

Merit System Operations Committee - Quarterly Meeting

Date: 01/27/2022

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.”

Members

Minnesota Association of County Social Service Administrators (MACSSA) Representatives	Region	County	In Attendance
Julie Sjostrand, Director	Region 1	Pennington	
Jamie Halverson, Director (Chair)	Region 2	Clearwater	X
Kathy LaFrance, Director	Region 3	Koochiching	
Dave Sayler, Director	Region 4	Wilkin	X
Jennifer Westrum, Director	Region 5	Wadena	X
Rae Ann Keeler-Aus, Director (Vice-Chair)	Region 6	Yellow Medicine	X
Vacant	Region 7		
Vacant	Region 8		
Naomi Ochsendorf, Director	Region 9	Watonwan	
Nina Arneson, Director	Region 10	Goodhue	X

Minnesota Association of County Administrators (MACA) Representative	County	In Attendance
Kelsey Baker, County Administrator	Swift County	

Minnesota County Human Resources Management Association (MCHRMA) Representative	County	In Attendance
Tess Arrick-Krueger, Human Resources Director	Houston County	X

Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) Representatives	Program Area	In Attendance
Jessica Page, Director	Merit System	X
Brent Boyd, Lead HR Consultant	Merit System	X
Pam Hughes, HR Specialist	Merit System	
Liza Garcia, Investigation Specialist & Equal Opportunity Consultant	Equal Opportunity & Access	X

Agenda and Meeting Minutes

1. Welcome

The Committee welcomed Jamie Halverson as the new Chairperson of the MSOC.

2. Approval of November meeting minutes

The minutes from the November 4, 2021 meeting were approved as recorded.

3. Annual EEO/AA reports

Liza wanted to remind the Committee that normally the year-end reports are due at the end of January; however, this year there has been an extension until February 28, 2022. She also reminded the Committee that the disability reporting information would not be due until next year. In addition, Liza pointed out that the new EEO-AA guidelines contain a sample annual report template on pages 26 and 27. The report contains five questions related to complaints, recruitment, underutilization and training. The report also contains a table with questions regarding underutilization and hiring goals by job categories. Jess mentioned that we are able to pull employee reports for individual counties from our employee database.

Nina wanted to thank everyone for all the helpful information that has been provided this year; however, as a result, she indicated that their report will look significantly different than it has in years past. She noted that this year there was substantially more structure than in years past. Liza expressed that they had tried to give the counties better information that was more responsive. She also mentioned that the best way to reach her with questions is through email. She will try and respond within 24 hours. Jess mentioned that Nina probably wasn't alone in noticing the differences in the reporting that have taken place.

4. Update on Merit System participation

a. Current county participation numbers

Jess reported that ten county agencies were certified this past year with an effective date of January first of this year. The counties included were: Brown, Douglas, Grant/Pope (now Western Prairie Human Services), Hubbard, Kanabec, Kandiyohi, Lake, Nobles, Pine and Todd. This means 40 agencies representing 42 counties will be participating in the Merit System this year, which comprises a count of 2,300 employees.

b. 2023 Certification requests received

For calendar year 2023, thirteen counties have requested to have their systems reviewed in hopes of certification for compliance with the Federal Merit System Standards. This includes two counties (Mower and Chisago) from the 2021 requests. These two counties chose to delay their review. The 2023 certification review list includes: Clay, Isanti, Lac Qui Parle, Le Sueur, Mahnomon, Renville, Sibley, Stevens, Traverse, Wabasha and Wilkin. This includes a count of 730 employees. If all these counties are approved, there would be 27 agencies (or 29 counties) participating in the Merit System in 2023. This would equate to a total count of just over 1,500 employees. Jamie asked if there was any indication as to why counties were leaving. Jess mentioned that various reasons have been given, but the reasons primarily relate to the duplication of functions. As some counties have grown, they have hired staff and taken on more HR responsibilities and purchased applicant tracking systems, such as NEOGOV. This has led them to consider alternative options. Once in a while, she has heard complaints about our pace, not getting back to people with referral lists or a complicated internal process involving our rules and practices. Dave mentioned that he was concerned with how the certification decision was handled in his

county, but understood the rationale for the decision and appreciated the work of his HR director. He felt that one concern he had was the quality of the position descriptions they would be using from their consultant. He questioned the cost savings and didn't feel the position descriptions had enough detail as to the work being performed. Overall, he was concerned as to whether or not it was the right move. Nina mentioned that Goodhue County was satisfied with the services provided by the Merit System and felt that the confusion arose when counties set-up separate systems of operation. However, she indicated that the future of the Merit System worried her.

c. Future planning conversations

Jess indicated that at this point in time there were no plans to eliminate the Merit System program, and that we will always offer assistance, as long as there is interest. Staffing adjustments would be made through attrition and by taking on overflow work from DHS/HR. Jess said we will continue to keep a close eye on numbers and costs. One additional idea might be for the Merit System to charge counties for the cost of the certification review, perhaps totaling between \$1,500 and \$2,000. Dave and Nina both thought that it was a reasonable consideration, especially given the amount of staff time and expertise required for the review. Jennifer agreed, but with some hesitation. The county may be satisfied with the services, but the board may force the issue because of increasing costs. She also noted that this could be a significant expense for smaller counties. The committee thought it would have been more effective if it were established a few years ago.

In terms of further cost reduction considerations, Jess mentioned that Merit System staff met with State employees to discuss using the State's recruiting system. Unfortunately, this option isn't viable because the State system was set-up in a way where it would be impossible to add county units of government. Jess mentioned that, at this point, the Merit System will probably stay with NEOGOV, but will look at locking in a five-year rate. Jamie suggested surveying the counties to determine their interest in leaving the Merit System. Jess remarked that that sounded like a great idea. Finally, Dave mentioned that, from the county's perspective, merging with other counties was certainly a viable means of reducing costs.

5. January – June 2022 Costs

Because two of the larger counties have deferred their certification efforts to next year, there will be a decrease in costs. Jess mentioned that she is waiting for the final spreadsheet from Accounting, but anticipated the increases will be in the 20 to 40 percent range, with an average around 25 percent. Nina inquired as to which counties would be deferring. Jess responded that Chisago and Mower were the counties deferring with a total count of about 200 employees.

6. Online testing

Based on our last conversation we wanted to look into the testing data for the Office Support Specialist, Eligibility Worker and Case Aide tests for the last six months. What we discovered was:

- 59% completed the exams
- 5% launched the exams but never finished

- 36% never clicked on the link

Looking at the Office Support Specialist pass/fail rate by ethnicity, we discovered:

For those who failed:

- 73% white
- 27% ethnic minority

For those who passed:

- 90% white
- 7% ethnic minority
- 3% unknown

This means that there was a 20% difference between the pass/fail rate for ethnic minorities and a 17% difference between the pass/fail rate for those identifying as white.

The Merit System currently has an operating budget of \$775,000 and to eliminate testing would save between approximately \$15,000 and \$16,000. This amount is a small percentage of the overall budget right now, but could be more significant in the future.

Jess asked the Committee members if they'd had a chance to get any feedback from their regional members and some responded they had not. Jamie suggested that this topic also be added to the survey so remaining Merit System counties can weigh in on the future of testing. Some members thought that if it would increase the applicant pool, they would be supportive of moving away from online tests. More discussion is needed on this topic before a decision is made.

7. Next meeting date/time

Thursday, March 24, 2022 at noon. (This meeting will be both in person and remote).

The meeting was adjourned at 12:52 p.m.

