

Merit System Operations Committee - Quarterly Meeting

Date: 03/24/2022

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	Region 1	Pennington	
Jamie Halverson (Chair)	Region 2	Clearwater	X
Kathy LaFrance	Region 3	Koochiching	
Dave Saylor	Region 4	Wilkin	X
Jennifer Westrum	Region 5	Wadena	
Rae Ann Keeler-Aus (Vice-Chair)	Region 6	Yellow Medicine	X
Vacant	Region 7		
Vacant	Region 8		
Naomi Ochsendorf	Region 9	Watsonwan	
Nina Arneson	Region 10	Goodhue	X

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

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

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

Agenda

1. Welcome

The meeting participants introduced themselves.

2. Approval of January meeting minutes

The minutes from the January 27, 2022 meeting were approved as recorded.

3. Capturing disability status for annual EEO/AA reports

During the EEO-AA training there was some discussion about how to collect disability information which changes over time. Jess mentioned that we created a form with a cover sheet covering this topic and veteran status. Definitions of disability status and veteran's status were included on the cover sheet, along with the reason for why this information is being collected.

After some significant discussion regarding distribution and return of the materials, the Committee agreed that, given the multitude of county structures, it might work best if the Merit System sends the documents to the counties with directions for the employees to return the materials directly back to the Merit System, with the caveat that participation in this process is entirely voluntary. This information will allow the Merit System to generate annual reports on these two categories.

There was some discussion about collecting the information anonymously for greater participation, but Jess indicated that the information is tracked by name and this might lead to double counting. A suggestion was also made to consider doing this process in a survey format. Jess said she could look into that possibility, and if any counties have concerns regarding the return process they should contact the Merit System. Some counties already track this information through Human Resources.

4. 2022 Costs

Jess mentioned that she sent out a spreadsheet covering the costs for the coming fiscal year. Included on the spreadsheet are red flags near the headers with notes describing the column or cell meaning. She also noted that counties in red are not part of the Merit System. Jess stated that cost increases were consistent with our expectations of an average increase of 25% with a range starting around 11% and going to 40%. She noted that there has been a decrease in the overall cost, down to \$775,000. This is partially due to the fact that not all of the counties that expressed an interest in leaving were certified. Accounting informed us that invoices went out early this week or late last week. Jess also mentioned that there may be one county receiving approval in June which could impact the overall costs. Kelsey asked about a list of counties possibly leaving in 2023, and Jess indicated that that information was in the minutes from our last meeting. If all counties are certified that would leave 29 counties or 27 agencies left participating in the Merit System.

5. Survey for tracking merit participation in the next 5 years

At our last meeting we discussed doing a survey regarding counties leaving, counties staying and continuing with the five on-line exams that we currently use. Jess indicated that she sent the survey yesterday and that it's fairly simple in gathering information on those counties intending to leave in the next two, three, five years, etc. Jess mentioned that this could give the Merit System a better guide as to what might be coming. Regarding testing, we're trying to get a better feel for who might be in support for continuing with the five on-line written exams: Accounting Technician, Case Aide, Child Support Enforcement Aide, Eligibility Worker and Office Support Specialist. Nina questioned the reasons related to this inquiry. Assuming that the first one is the cost and the second being that the test is weeding out qualified candidates. Jess indicated that that was the case, although the cost is not significant in comparison to the overall budget (\$15,000 out of a budget of \$775,000). Jess mentioned that when pulling test participation numbers, approximately 60% were

taking the exams while 40% were not. Jamie asked what the alternative would be if we move forward with eliminating the written tests. Would we need to look at the minimum qualifications? Jess responded that there would be some work to be done in reviewing the minimum qualifications, but also the counties would need to decide if there are certain assessments that they would want to administer such as writing samples, math exercises and case studies. Jamie and Nina indicated that they were already administering some of these assessments as part of the interview process.

Jess mentioned that her thought would be to continue with the on-line written exam process through this coming year and shift away from written exams at the end of the contract in July of 2023, but the survey data will certainly help in making that determination. Jamie suggested that the Committee members go back to their regions and collect information on the minimum qualifications being used by counties not covered by the Merit System.

In terms of final suggestions for the survey, Nina suggested leaving it open for any other comments the counties may be interested in sharing.

6. Qualifications for Fiscal Officers

Jess started the discussion by explaining that the Merit System is running into issues with applicants not qualifying because they lack social services or healthcare accounting experience. She mentioned that, if the Committee thought that private sector accounting work was acceptable, we could change it to a preferred qualification. Dave mentioned that this was probably the case before and when the assessment process was changed from a written to a scored supplemental, this may have changed. Nina brought up the point that her county has had difficulty filling positions throughout the fiscal series and she would support opening this up. In fact, all the directors in attendance mentioned concerns and difficulties with the series and were in favor of making this change, along with considering other options. Nina mentioned that she had difficulty hiring individuals with this unique skill set and drawing candidates to county employment. Jamie brought up the distinction between cash based and accrual accounting in terms of learning the county's fiscal reporting work. She noted that new employees adjust, but it takes some time and effort.

The posting marketing statement was also mentioned as an enhanced feature for attracting candidates. In fact, Jess mentioned that the Merit System has amended some of the language on our Careers page to make it more enticing and rid it of government-speak while also promoting that it is stable and rewarding employment.

7. Recap of MSSA networking event & marketing ideas

Pam described her experience attending the MSSA conference student luncheon. There were approximately 62 students in attendance at the luncheon. In addition to Pam, there were presenters from Pinnacle, MSSA Region Nine, and the Board of Social Work. Pam mentioned that the students seemed very engaged and the session seemed well organized, but there wasn't a lot of student interaction.

Related to the session and marketing efforts, Pam mentioned that the Board of Social Work brought up the licensure requirement for all positions except ones covered by the Merit System and Tribal Nations. In response to that distinction, Pam was considering adding a statement to our postings describing how county positions don't have that requirement. Pam was hoping for some input from the MSOC on this topic and noted that Brent had expressed reservations. Brent brought up the point that in the past this has been an area of significant interest with the Board of Social Work and with their legislative priorities. The ensuing discussion revealed just how varied the social work licensure landscape is in the counties. Dave described how Wilkin County reimburses for licensure costs and the advantages in having licensed workers appear in court. Most of the Social Workers in his County are licensed. Rae Ann described the opposite licensure mix in Yellow Medicine County. Jamie brought up the point that although professional credentials can be important, she has found that a varied degree background can be useful and that the candidates work experience, both voluntary and paid, is a key element in their success. She further noted that most of the Social Workers in Clearwater are not licensed. Jamie suggested that, perhaps as a compromise, it could be noted somewhere on the Careers page not directly tied to the posting. Dave also noted that the degrees (e.g., Master's and Doctorates) *along with* internships and practicums (e.g., IV E Scholar's program) are important. To a large degree, it comes down to the candidate's decision-making skills and their ability to adapt in determining their success in the organization and in the field.

Ultimately, the committee agreed that they were not in favor of noting licensure on the postings.

8. Next meeting date/time

Thursday, July 28, 2022 at noon. (This meeting will also be both in-person and remote).

