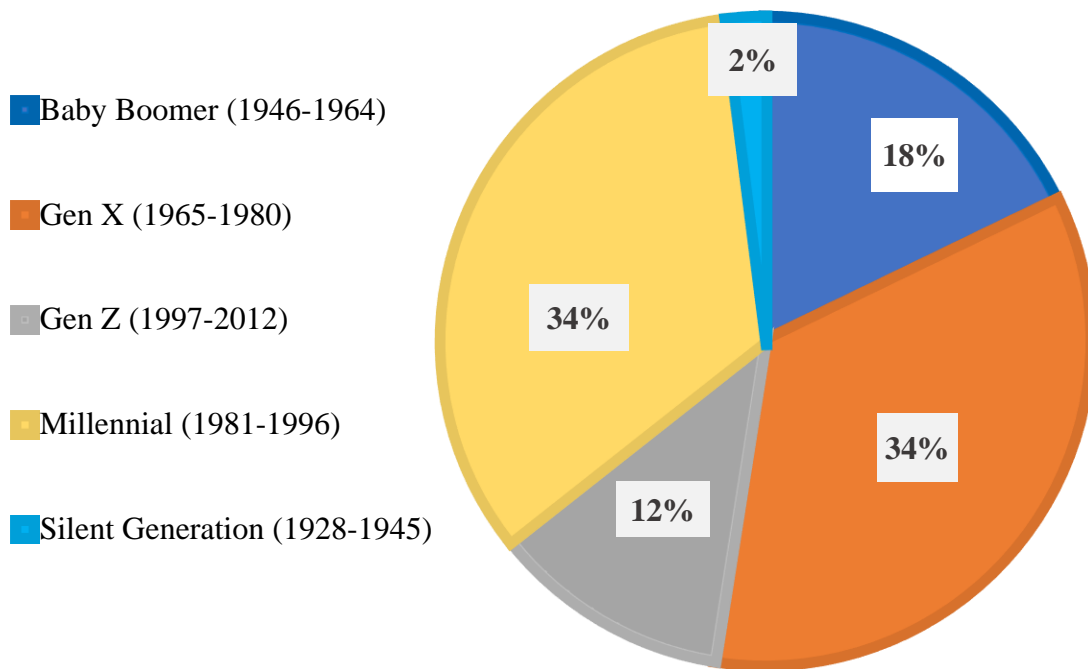
### Introduction

This study analyzed employment trends within Yellowstone National Park. The data examined the impact that contingency plans surrounding government shutdowns, succession training programs, and the lack of affordable housing have on retention. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected over a four-week period inside Yellowstone. Within Yellowstone, there are approximately 350 full-time, permanent employees, and 300 seasonal employees who work during the summer months. The study prioritized the perspective of a multi-generational workforce that operates in Yellowstone. The study also collected data from respondents within the five major divisions: a) Facility Management, b) Resource and Youth Education, c) Visitor Resource Protection, d) the Superintendent's Office and Administration, and e) Yellowstone Center for Resources (See Figure 1a and 1b).

### Figure 1a

*Respondents by Division or Department*



**Figure 1b***Respondents by Generation*

Furthermore, over 100 surveys were distributed via email (Microsoft Forms) or in person (hard copy). Only about 1 in 3 surveys were returned when delivered electronically. Almost all hard-copy surveys were returned promptly. Surveys consisted of categorical questions, such as “Which generation do you identify with,” and seven yes or no questions, such as “Do you live in park housing.” Respondents were also asked to rank ten statements in terms of their agreement with each statement. For example, respondents were asked to rank the statement “housing is fairly and equitably distributed among employees.” While creating the survey, careful attention was made to avoid implying the study’s assumptions. Therefore, the study followed a purely phenomenological approach that was interested in only the subjective perspective of each respondent (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

Furthermore, this study conducted 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews and three focus group discussions. The focus groups were conducted on purpose with different, major generational categories. There were three focus groups made up of two Gen Z, two Gen X, and one Baby Boomer, and a last group of one Baby Boomer and one person from the Silent generation. Some informal observational data, such as tenant records, were also collected.

After interviews were performed, transcriptions were coded by color based on three themes: government shutdowns (red), succession training (green), and housing (blue). A fourth theme emerged in many interviews that, for the purposes of this study, will be identified as the evolution of culture (pink). The researcher determined the internal consistency reliability of the data, first in the preliminary stages of the data collection and then more firmly once all the data was collected (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). The data was saturated with repeated phrases, themes, and conclusions, such as “pawns” and “non-existent.” This study determined that respondents, overall, shared similar perspectives on shutdowns, affordable housing, and succession training.

As described in the textbook, true objectivity is not possible because of researcher bias (Leedy and Ormond, 2019). Therefore, to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of these findings, the data was shared with two colleagues. One colleague had been working in the park for over 20 years and the other colleague, while she worked in upper management, had only been here 5 years. Their unique perspectives and input were invaluable.

Overall, the data supported two assumptions from this study. Respondents widely agreed with the assumptions that succession training and more affordable housing will improve employee retention. The third assumption, that contingency plans around government shutdowns will improve retention, was not supported by respondents. As discussed, the study has internal validity due to the diverse sample of respondents, ranging in age, division, job title.

Since Yellowstone is a unique park unit, consisting of over 2.2 million acres of wilderness and supports over 700 employees, the study determined that the external validity could be made to similar top-tier parks. There could be external validity when comparing employment trends in Grand Canyon National Park, Glacier National Park, and Yosemite National Park. Smaller NPS units could not be compared to this study, though. Conditions are too dissimilar. Here are the results and findings for each assumption:

### **Assumption One (A1)**

If there are contingency plans for government shutdowns, THEN employee retention will improve at Yellowstone National Park.

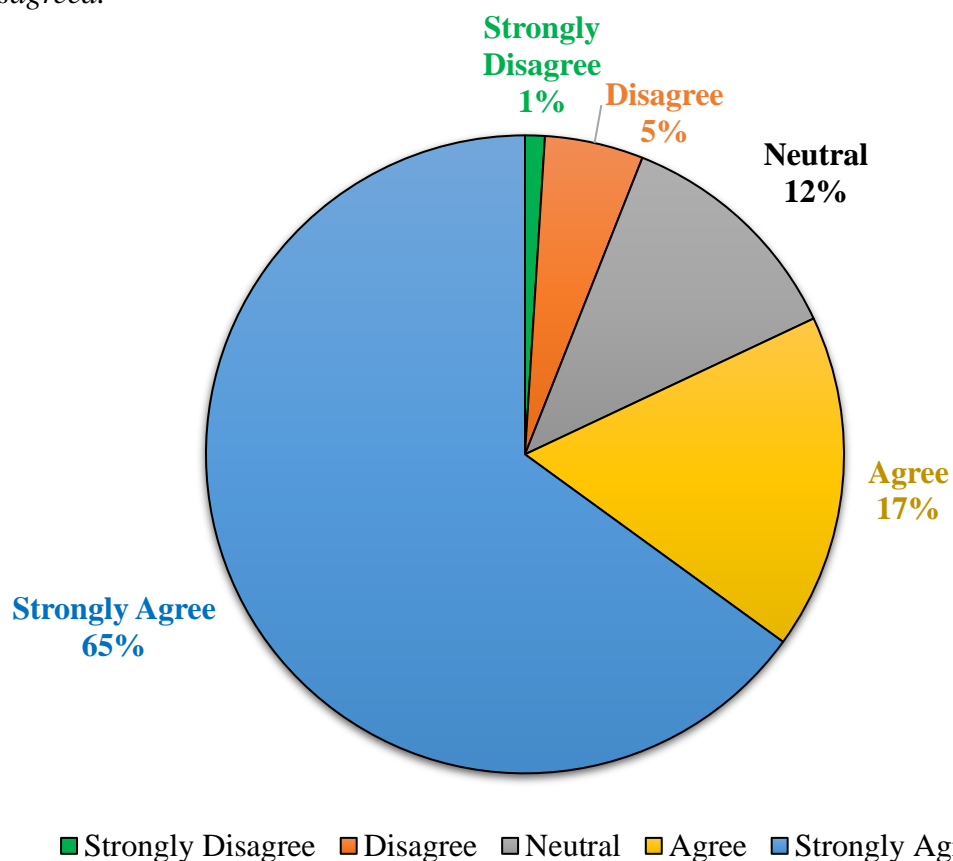
### **Quantitative Results**

There were mixed results surrounding data related to the first assumption. Though government shutdowns are unpleasant, most respondents did not support the correlation between shutdowns and employee retention in Yellowstone. The data will show that shutdowns are widely inconsequential to Yellowstone employees. Though frustrating and causing conflict internally, shutdowns were widely understood as a politicized issue that does not impact retention as much as other variables. The following is a comprehensive analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data regarding A1.

