



COUNTY OF SONOMA

HUMAN RESOURCES DEPARTMENT

Christina Cramer, HR Director

Employment • Classification • Employee Relations • EEO • Training • Risk Management

August 18, 2022

The Honorable Shelly Averill
Presiding Superior Court Judge
600 Administration Drive
Santa Rosa, CA 95403

RE: Response to the 2021-22 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Report

Dear Honorable Judge Averill,

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the 2021-22 Grand Jury Report. The Human Resources Department's required response to the Grand Jury Report: Department of Health Services is attached.

A sincere thank you to the 2021-22 Grand Jurors for their service.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Christina Cramer'.

Christina Cramer
Director

Attachments: Human Resource Department Response

cc:

Sonoma County Board of Supervisors
Clerk of the Board of Supervisors
Grand Jury Foreperson

Response to Grand Jury Report Form

Report Title: Department of Health Services
Report Date: June 14, 2022
Response by: Christina Cramer Title: Director
Agency/Department Name: Sonoma County Department of Human Resources

FINDINGS: F9, F13, F14, F15, F16, F17, F18, F19, F20, F21

I (we) agree with the findings numbered: _____

I (we) disagree wholly or partially with the findings numbered: F9, F13, F14, F15, F16, F17, F18, F19, F20, F21

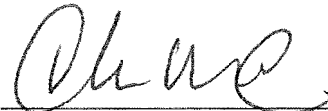
(Attach a statement specifying any portions of the findings that are disputed with an explanation of the reasons.)

RECOMMENDATIONS: R8, R15

- Recommendations numbered: _____ have been implemented.
(Attach a summary describing the implemented actions.)
- Recommendations numbered: _____ have not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.
(Attach a timeframe for the implementation.)
- Recommendations numbered: R8, R15 require(s) further analysis.
(Attach an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or director of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. ***This timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of publication of the Grand Jury report.***)

Date: August 19, 2022

Signed: _____



Number of pages attached: 5

(See attached Civil Grand Jury Response Requirements)

Department of Health Services Report – Human Resources Department Required Responses
F9, F13, F14, F15, F16, F17, F18, F19, F20, F21

F9. The COVID-19 crisis exacerbated dysfunctions within the Department of Health Services and caused rifts between the Department of Health Services and the Department of Emergency Management at a time when the two departments needed to work closely together.

Response: The Human Resources Department disagrees with this finding.

Additional information is needed to validate this response. A complete after-action report from the Department of Health Services will be provided to the Board of Supervisors within the first quarter of 2023.

F13. Many Department of Health Services employees are fearful to report harassment, bullying, toxic work environment, and safety issues to their executive team due to a fear of retaliation.

Response: The Human Resources Department partially disagrees with this finding.

It is difficult to completely substantiate this claim. The County Administrator will collaborate with the Health Services and Human Resources Departments to further understand and investigate the extent of employee concerns.

F14. Many employees in the Department of Health Services do not trust their departmental Human Resources team or its processes.

Response: The Human Resources Department ("Central HR") partially disagrees with this finding.

What must be taken into consideration and is not covered in the Grand Jury's report are what may be underlying reasons as to why DHS - HR is not trusted. Central HR believes more assessment should be conducted to determine the root cause for this finding. Possible causes could be organizational structure, given level of authority, support, and regard by DHS leadership, knowledge, communication channels, etc.

DHS should consult with Central HR and develop action plans to further assess this finding and potentially change the perception or issues.

F15. A review of Department of Health Services exit interviews shows a distrust of upper management.

Response: The Human Resources Department partially disagree with this finding.

It is difficult to completely substantiate this claim. The County Administrator will collaborate with the Health Services and Human Resources Departments to further understand and develop action plans to mitigate this finding.

F16. Exit interviews can be done by either the County Human Resources Department or by individual departments, potentially leading to a lack of effectiveness and accountability at the department level.

Response: The Human Resources Department ("Central HR") disagrees with this finding.

The most prevalent general human resources best practice is to ask employees to voluntarily provide information at the time of separation that the organization may consider to improve the employee experience. Another best practice is to review the information to look for anything of concern, such as a single issue of concern or recurrent themes and take appropriate action with areas of concern. The process by the Department of Health ("DHS") is consistent with best practice. DHS human resources staff send the separating employee information that they may voluntarily complete an exit interview form and/or request an exit with their supervisor/manager or DHS human resources staff. According to DHS departmental human resources staff, the forms are reviewed and if concerns are identified, they would take appropriate action. Additionally, the forms are forwarded to Central HR for review. Furthermore, employees may request exit interviews with Central HR as Central HR may be seen as a neutral party in which individuals may be more forthcoming with information. If concerning information was shared with Central HR and/or found when reviewing DHS exit interview forms, appropriate action would be taken which may include sharing the concerns with County leadership or DHS management/leadership

DHS human resources staff and managers are encouraged to seek consult with Central HR when issues are discovered during employee exit interviews to ensure appropriate actions are taken when concerns are discovered.

Central HR is currently piloting a new exit interview process with three County departments. As part of this pilot, new reporting features are being developed that will improve department's ability to analyze information and Central HR's capability to monitor exit interview information more easily. If the Pilot is successful, when launched Countywide there will be a better exit interview process and tool that departments may use to understand what helped to retain County employees or why employees left County employment.

