

MERIT SYSTEM OPERATIONS COMMITTEE MEETING MINUTES

Thursday, April 22, 2021

11:30 a.m.

Committee Purpose: Minn. Stat. § 256.012, subd. 3 provides that "The Commissioner shall ensure that participating counties are consulted regularly and offered the opportunity to provide input on the management of the Merit System to ensure effective use of resources and to monitor system performance."

Present: Rae Ann Keeler-Aus (Yellow Medicine), Dave Saylor (Wilkin County), John Dahlstrom (Wabasha County), Naomi Ochsendorf (Watonwan County), Kay Steffen (Des Moines Valley Health and Human Services), Jamie Halverson (Clearwater County), Chuck Hurd (Kanabec County), Tess Arrick-Kruger (Houston County), Jennifer Westrum (Wadena), Pam Hughes (DHS), Brent Boyd (DHS), Liza Garcia (DHS), Jessica Page (DHS), and Renee Edwards (DHS).

Absent: Bruce Messelt (Sherburne County), Julie Sjostrand (Pennington County), Kelsey Baker (Swift), and Kathy LaFrance (Koochiching).

1. Intros - Welcome

- The committee welcomed new Region V representative, Jennifer Westrum from Wadena County, replacing Jackie Och from Todd County.
- New MACA representative, Kelsey Baker from Swift County, replacing David Minke from Pine County, could not make it to the meeting but did send Jess some questions and items to consider.

2. **Approval of January 28, 2021 and March 22, 2021 meeting minutes.** The minutes from the January and March meetings were approved as recorded.

3. **EEO/AA annual reports.** Liza gave an update on the counties who have sent in their annual reports (14 have not yet sent their information). Some things that have come out of the information on reports is that counties would like training on how to fill out this information and some counties weren't aware that they needed to fill out the information yearly. Liza will contact the counties who have not yet sent in their information.

Liza shared that DHS is moving towards becoming an anti-racist organization and will be holding Anti-Racism training in the near future for DHS staff. Commissioner Jodi Harpstead and Dr. Karen McKinney are leading this effort. DHS is evaluating policies and

practices that may result in disparities. The annual EEO/AA reports, guidelines, and work done within DHS, the counties, and Merit System are just some examples of what we're all doing together to bring diversity, equity, and inclusion front and center.

4. **Review of Merit System handouts.** Jess shared several handouts that outlined the history of the Merit System, functions, and principles. Jess asked if anyone has had a chance to share the handouts with their regions or if anyone has feedback. The handouts were created in response to needing to market merit services better and share background information on the Merit System and why it exists. If anyone wants the Merit System to include additional information, please let Jess know.

Dave asked if it usually takes one year to go through the certification process. Jess answered that there is a fair amount of back and forth with the counties and that the team is managing the reviews while also completing day-to-day work. Time is needed to review the quality of documents submitted, and policies are not always up-to-date. The number of counties wanting to operate their own merit system this year means the team had to start reviewing submitted materials right away just to get through all the documentation.

Jess shared that *Meet & Greet* conversations are still occurring and she has been receiving great information from the counties. These have been helpful to the counties and Merit, giving a background and explaining why Merit exists and how we can help. Jess said that she would be willing to talk to new directors about the Merit System since there is some concern over the amount of turnover and lack of knowledge re: Merit System.

5. **Cost projection for July 1, 2021 through December 31, 2021.** Costs for 07/01/21 to 12/31/21 are expected to remain the same. (The current range per county health and human services agency is \$7,457-\$32,518/year with an average of \$15,700/year). Jess will be talking with DHS accounting in the coming weeks to see how cost projections look for January 2022. Jess hopes to have the 2022 cost projections at the July MSOC meeting. As a worst-case scenario, if the program loses all 13 counties that applied for certification in 2022 and there's no change to the overall budget/costs, this could project a 36-40% increase for those counties remaining. If we can lower costs by 15%, it'd be more like a 19-22% increase. If we reduce it further (20%), it'd be about a 10-13% increase for those remaining. The Merit System is doing everything possible to keep costs down.

One example of outreach occurring is preliminary talks with Minnesota Management and Budget (MMB) about using Recruiting Solutions as the recruiting system (vs. NEOGOV).

There are many questions to work through to see if this is a viable option. There are initial concerns that it will be a more manual process. MMB is in the middle of a large upgrade so the Merit System won't have more information until after Fall 2021.

Dave asked about the State Personnel system and if we could roll into the state system with Merit and maintain what we currently have? Jess answered that the Merit System is looking at every possibility.

Kelsey asked how many counties have purchased the NEOGOV program. The committee answered; some have and others have not. Yellow Medicine does not have NEOGOV, Watonwan does, and Houston is implementing it now for the entire county.

Houston County has recently purchased NEOGOV for an initial set-up fee of \$11,460 with a training fee of \$4,000. The price varies on the number of employees one has and the modules the organization purchases. The NEOGOV "Insight" system will cost Houston County \$10,000/year for about 150-170 employees. (The Merit System pays less than \$50,000 for both NEOGOV and Biddle testing systems for 53 counties/2,898 employees).

Jamie asked if there is a performance review option in NEOGOV that offers live feedback between supervisors and staff. Committee members answered that there are multiple options you can buy into (performance management, onboarding, HRIS, etc.). NEOGOV has a lot of features that can be added at an added cost.

6. Merit system survey results and suggested improvements. Jess shared that the Merit System received 49 responses to their winter/spring survey.

About 40% of respondents answered that they use the Merit System less than once/month. Another 25% stated that they use Merit resources a few times a month or once/month. The most impactful services provided by the Merit System are: 1) reviewing applications, 2) administering online testing, and 3) managing eligibility lists. There was a wide range of answers for the timeliness of Merit responses (0-80 on a 100-point scale).

Training topics of most interest were: 1) Performance Management, 2) Recruiting Strategies, and 3) How to use NEOGOV. The Merit System had to reschedule the Performance Management training due to limited staffing resources but will offer it in the next couple of months. The team is considering offering another training session on Recruiting Strategies in the Fall or Winter.

Several comments included in the survey were that counties appreciate Merit staff and having the resource/program available. The next most popular comments were concerns about Merit costs. Additional comments referenced the need to reduce duplicative work between the counties and Merit System (reporting LOAs, wage changes, submitting forms, dual applications, etc.). Tied at #4, were comments surrounding making sure to have active applicants on the lists and only receiving the top 15 applicants (per statute). One comment expressed concern that only receiving the top 15 applicants could conflict with bargaining contracts if an internal candidate applied and did not score within the top 15.

Jess asked if updating the Merit language and rules to be able to refer more than 15 names would be helpful. Committee members thought that would be beneficial.

Other feedback received pertained to appreciating the testing that's done through the Merit System and EEO/AA help available. Another positive note was that the Merit System provides equity and consistency among the counties that use it.

The committee had the following comments/suggestions based on the survey results:

- Educate schools about having students mark every county vs. those they are truly interested in.
- Send a monthly reminder to applicants on the lists to make sure they are actively seeking employment.
- Keep all three registers—statewide, regional, and county (they are used and liked by the counties).
- Remove an applicant from the list(s) when they get a new job.

Naomi suggested that the Merit System and Liza with EEO/AA may want to do a "Lunch and Learn" at the next MACSSA conference. She will check with the committee and follow-up with dates/times.

7. **Next meeting date/time.** The next meeting of the MSOC will be held via WebEx on Thursday, July 22, 2021, at 11:30 a.m. The November MSOC meeting might be held both in-person and via WebEx.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:35 p.m.