The survey asked six questions related to government shutdowns and the effects it had on employees. Approximately 75% of respondents had experienced at least one shutdown while working in Yellowstone National Park. Furthermore, approximately 80% of respondents agreed that another government shutdown would likely occur (See Figure 2a).

Figure 2a

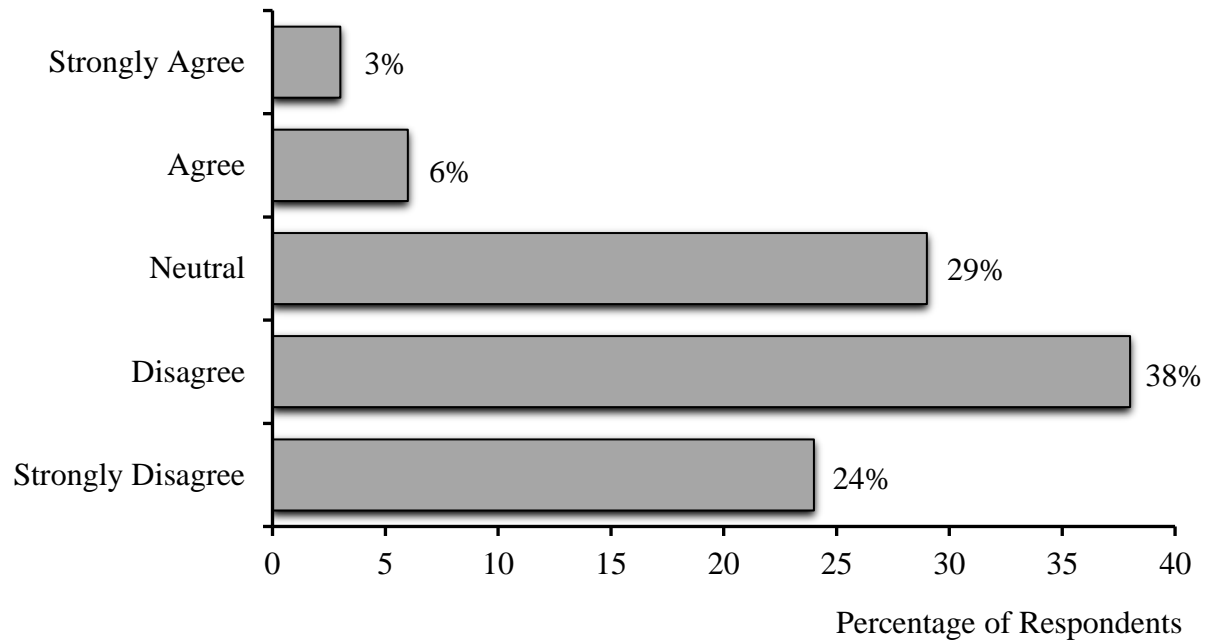
*There will be another government shutdown during the lifespan of my career with the NPS. Percentage of respondents that agreed and disagreed.*



The survey went on to ask respondents about how they felt previous shutdowns had been handled at the park level. Notably, most respondents did not agree that Park management could have done more to mitigate or prevent future government shutdowns. Park managers have little influence over major budget determinations. That happens in Congress. Only a few respondents, only 9%, agreed that Yellowstone could do more to prevent shutdowns (See Figure 2b).

**Figure 2b**

*Park management could do more to prevent or mitigate government shutdowns.*



The quantitative data did not support conclusions drawn from previous studies. Many studies found that federal employees experienced substantial long-term stress and lowered organizational commitment because of government shutdowns (Reichel, 2019). This could not be confirmed in this study, however. Therefore, the quantitative data, in this study, invalidates A1.

### **Qualitative Results**

For this study, interviewees and focus groups discussed their experiences related to government shutdowns. Their answers mirrored the findings in the quantitative data. Furthermore, a prompt of two questions were asked related to shutdowns. Repeatedly, respondents used the words “waste,” “dumb,” and “pawns” to describe government shutdowns.



Government shutdowns effectively halt operations in National Parks such as Yellowstone and this was very frustrating to respondents (Furlough Guidance, 2023).

Additionally, when asked about financial stress, Respondent #10 shared that some of her colleagues' fiscal insecurities during the shutdown surprised her. She explained that she was very frugal and did not have the same difficulties others had. Interestingly, all respondents from this study described themselves as "frugal" always having a "backup plan." Some respondents reported a "beans and rice only" mentality, as described by Respondent #2. That attitude soon dissipated, he admitted, once respondents found out they would receive back pay. The data revealed that respondents felt government shutdowns were "overhyped," as explained by Respondent #2.

Furthermore, many respondents praised park management for its superior communications and transparency during government shutdowns. Respondent #10 stated, "I feel like before there wasn't much messaging... now there has been. There are employee calls, and the communications are much, much better." Often the park holds a call, internally, with all NPS employees and another call, externally, with other stakeholders and contractors. In 2018-2019 this was accomplished on a weekly basis and produced positive results.

A theme that emerged, from many respondents, was the aversion to using the words "essential" and "non-essential" to describe employees during a government shutdown. The verbiage was widely disliked. The NPS has the discretion to determine whose work is considered "essential" and "non-essential" during a government shutdown (Ali, 2023). Furthermore, essential employees usually deliver lifesaving and infrastructure critical services such as, law enforcement rangers, park dispatchers, high-level managers, Superintendent and

Division Chiefs, and a few other specialized personnel. Furthermore, essential employees must work, without pay, to protect infrastructure and lives. It can appear unfair when their counterparts are sent home. Non-essential employees get a “paid vacation...it’s not fair” according to Respondent #12 (who is usually essential). Another respondent felt that his work should be considered “essential”, and disliked being told to go home. “It creates conflict between those that had to work and those that didn’t have to work, for sure” Respondent #12, a supervisor, stated.

Furthermore, according to most respondents, distinguishing between the park’s “essential” and “non-essential” employees conveys “the wrong message to the public.” One respondent described the public may think “why are we paying taxes on non-essential employees?” Inconsistencies in how management determined who was essential and who was not also caused frustration. This finding was consistent with previous research (Ali, 2023). Respondent #9 went on to declare that “We all matter. We are all essential. We should all work (during a shutdown).” Furthermore, since the 2019 Government Employee Fair Treatment Act was passed, which guarantees back pay after a shutdown, the fact that some employees are still furloughed confused many respondents (Weichert, 2019).

The data revealed one outlier that did not match other perspectives on government shutdowns. This outlier, respondent #8 explained that she and her husband (also an NPS employee) decided to leave the agency after the 2019 shutdown, due to financial stress. “The shutdown was the catalyst for us to reevaluate our life and in planning our retirement.” Respondent #8 retired in 2022. She has since returned as a career seasonal employee, though. Respondent #8 explained that she ultimately came back on “terms that worked better” for her

and her family. She now works remotely and has a 6-month long furlough. So, although, some of this study's data found that more financially burdened employees may have left Yellowstone because of a government shutdown, this finding could not be widely represented. A1 was not widely supported.

## **Findings**

The findings, therefore, did not support A1. Respondents repeatedly expressed frustration with Congress and their inability to do their job “when we (NPS employees) have to do ours” as stated by Respondent #7. Respondents were widely in agreement about blaming higher level official and not Yellowstone's Park managers. Most respondents acknowledged that decisions, surrounding how we conduct shutdowns, are made way above the park level and park managers are doing the best they can. Improved Park communications surrounding government shutdowns, was repeatedly praised by respondents too. Park managers do a good job of communicating to a diverse audience. A few things may be altered to improve employee morale during a shutdown. Some suggestions for management included changing the way we describe employees to “lifesaving” or “infrastructure critical” instead of “essential” and “non-essential.” The determination, though, was that the data did not support A1.