F17. The practices of human resource management in the Department of Health Services are not regularly or consistently reviewed by the County Human Resources Department.

Response: The Human Resources Department ("Central HR") disagrees with this finding. Central HR is not staffed appropriately to review and/or oversee departmental HR program areas, and departmental HR specific positions are accountable to their department

head/appointing authority, not Central HR, in the current organizational and service delivery structure.

To set up departmental HR staff for success, Central HR provides training to new departmental HR “Liaison” staff on best human resources practices and County practices and processes. Then, through the day-to-day advisory relationship that Central HR has to County departmental staff, central HR guides and advises department on related matters, which over time provides an HR Liaison with on-the-job training and experience. Additionally, there are monthly meetings with departmental HR Liaisons in which HR covers relevant information and departmental staff may seek guidance in a round table Q&A, there are many available online resources on policy/procedures, and there are available trainings on special topics that HR Liaison’s may take advantage of in learning and practicing departmental HR duties.

F18. In the Department of Health Services, essential human resource processes such as performance appraisals, supervision, conflict resolution, etc. are performed irregularly, inconsistently, and are not in alignment with County standards.

Response: The Human Resources Department (“Central HR”) partially disagrees with this finding.

This finding is unclear. It appears the Grand Jury believes some Human Resources best practices or policies are not being followed by DHS with respect to: (i) conducting performance evaluations; (ii) addressing interpersonal conflicts; and (iii) concerns raised about the quality of supervision.

If this interpretation is accurate, department heads are responsible for following and implementing County policies, and there is an existing County policy regarding performance appraisals. Department heads are also responsible for ensuring their supervisors and managers are appropriately trained and carrying out their duties as supervisors and managers.

Central HR would need to audit DHS compliance with the County’s performance evaluation policy to get a more accurate assessment of the Department’s compliance with County processes. Given the significant effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on DHS generally during this review period, it is also reasonable to assume that DHS has struggled with some HR best practices.

Central HR’s experience in advising DHS staff does indicate that DHS should make efforts to improve internal processes and plans to better handle employee performance, interpersonal conflict, and work culture issues.

F19. In the Department of Health Services there are numerous unfilled positions due to slow recruitment efforts and other deficiencies.

Response: The Human Resources Department partially disagrees with this finding.

The large number of vacancies in the healthcare field is a state and nation-wide issue. The County Administrator's Office and Human Resources Department are currently evaluating the County's Compensation Philosophy and conducting a comprehensive total compensation comparison study for the County's benchmark job classifications.

F20. The Department of Health Services' perceived hostile work environment may be causing extra challenges in the recruitment of senior Department of Health Services staff.

Response: The Human Resources Department partially disagrees with this finding.

The Department of Health Services will review this issue in coordination with Central HR to take actions to address issues that may affect the work environment, culture, and employee morale.

F21. The Department of Health Services has failed to execute on their commitment to a communication plan between the executive team and their employees.

Response: The Human Resources Department partially disagrees with this finding.

The Department of Health Services ("DHS") is accountable to the previous commitment to improved communication with their employees. It is not within Central HR's role to manage operations at DHS.

The Department of Health Services Director and management team have implemented a multi-tiered communications plan to improve department communication. The implementation of the plan will be evaluated by the Department of Health Services.

RECOMMENDATIONS: R8, R15

R8. By December 31, 2022, the Board of Supervisors consult with the County Human Resources Department to consider establishing an Ombudsperson for County employees to provide a neutral means to voice issues of concern. (F9, F13, F14, F15, F18, F19, F20, F21)

R8 requires further analysis. More specifically, there is merit to the recommendation that there is a neutral position for County employees to voice issues of concern; however, it is unlikely that an Ombudsman position is the reasonable and appropriate solution.

There is a broad spectrum of what may constitute an "employee concern". The County of Sonoma, as an employer, must be aware of and take appropriate actions to mitigate running afoul of the myriad of State and Federal laws, and the County's personnel rules and requirements. There are also existing mechanisms for employees to express concerns such as: union representatives who may advocate for employees; a Whistleblower program; appeals and

grievances; workplace safety programs; and the County Equal Employment Officer and an anti-discrimination, anti-harassment policy and procedures to name a few. Many of these areas are specialized areas of law and procedure that must be handled appropriately by experienced and trained individuals.

However, there are areas that do not cleanly fit into the existing legal or formal programs as a means to discuss an employee concern such as interpersonal conflicts or disrespectful behaviors.

The above examples must be handled thoughtfully and often with a multi-faceted and collaborative approach. A position who intakes an “employee concern” must have the right knowledge to take appropriate action. Human Resources professionals and Central HR is the best location and source for a position such as this. However, Central HR is not appropriately staffed to develop a more formal program area for areas of concern that do not fit squarely into the County’s anti-discrimination/harassment policy and procedures and other supportive services.

R15. By March 1, 2023, the Board of Supervisors direct the County Administrator’s Office and the County Human Resources Department to review the effectiveness of having departmental human resources units versus one centralized human resources department. (F13, F14, F15, F16, F17, F18)

Recommendation 15 requires further analysis.

If the Board of Supervisors and CAO are interested in evaluating the effectiveness of a centralized human resources department, Human Resources recommends a consultant be hired for the evaluation.