## **Assumption Two (A2)**

If there is a succession training program, THEN employee retention will improve at Yellowstone.

## **Quantitative Results**

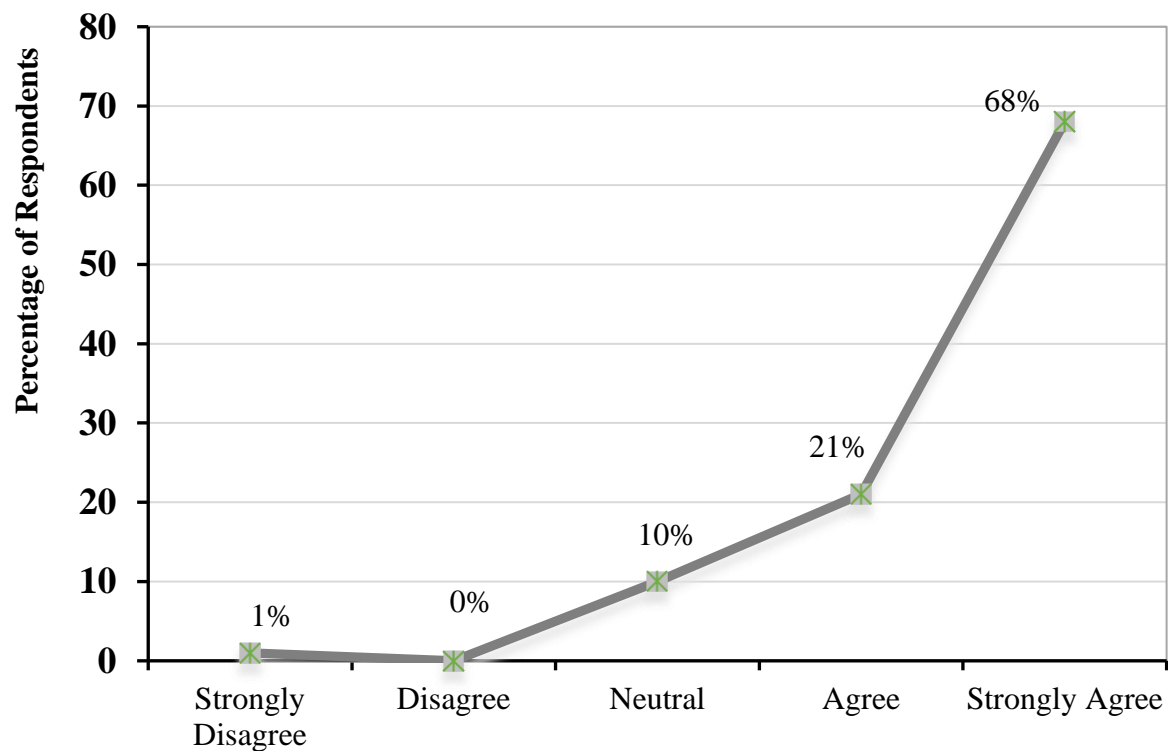
The survey asked respondents five questions related to succession training and its impacts on employee retention. Respondents expressed a desire for more succession training, cross-

training, and other developmental opportunities. The data largely supported the assumption that succession training is important and valued by Yellowstone employees. The following will explain why respondents strongly supported A2.

Respondents were asked to rank various statements. For example, most respondents agreed that a succession training program is important (See Figure 3a). Over 90% of respondents agreed with the below statement. Almost no one, only 1%, disagreed. Furthermore, even though succession training was widely held as important, only about half of respondents had training from a subject matter expert for two weeks or longer in their current role (See Figure 3b.)

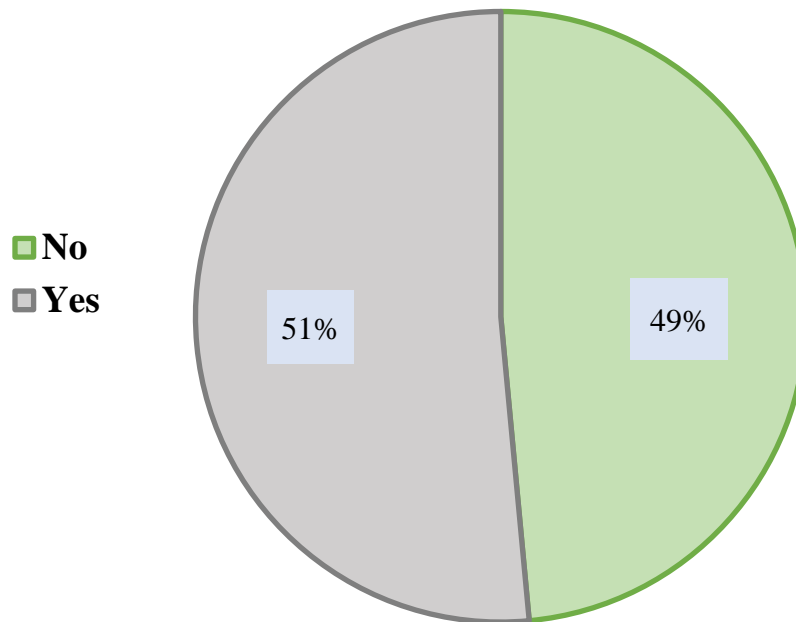
**Figure 3a**

*A succession training program is important.*



**Figure 3b**

*In my current role, I received training, from a subject matter expert (SME) for two weeks or longer.*



The survey also asked staff about their interactions with colleagues. Specifically, Baby Boomers and Gen X were asked about whether younger colleagues seek out information from their senior counterparts. Then, Millennial and Gen Z respondents were asked about their senior counterparts' willingness to share information. The findings illustrated that almost half of each respective group agreed that their generational counterparts share and seek information willingly (See Figure 3c and 3d). An observer may wonder why there is no more widespread agreement, though.

Figure 3c

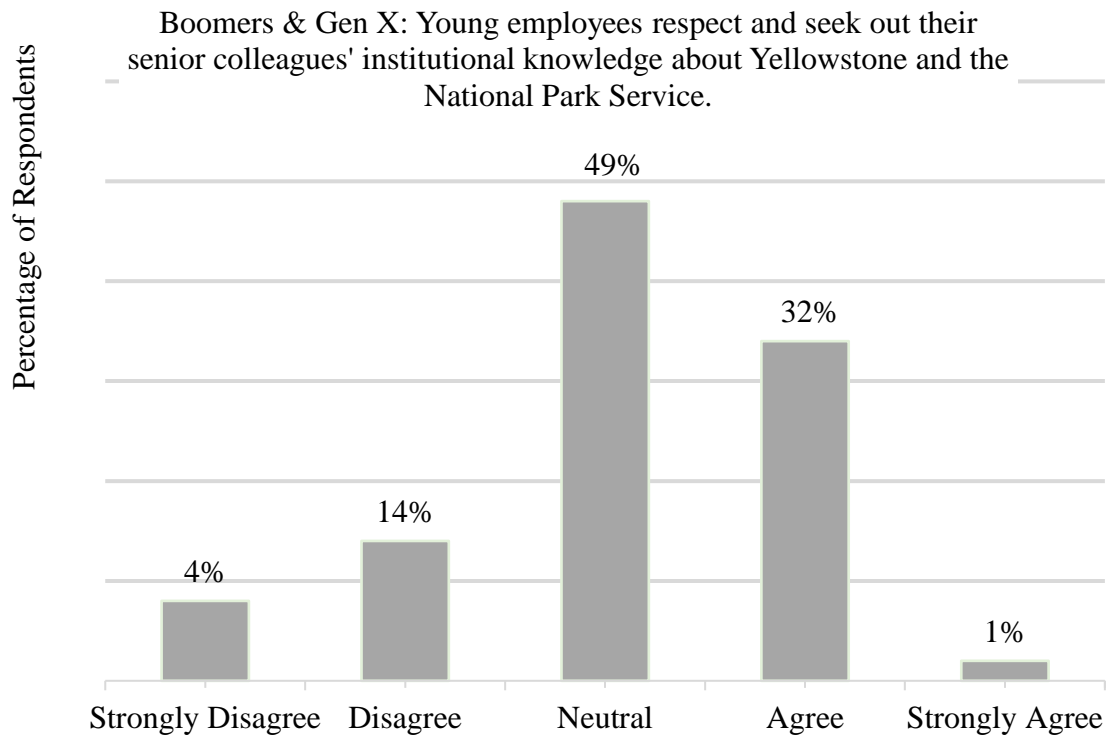
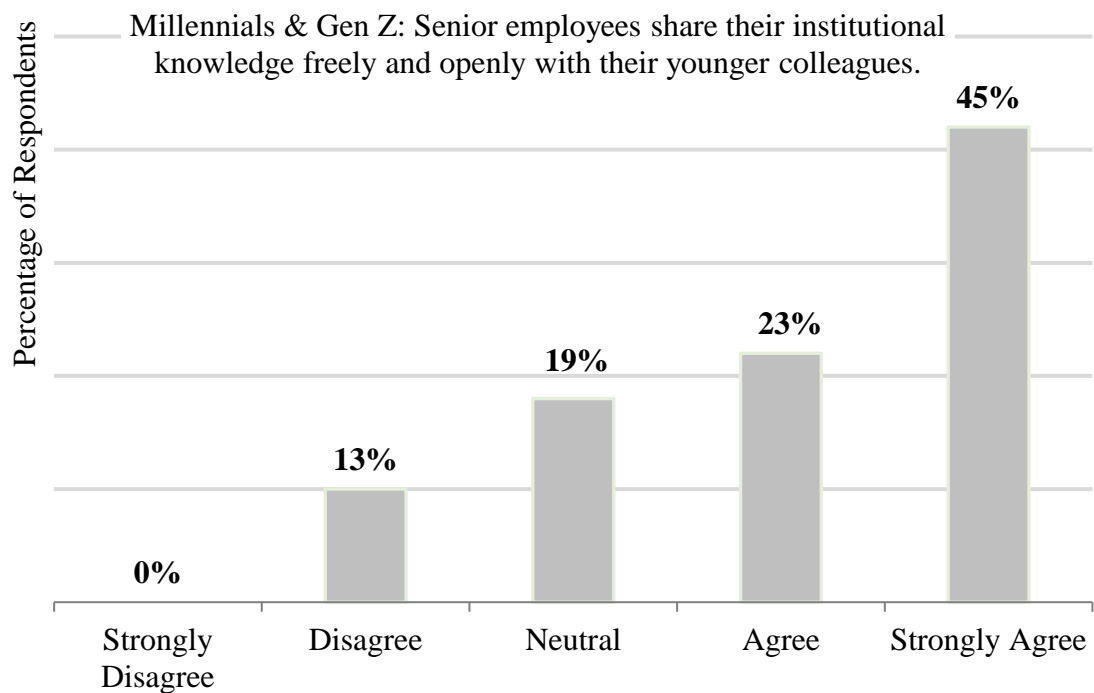


Figure 3d



## Qualitative Results

Respondents were asked three questions related to succession training and were encouraged to expand upon their answers. Respondents expressed a strong desire for more training and a more focused, proactive, development program. Many respondents claimed that succession training was “non-existent” in Yellowstone. For example, in Focus Group #3, respondents spoke highly of individuals who are known for their institutional knowledge. One respondent explained that these people are “pillars of knowledge” in the Yellowstone community and that their expertise should be secured.

Additionally, respondents in Focus Group #1 stated that, while supportive of succession training programs, applicants have difficulty in getting successfully referred by HR. Someone can be in line for succession and development, getting all the training they need to do the job, but won't get referred by Human Resources. One respondent stated that it can often be the case that someone “may be perfect for the job, but because of the way HR is set up, they can't get referred to the hiring official, and it just creates more turnover.”

Furthermore, succession training requires time from staff to organize and implement. Time is unfortunately scarce in Yellowstone, which exceeds visitation records every year. Experts wonder if the park is being “loved to death” (Fresh Air, 2016). Visitation not only stresses the park ecosystem. Respondents spoke about the stress increasing visitation has on employees too. Respondent #5 explained it is “a bandwidth issue. Senior employees simply do not have enough time. It's ridiculous to think that (name omitted) has enough time to do training... and it's gotten worse.” Respondent #3 reported feeling like staff are “in reactive mode all the time... we're a 24-hour park but we've planned for 12-hour coverage.” In psychological literature, burnout can result in anxiety, decreased performance, and even health

problems (Alarcon, G. 2011). The park has seen an increase in mental health issues, among staff, and has also established a resiliency program with free counselors to address the problem.

In addition to discussing succession training, several respondents brought up the need for more cross-training in Yellowstone. Respondent #12 stated that she didn't know who would take over her very specialized role. Learning this skill took her several "years and many visits to the regional office" to master. Other respondents mentioned that the nature of the job promotes on-the-job, or "OJT" training as explained by one supervisor. Perceptively, respondent #9 said the key to effective succession training is to avoid a "cookie cutter approach. We need to build a program that is going to have buy-in, and if people have buy-in, you're going to have a successful program," he said. Though the topic of succession training unraveled many other divergent and parallel issues, respondents widely supported A2.

## **Findings**

These findings strongly supported A2. The quantitative data revealed that most employees believe a succession training program is important. Almost no one, only 1%, thought a succession training program was unimportant. Though implementing a succession training program was widely supported, the qualitative interviews described a less-than-ideal and reactive environment in Yellowstone that made implementing one difficult. Nevertheless, several respondents spoke about the frustration of always "re-inventing the wheel." As described in previous literature, succession training programs strongly support healthy work groups (Chatigny, 2005). Employee retention may improve if Yellowstone is able to harness the institutional knowledge of senior staff and deliver what the literature describes as a "leadership pipeline." Assumption 2 was widely supported by both the qualitative and quantitative data of this study.



**Assumption Three (A3)**

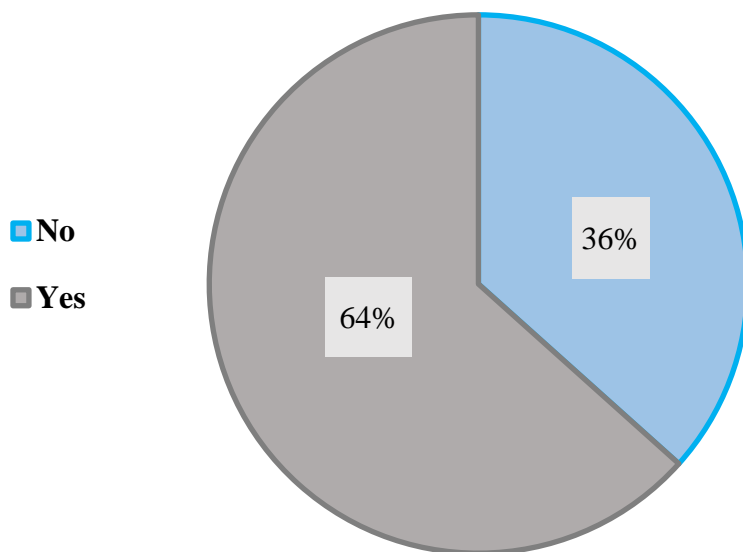
If there are affordable housing options, THEN employee retention will improve at Yellowstone.

**Quantitative Results**

Respondents were asked eight survey questions based on their personal experiences with housing in Yellowstone. Based on the survey data, most respondents supported the assumption that the lack of affordable housing decreases employee retention. Some employees are deemed essential or “required” occupants (resembling the verbiage used during government shutdowns) while others are not required occupants. Employees that fall in the latter category often must compete and are not guaranteed housing. The feelings around the housing scarcity issue mirror employees' tension and division during a government shutdown. Most respondents agreed that housing was a determining factor in accepting one's position (See Figure 4a).

**Figure 4a**

*The availability of housing was a determining factor in accepting my position? Percentage of respondents that agreed and disagreed with this statement.*



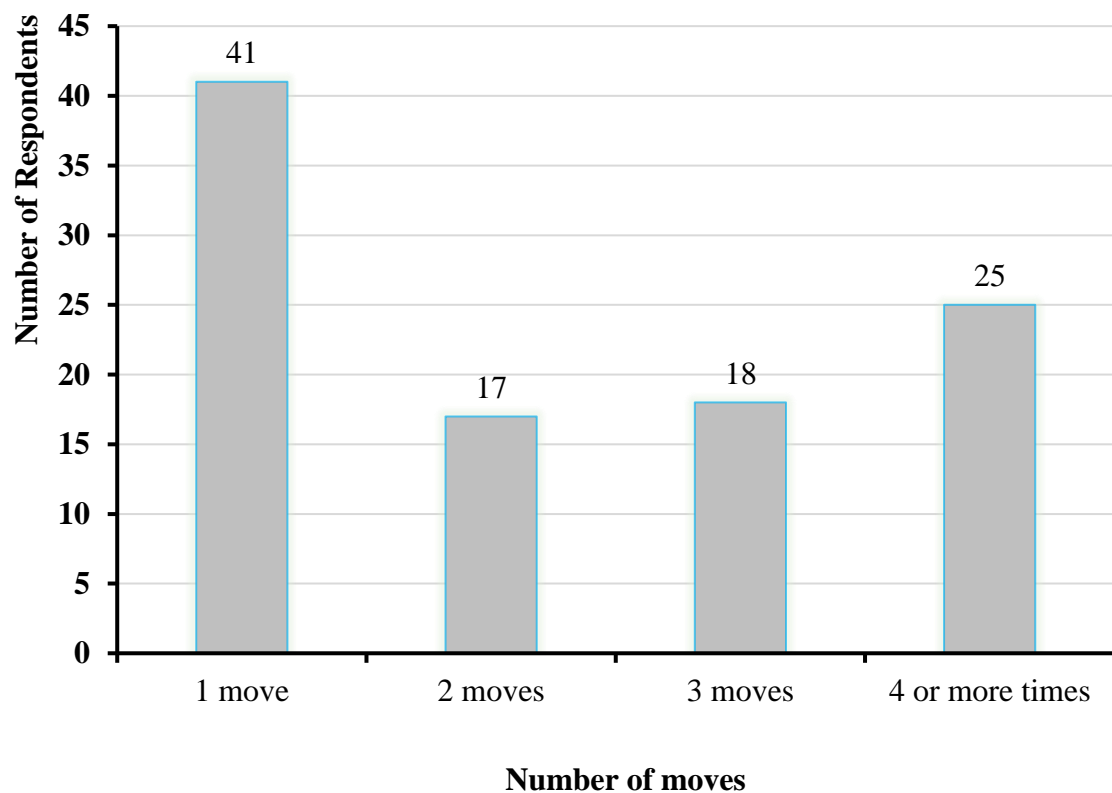
One seasonal employee shared that he camps outside Yellowstone at the beginning and end of each work week. Then he spends the weekends at his parent's home in Bozeman, Montana. He does this to save money. Even though seasonal housing would be provided to him, the cost of rent is just too high he explained. Furthermore, home values in nearby gateway communities, such as Gardiner, Montana and West Yellowstone, Montana are double the national average (State of the Park, 2023). The average salary of a NPS employee in Yellowstone is insufficient to buy or rent in any of these localities.

The survey went on to ask respondents how many times they had moved while working in Yellowstone. Almost a quarter of respondents reported that while working in Yellowstone,

they have had to move four or more times (See Figure 4b.) Several respondents shared that they had moved 8, 9, or even 12 times. The survey failed to capture all the data points related to this question. A fill-in-the-blank type of question would have produced better results regarding the number of moves. According to experts at Psychology Today, moving is one of the top stressors in a person's life and falls only behind the death of a loved one or divorce (Hatcher, 2023).

**Figure 4b**

*Number of times that you have had to move while working in Yellowstone?*



## Qualitative Results

During the interviews there were two questions regarding housing and respondents were asked to elaborate upon their answers. Unsurprisingly, respondents supported the assumption that more affordable housing would improve retention. Respondent #2 stated, “As a supervisor, (housing) is the single biggest problem I have.” She went on to explain that some very high-level positions remain unfilled (over 5 in her group) because she cannot secure housing for applicants.

Additionally, even though, as respondent #11 explained, “not everyone can live, or wants to live, in park housing,” the cost of housing in neighboring communities is simply too high. Employees have very few housing options. The struggle to find affordable housing is echoed in other tourist destinations, such as Hawaii or Alaska (Terrell, 2023). Many respondents in this study blamed the rise in vacation and short-term rentals. Landlords can make so much more money with short-term rentals and would rather avoid long-term renters (Molla, 2023).

Respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of clear communications surrounding housing issues in Yellowstone. For example, respondent #3 shared that his seasonal employees had to move three times before being finally situated. The respondent felt it was completely unnecessary, disorganized, and unfair to move employees so many times. He reported that because of the “snarl of communication,” his seasonal was also scolded for moving into the wrong unit. Other respondents reported that multiple times, furniture had not been moved into a residence before an employee’s arrival. The employee and whoever was around had helped move the furniture themselves. A seasonal employee this year shared that she had not been given a key to the housing unit. It had been one month since she had moved in.

Interestingly, according to official records, park residents only stay in their housing unit for 2 years, on average. An astute observer may wonder what the cause for such high turnover is. Are residents leaving for better jobs elsewhere? Or are they continuing with the park service? Why are park residents moving out of the park-assigned unit so fast? Certainly, moving staff in and out of housing must be extremely time-consuming and disorganized for the housing management team. More information is needed to understand why employees are leaving so quickly. More data points should be revealed because the average only gives us a statistical understanding of the phenomenon (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). Respondents strongly believed that housing is directly connected to employee retention.

### **Findings**

Overwhelmingly, the data supported A3. Affordable housing would improve employee retention in Yellowstone. Park managers are aware of this point since they have made improving employee housing a major park priority (State of the Park, 2023). Overwhelmingly, respondents agreed that they accepted their position on the condition of housing availability. Interview respondents had many comments about how to improve housing. They agreed widely that there was a need for improved Park Housing communications and organization. There was also great interest in developing more opportunities for staff to own or rent in the gateway communities, such as Gardiner, Montana, or West Yellowstone, Montana. Therefore, the findings from this study strongly support A3.

### **Additional Findings**

Another theme kept emerging in the interviews and focus groups. Respondents, mainly Baby Boomers and Gen X, blamed the evolution of mainstream culture for poor employee

retention. Respondent #5 stated, exasperatedly, “For some reason, they (employees that have left) think this is a hardship post. We’ve convinced ourselves that working and living here is a hardship post. We have meetings about how difficult it is, but we don’t have meetings about how rewarding it is.” Another respondent explained that while encouraging his nephews to work in Yellowstone, they replied they would rather work remotely for higher pay and could experience Yellowstone virtually. The respondent further shared that he never came to work in Yellowstone, for “the money, but came here for the experience.” He, like other respondents of his generational category, felt great pride in working here. Respondent #5 said working in Yellowstone is “the package deal.” It was widely understood that the mentality of getting to work in Yellowstone and only getting “paid in sunsets” has expired. “Simply working for the NPS, or working in Yellowstone, does not have as much attraction as it once did” one respondent explained. She theorized that “maybe Yellowstone relied heavily on the attraction of working at a park to overshadow the downsides” such as being seasonal, poor housing, remote location, and low wages. Interestingly, respondent #8, who had worked in the park since the 1990s, shared that each district of the park “used to be families...the old timers would tell us the villages used to be families.” Respondent #8 described many park events and opportunities to be social when she first started in the 1990s. That is not the case anymore.

Furthermore, Millennial and Gen Z respondents blamed poor local interactions and intolerance that may explain high turnover. A respondent, from Focus Group #3, described “bad vibes” and “anti-social” behavior. She explained, “Walking into the Old Saloon... it feels like everyone turns to look at you and are like ‘who are you?! what are you doing here?!’” Gen Z and Millennial respondents also expressed a desire for more community events. Another respondent stated that only two events bring the community together and more could be arranged. A Park

manager pointed out that no one offers to help organize community events. Many other respondents admitted that there is this disconnect. There is a desire for more community, but no one wants to take their personal time and space to organize.

Furthermore, there was a widespread belief among respondents that, in the past, the park community was more connected and more allied than it is now. Regarding this last finding, which an observer may describe as the evolution of culture, respondents were clear that they thought employee retention was negatively impacted by current societal values and mainstream priorities. Older respondents felt that young people no longer wanted to experience the park the way they once did. Younger respondents described a disconnected community. More research should be done to explore why this cultural swing has taken place and how shifting priorities may impact employment in Yellowstone.

## **Summary**

Overall, the data obtained through surveys, focus group discussions, informal observations, and one-on-one interviews strongly supported two assumptions and invalidated one assumption. While the results did support the assumptions that more affordable housing and a succession training program will improve employee retention, the assumption that government shutdowns impact retention could not be supported.

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that Yellowstone and our Park managers do not have the power or influence to mitigate government shutdowns. Some suggestions were made, by respondents, to change the verbiage around “essential” and “non-essential” employees. The connotations of these words were widely disliked. Unlike government shutdowns, succession training was widely supported by the data. Respondents revealed some constraints and

extenuating circumstances that hinder the ability to train in succession. These tangential issues, such as low bandwidth, made staff feel like they always had “several competing priorities.”

Some more research may be required to determine a “non-cookie cutter” approach as suggested by one respondent. Lastly, it was widely agreed that if there was more housing and it was affordable, employee retention would improve. The issue of poor communication was brought up on occasion. One respondent noted, “We can do better,” after describing a communication breakdown involving housing.

Hopefully, Yellowstone Park managers may use this study’s findings to understand employee phenomenological understanding of government shutdowns, affordable housing, and succession training programs. In the next section, some data-driven recommendations will be provided. Solutions, as proposed by respondents’ own answers, will be provided to improve succession training, and increase affordable housing. Park managers may maintain processes in place for government shutdowns in Yellowstone National Park.



## Chapter 5: Conclusions, Recommendations, and Areas of Further Research

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to answer the question: How can Yellowstone's Park management improve employee retention? In addition, the study attempted to address the following sub-questions:

- How do contingency plans surrounding government shutdowns affect employee morale?
- How do succession training programs affect employee retention?
- How does affordable housing affect employee organizational commitment?

This study took a phenomenological approach to understand respondents' subjective reality. An emphasis was placed on understanding cross-generational views. Many attitudes and beliefs spanned multiple generations, too, such as the need for more affordable housing. Yellowstone boasts a workforce of Gen Z, Gen X, Millennials, Baby Boomers, and even Silent Generation. The results showed that respondents widely supported the idea that more affordable housing and a succession training program will improve employee retention. The third assumption that contingency plans surrounding government shutdowns could improve retention could not be confirmed, however. Therefore, the results from this study challenged assumption A1 and validated A2 and A3.

Yellowstone is a unique park, spanning wilderness that crosses into three states and consists of eight major districts. Each district or village in Yellowstone has its own unique culture, preferences, and returning workforce. Some employees, such as Harlan Kredit, have returned for 52 seasons! Over 700 employees work in Yellowstone. This study recommends that more

frequent studies be conducted to determine environmental, societal, and cultural impacts on employees.

### **Conclusions**

The theory of change in this study applied the formula of three IF's and one THEN to examine employment trends across different generational categories in Yellowstone National Park.

#### **Assumption One (A1)**

If there are contingency plans for government shutdowns, THEN employee retention will improve at Yellowstone National Park.

#### **Conclusion**

The results of the data were inconclusive and did not support assumption 1. Employees did not blame Yellowstone's Park Management for government shutdowns. Interview respondents described government shutdowns as an inconvenience but ultimately "overhyped" since federal employees, by law due to the 2019 Employee Fair Treatment Act, always receive back pay. Though one employee, Respondent #8, left Yellowstone after the 2019 shutdown, she ultimately returned to the agency within two years. She stated she "was glad they wanted me back." Therefore, the results from this study do not support A1. Employee retention is not impacted by government shutdowns.

#### **Assumption Two (A2)**

If there is a succession training program, THEN employee retention will improve at Yellowstone National Park.

## Conclusion

The data strongly supported the assumption that a succession training program would improve employee retention. Although the survey results found that over 80% of respondents believe a succession training program is important, interview respondents described succession training as abundantly “non-existent.” Some procedural limitations, such as the “bureaucratic lag” between when someone quits or retires and when the agency can hire a new person, complicate successful transitioning, according to many respondents.

Respondents frequently described the alternative to succession training, or on-the-job training “OJT” that “gets new staff up to speed.” Respondent #3 described that she felt like the park was always “in reactive mode. We’re a 24-hour park, but we’ve planned for only 12-hour coverage.” Experts from previous studies found that when employees continue to do their work while being burned out, they do harm to their own health and to the well-being of those they serve (Evers & Tomic, 2003). It is even more important to ensure emergency response personnel get the rest and recuperation they need.

In addition to wide support for succession training, interview respondents spoke supportively for more cross-training. Several respondents described specialized positions with no or limited overlap. Respondents believed that this created major gaps in operations when people were on leave or left Yellowstone. Therefore, the data from this study strongly supported A2. Though complicated to implement, a succession training program would improve employee retention in Yellowstone National Park.

**Assumption Three (A3)**

If there are affordable housing options for employees, THEN employee retention will improve at Yellowstone.

**Conclusion:**

The data strongly and unsurprisingly supported the assumption that more affordable housing will improve employee retention. As one respondent, a supervisor, explained, “Housing is the single biggest problem I have.” Though the park is improving housing, under Director’s order #36 and according to the 2023 State of the Park, employees and prospective applicants are eager for more housing relief. Respondents widely agreed that the availability of housing was a determining factor in their ability to accept their current position. Yellowstone is an austere and isolated environment. It is understandable that housing and infrastructure would be limited or in poor condition. Even so, Yellowstone’s housing crisis reflects a nationwide problem. According to a Harvard study, half of renters nationwide could not afford their housing costs (Ludden, 2024).

Furthermore, regarding housing, respondents described a poor “snarl of communication” coming from that program. For example, many seasonal staff were inconveniently moved several times in a short span of time according to respondent #4. Respondent #3 described having to move over 5 times in one summer, with her young daughter. Recently, an employee, that was not interviewed or surveyed, claimed she had not been given a key to her residence. She moved in one month ago!

Some conflicting data was also found relating to housing. According to park records, Yellowstone tenants only stay, on average, for 2 years, in their assigned housing unit. An observer may question why the resident turnover is so high. More continuity and less turnover

would improve facility and administrative operations. Therefore, more research should be done on housing utilization and tenant needs in Yellowstone.

Furthermore, respondents who live in the gateway communities described a fortunate series of events that helped them “land” their home. For example, the realtor was their friend, or they heard from someone they were going to sell their house, and they didn’t put it on the market so the respondent could purchase it. Besides, for one respondent, everyone had a lucky encounter directly with the home seller or a realtor they knew they “could trust.” Also, respondent #10 confessed that she really enjoys living outside the park. She explained that it was hard to “turn off work” while living in the park, living close to co-workers, and constantly talking about work. As respondent #11 stated, many employees simply do not want to work and live in Yellowstone.

The data unraveled into a few different avenues, though, ultimately, the results from this study firmly support A3. More affordable housing would improve employee retention. Much more research should be done on how to maximize in-park housing, the longevity of park residents, improve communications, and build relationships with local housing providers.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendation 1:**

Since assumption one was not widely supported, it is recommended that park managers continue their approach to handling government shutdowns. The results from this study revealed that respondents believe Park managers are doing a great job at navigating government shutdowns. Respondents, such as Respondent #10, acknowledged that communications have improved significantly over the past 3 shutdowns.

Many respondents did identify a disconnect between essential and non-essential employees. There is a conflict between those that must work and those that do not. As respondent #9 highlighted, since the 2019 Employee Fair Treatment Act which was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Trump all federal employees are now guaranteed backpay after a government shutdown.

Furthermore, according to most respondents, the connotation and meaning of “essential” and “non-essential” do not correctly reflect the value inherent in every Yellowstone employee. The binary creates unnecessary conflict too. Managers should instead change the verbiage to “lifesaving” or “infrastructure critical” services.

Additionally, according to respondents, Yellowstone could do more to acknowledge the “lost time” after a shutdown. Deadlines, contractor expectations, and other time-sensitive tasks are all still due, with no extension, after a government shutdown according to respondent #2. It would help if managers more publicly acknowledged the lost time and communicated expected delays.

Ultimately, however, the results from this study show Yellowstone Park managers are doing a great job navigating government shutdowns. Assumption 1 was widely unsupported. Shutdowns do not have much impact on employee’s level of organizational commitment and retention, at least in Yellowstone. The recommendation of this study is to modify the verbiage surrounding “essential” and “non-essential” employees. Lastly, the park should refine the processes already put in place to handle government shutdowns.

**Recommendation 2:**

Succession training programs were widely supported by respondents. Therefore, this study recommends implementing a methodical and coordinated succession training program in Yellowstone. Respondents expressed a sense that they were always, and unnecessarily, “re-inventing the wheel.” If Yellowstone had a strategic succession training program, this might alleviate gaps in the workforce, unnecessary confusion, and employee frustrations. Furthermore, respondent #12 stated that she worried the work she specialized in would not be effectively passed to the next person. She stated, “It took me a number of years and many visits to the regional office to master this skill.” Someone with no experience cannot just step in, she explained. Among most respondents, there was a widespread desire for succession training. Some respondents, though agreed training was important, did not believe it could be implemented in Yellowstone’s fast-paced environment. These respondents pointed towards “on-the-job training” and a more employee-driven approach, which they thought worked.

Ideally, a training specialist could be hired and allowed to develop a team, program, and resources just for Yellowstone. That person could help formalize and coordinate succession and cross-training programs throughout Yellowstone. Supervisors and staff could go to these specialists for guidance, resources, and the latest in developmental training. Every division and workgroup has different goals, procedures, and work cultures. So, it should be noted that a cookie-cutter approach would not work. Law enforcement officers cannot have the same succession training program or format as Park Researchers. There must also be “buy-in,” as Respondent #9 described. An opportunity to progress professionally into “laddered” positions was suggested by Focus Group #2. “People tend to feel stuck, and if staff felt like they could be advancing their career but not moving so far up into supervisory roles... a lead would be great...

we don't have enough ladder positions. So, either people have to be entry-level, or they need to move into management, which is not everyone's skill set," said one respondent. A look at Yellowstone's org chart to define more ladder opportunities may be helpful. This study recommends designating a hiring, development, and training specialist to improve employee retention.

### **Recommendation 3:**

Assumption 3, that affordable housing will improve retention was strongly supported by the data. Rising housing costs have not just affected the Greater Yellowstone region but are a problem nationwide. As Respondent #2 explains, "availability of the housing inside and outside the park...the inventory is just not there. It is just not commensurate with the rate of pay. So even if someone finds a place, they can't afford it." While continuing the improvement plan Yellowstone has already embarked on under Directors Order #34 and described in the 2023 State of the Park, 2021, this study recommends that park management should connect with realtors, housing, and property providers in the local communities that surround Yellowstone, such as Gardiner, Emigrant, Pray, Livingston, West Yellowstone, Montana. Building relationships with the local community and experts in the housing market could produce more housing options. If those relationships are successful, the park may consider contracting the services of a local realtor or housing provider and that person's sole purpose would be to help staff find housing outside Yellowstone, but still within a commutable range. Until the park has housing for every position, developing opportunities outside the park must be considered.

Additionally, it is recommended that the park consider opportunities to improve communications around in-park housing. The park may consider moving the housing department from Facility Management, where it resides now, to the Division of Administration.



Facility managers would continue to work closely with housing specialists and residents, but they would not be responsible for communications. Communications is not the division's expertise. According to respondents in Focus Group #3, the issues surrounding assignments, unfairness, and disorganization may be better addressed by experts in the Department of Administration. One respondent further explained, "It would be wonderful if housing was moved to Administration. That would clear up a lot of confusion."

As described by previous studies that explored goal-centered communications, the lack of communication can influence the quality of workforce morale (Chaaban et al., 2020). The researchers further suggested that a cybernetic approach to communication structures may be helpful, and this could be explored more fully in Yellowstone. Cybernetic is described as identifying procedures, understanding deficiencies, establishing consistent protocols, creating a flowchart of responsibilities, and lastly educating the workforce on established guidelines. The Division of Administration may be better equipped to manage and perfect these types of communications than the Division of Facility Management. While Facility Managers could focus their expertise on housing infrastructure, rehabilitation, and procurement, specialists in Administration would handle internal communications and housing assignments. In any case, as explained by respondents, "we can do better" and communications around housing should be improved. It is, therefore, the recommendation of this study to explore new ways to improve Yellowstone's housing operations and communications. Also, the park should continue building its housing inventory inside and outside the park.

**Table 1: SMART criteria for each recommendation**

	<i>Recommendation 1</i>	<i>Recommendation 2</i>	<i>Recommendation 3</i>
<i>Specific</i>	Management should continue refining their approach towards <b>government shutdowns</b> . Consider revising verbiage of essential & non-essential employees	Management should implement a <b>succession training program</b> . Managers should avoid cookie cutter approach and emphasize staff “buy-in.”	Management should add more <b>affordable housing</b> within Yellowstone’s boundaries and build relationships with local housing providers in the gateway communities.
<i>Measurable</i>	Park management should measure and evaluate tension between essential and non-essential employees during government shutdowns.	Managers could count the number of new hires that step into ladder positions through the succession program. Managers should identify “pillars of knowledge” within Yellowstone. Frequent measures should be put in place to track the correlation between hiring	Management could count the number of new houses built within Yellowstone and identified in the local communities. Management could contract the services of a local realtor who would use their expertise to find affordable housing, in the gateway communities. Yellowstone employees could use this person as a

		and the effectiveness of the training program.	resource in their housing search.
<i>Achievable</i>	This recommendation is achievable because park managers have already put good processes in place to handle government shutdowns.	With enough resources and personnel, this recommendation could be achievable. Ideally, resources will allow for a park training specialist to be designated. That person (or team) can support cross-generational alliances and succession training across divisions.	This recommendation is achievable because park managers have already identified housing as a major park priority in the 2023 State of the Park compendium.
<i>Relevant</i>	The recommendation directly supports the data. Assumption 1 is widely unsupported and invalidated.	The recommendation directly supports Assumption 2, which is widely supported by the data.	Recommendation directly supports Assumptions 3, which is widely supported by the data.

<b><i>Time-bound</i></b>	Management should implement these processes before the next fiscal year-end or budget deadlines ~ Oct 1, 2024.	Management should identify current budget or personnel opportunities to make a succession training program, personnel, and events a reality. Ideally, a plan will be in place within the next 12 months.	Management should identify the current budget, federal personnel, and contracting capabilities to increase affordable housing for employees. Ideally, a plan will be in place within the next 12 months.
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### **Areas for Further Research**

The study identified several areas for further research. Related to housing, park managers may like to understand why tenants only stay, on average, for a short 2 years. This statistic should be further analyzed and explained. Averages, as described in the textbook, do not reflect actual data points (Leedy & Ormond, 2019). For example, one employee could be in their house for five years and another only five months. Park managers should reflect on all the data related to tenant longevity. Park managers may discover trends and other factors that could improve residents' permanence.

Furthermore, other impositions to employee retention were described in this study. Though so many variables may contribute to poor employee retention, respondents pointed to major shifts in societal priorities. Many Baby Boomers and Gen X respondents blamed widespread changes in values and priorities that have led to poor employee retention. For example, respondent #5 stated, "We went from being a sought-after niche place to work to a hardship post. We've done it to ourselves. We've convinced each other that it is a hardship. We

have meetings where we talk about how hard it is (to work here), and we don't talk about how rewarding it is.”

Gen X Respondents in Focus Group #3 described a declining sense of community, from their perspective, that led to poor retention. Besides two community events, there's nothing else going on, they said, during the summer. More data on what this means and how staff understand a sense of community could be collected. As some upper-level park managers describe, the problem isn't just a desire for more community events but for people to organize them.

More research could be done to improve employment conditions in Yellowstone National Park. Yellowstone is such a special place for so many people. It is still a “niche” and sought-after post for National Park Service employees. Yellowstone can still attract the best candidates if management takes steps to improve conditions. If programs were introduced, such as cross-generational succession training programs, then employee retention, morale, and organizational commitment may improve. The first step toward correcting Yellowstone's problems is acknowledging deficiencies and areas for improvement. Yellowstone has acknowledged many of these areas already (State of the Park, 2023). The solutions introduced and perfected in Yellowstone could be applied to other top-tier parks as well. Employees, managers, and Yellowstone National Park will benefit from any endeavor to improve employee retention. Hopefully, the solutions presented in this paper are a humble starting point.

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## Appendix B – Data Collection Instruments

### Qualitative Data Collection Instrument

#### Research Topic:

Analyzing Employment Trends Among Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z at  
Yellowstone National Park

**Consent for the interview to be recorded?** Yes / No

**Would you like to remain Anonymous?** Yes / No

**Generational Category:** Please select the one that best describes you:

\_\_\_ Baby Boomer (born 1946-1964)

\_\_\_ Gen X (1965-1980)

\_\_\_ Millennial (1981-1996)

\_\_\_ Gen Z (1997-2012)

**Number of Years at Yellowstone National Park:**

\_\_\_ Less than 5

\_\_\_ 6-9

\_\_\_ 10-15

\_\_\_ 16-20

\_\_\_ 21 and above

**Division:**

- Facility Management
- Visitor Resource Protection
- Yellowstone Center for Resources
- Superintendent's Office & Administration
- Resource Education and Youth Programs
- Other

**Nature of the position:**

- Seasonal
- Permanent Full Time
- Part Time
- Permanent Subject to Furlough
- Term

**Number of shutdowns experienced:**

- None
- 1-2
- 2-3
- 3 or more

**Number of times you have had to move while working for Yellowstone National Park:**

- 1

\_\_\_ 2

\_\_\_ 3

\_\_\_ 4 or more

### **Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

Hi, my name is Yasmine. Before we begin, if you have any questions before we proceed, please let me know.

As there is no question, we will proceed to the next step. Today's interview and discussion will last from **30 – 40 minutes**, which I will be recording to keep the accuracy of your answers and our conversation. Also, I will be taking notes to supplement the discussion points. Your identity may remain anonymous if you like. I will be posing a few general, specific questions, and follow-up questions. If you are uncomfortable with any of the question (s) or do not want to answer, we can skip it. Thanks for your consent, and let's begin our interview.

Today is \_\_\_\_\_date\_\_\_\_\_ and it is \_\_\_\_\_time\_\_\_\_\_, I am speaking with Mr./Ms.\_\_\_\_\_

#### **ASSUMPTIONS:**

Yellowstone's Park management can improve **employee retention** -

**A1)** If, there are contingency plans for government shutdowns, THEN employee retention will improve at Yellowstone Park.

**A2)** If there is a succession training program, THEN employee retention will improve at Yellowstone Park.

**A3)** If, there are affordable housing options for employees, THEN employee retention will improve at Yellowstone Park.

#	Core Questions	Follow Up Questions
1	<p>Tell me about your housing situation in Yellowstone National Park?</p> <p>-&gt;A3</p>	<p>What do you like about your housing?</p> <p>What do you want to improve?</p> <p>What would you like management to know about your housing struggles?</p>
2	<p>Tell me about a poor housing environment you or someone you know experienced while working in Yellowstone?</p> <p>-&gt;A3</p>	<p>What follow-up action was taken by management?</p>
3	<p>Can you describe your division's succession training program?</p> <p>-&gt;A2</p>	<p>How could it be better? What works well?</p>
4	<p>Tell me about an experience you had with a senior employee tasked with training you?</p> <p>-&gt;A2</p>	<p>How long did that experience last?</p> <p>Do you think senior employees fear that sharing institutional knowledge will negatively impact their careers? Why or why not?</p>
5	<p>Tell me about a time when you were tasked with conducting a succession training program?</p> <p>-&gt;A2</p>	<p>What went well?</p> <p>What went poorly?</p>



6	<p>Tell me about the first government shutdown you experienced?</p> <p>-&gt;A1</p>	<p>What was your attitude throughout?</p> <p>How did it feel coming back to work?</p> <p>How many total government shutdowns have you been through?</p>
7	<p>How has Park Management handled previous shutdowns?</p> <p>-&gt;A1</p>	<p>What did management do well?</p> <p>What could management have done better?</p>
8	<p>How would you describe the struggle to improve employee retention?</p>	<p>Please elaborate and explain why.</p>
9	<p>Is there anything else you would like to share or address that I did not ask?</p>	

**Thank you NOTE:**

Thank you very much for your time and valuable input. Your provided information will solely be used for research purposes, and the collected data will not be shared with anyone. If you have any questions in the future, please feel free to contact me using the contact details provided below. Thank you again and have a great day.

**Contact:** yasmine\_tom@nps.gov or ytom@my.ggu.edu | #307-344-2395

\*

**Quantitative Data Collection Instrument**

**Research Topic:** Analyzing Employment Trends Among Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z in Yellowstone National Park.

**Would you like to remain Anonymous? Yes / No**

\*Please provide your name/phone number if it is ok to be contacted.

Optional \_\_\_\_\_

**Generational Category:** Please select the one that best describes you:

\_\_\_\_ Baby Boomer (born 1946-1964)

\_\_\_\_ Gen X (1965-1980)

\_\_\_\_ Millennial (1981-1996)

\_\_\_\_ Gen Z (1997-2012)

**Number of Years at Yellowstone National Park:**

\_\_\_\_ Less than 5

\_\_\_\_ 6-9

\_\_\_\_ 10-15

\_\_\_\_ 16-20

\_\_\_\_ 21 and above

**Division:**

\_\_\_\_ Facility Management

- Visitor Resource Protection
- Yellowstone Center for Resources
- Superintendent's Office & Administration
- Resource Education and Youth Programs
- Other

**Nature of the position:**

- Seasonal
- Permanent Full Time
- Part Time
- Permanent Subject to Furlough
- Term

**Number of shutdowns experienced:**

- None
- 1-2
- 2-3
- 3 or more

**Number of times you have had to move while working in Yellowstone:**

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4 or more

**ASSUMPTIONS:**

Yellowstone's Park management can improve **employee retention** -

**A1)** If, there are contingency plans for government shutdowns, THEN employee retention will improve at Yellowstone Park.

**A2)** If there is a succession training program, THEN employee retention will improve at Yellowstone Park.

**A3)** If, there are affordable housing options for employees, THEN employee retention will improve at Yellowstone Park.

**SURVEY****1. Yes or No Questions**

**A3<-** I live in government housing. **Yes / No**

**A3<-** I have lived in government housing for more than 5 years. **Yes / No**

**A3<-** The availability of housing was a determining factor in accepting my position. **Yes / No**

**A2<-** In my current role, I received training, from a subject matter expert (SME), for two weeks or longer. **Yes / No**

**A2<-** There is a SME, currently, that I can go to for advice and mentorship. **Yes / No**

**A1<-** I was furloughed during one or more government shutdowns. **Yes / No**

**A1** I am considered an essential employee and, therefore, must work without **Yes/ No** pay during a government shutdown.

**2. Likert's Scale Questions: 1: strongly disagree 2: disagree 3: neutral 4: agree 5: strongly agree.**

Statements	1	2	3	4	5
A succession training program is important. <b>-&gt;A2</b>					
Senior employees share their institutional knowledge freely and openly with their younger colleagues. <b>-&gt;A2</b>					
Young employees respect and seek out their senior colleagues' institutional knowledge about Yellowstone and the National Park Service. <b>-&gt;A2</b>					
I am satisfied with my housing accommodations. <b>-&gt;A3</b>					
Government housing is fairly and equitably distributed among employees. <b>-&gt;A3</b>					
Employees take care of their assigned government housing. <b>-&gt;A3</b>					
Older employees had less difficulty acquiring affordable housing than newer Yellowstone employees.					

->A3					
Government shutdowns have negatively impacted me and my family.					
->A1					
Park management could do more to prevent government shutdowns.					
->A1					
There will be another government shutdown during the lifespan of my career with the NPS.					
->A1					

**Thank you NOTE:**

Thank you very much for your time and valuable input. Your provided information will solely be used for research purposes, and the collected data will not be shared with anyone. If you have any questions in the future, please feel free to contact me using the contact details provided below. Thank you again and have a great day.

**Contact:** ytom@my.ggu.edu | #307-344-2635