

PERSONNEL DEPARTMENT

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION

The Civil Grand Jury selected the Personnel Department for investigation because of related issues encountered during the investigation of several other departments in the county government.

PROCEDURE FOLLOWED

The Grand Jury interviewed the Director of Personnel Lori Walsh and the county administrative officer (CAO) David Brennan. Also interviewed were several department heads and other managers. The Grand Jury studied personnel records, management correspondence and the county personnel code.

FINDINGS

1. The Personnel Department was created in 1991 by a resolution of the Board of Supervisors. Before that time it was a part of the County Administrator's Office.
2. The county has a Personnel Code created by a series of resolutions of the Board of Supervisors.
3. The Director of Personnel is empowered by Personnel Code Section 3.1(c), to direct the enforcement of personnel policies established by the Board of Supervisors. Section 3.1(e) empowers the director of personnel to require that all department heads keep records and use procedures in accordance with the dictates of the Personnel Department.
4. In at least two instances found by the Grand Jury, the director of personnel acted in a support role in matters affecting employees, rather than directing the outcome. In both instances, the director met with the department heads and the CAO to find solutions to the problems. A memo from the director to the CAO concerning one of the two issues did not state the position of the director on the issue and contained inaccurate statistics on the hiring practices of the division in question that tended to show a lack of gender discrimination when the actual statistics may have shown the opposite. The Personnel Department has since corrected the mistake in documents turned over to the Grand Jury, but the CAO had not been informed of the change.
5. Some county managers see the role of the director of personnel as important only in the hiring of new employees and gender bias issues. All other management-employee problems are typically considered internal matters by the department managers.
6. The Personnel Code mandates the director of personnel establish recruiting procedures and techniques that would secure qualified employees. Many job announcements are released with insufficient minimum standards for the positions announced. Many standards are couched in "nice to have" language rather than being mandatory requirements.

7. The list of current job descriptions in the county government runs to several hundred. Many of these descriptions are not adequate for the positions they describe, and some are so old they do not place the particular job in the correct department.

8. The Personnel Code mandates that personnel files be set up to document each employee's employment history. Most files accessed by the Grand Jury contained nothing more than annual performance evaluations and attendant step increases or promotions. The files contained almost no training documentation, letters of commendation or other data. The Personnel Department has the authority under the Personnel Code Section 15, to set standards for performance evaluations and to have access to the evaluations. Employees are rated annually by their supervisors and the evaluations are reviewed by the department head, the employee and the director of personnel. All annual evaluations are kept in official personnel files by the Personnel Department. The employees can receive a rating of "unacceptable," "improvement needed," "satisfactory," "very satisfactory" or "outstanding." Out of over 200 performance evaluations examined by the Grand Jury, all but one employee were evaluated either "outstanding" or "very satisfactory."

9. Because of inordinate turnover in the Information Systems Division of the county government, the Personnel Department developed a special exit interview survey form that was mailed to those who left county employment. The form was designed to identify employment related problems. The results of the exit interviews revealed concerns regarding poor management and lack of response to employee problems.

10. The director of personnel has a staff of four. The ratio of personnel staff to total county work force in Nevada County is one to 183, the lowest of any similar California county studied by the Grand Jury, indicating that the staff should be increased. The average ratio in the other eight counties studied was one to 141. To meet the average ratio of the total counties studied, Nevada County would have to increase its staff by two employees.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The Personnel Department has broad power in the Personnel Code to direct how employees are hired, treated on the job and terminated.

2. The director of personnel is not adequately fulfilling her role in personnel matters by not utilizing the authority given her by the Personnel Code.

3. There is a lack of understanding, or refusal to accept by department managers, the mandate of authority given by the Board of Supervisors to the director of personnel.

4. The job announcements being used are not adequate for ensuring that those selected will be the best qualified. Job descriptions as written are not up to date or adequate.

5. Documentation of job related activities is not routinely entered into official personnel files as implied by the personnel code. Annual evaluations are not being monitored or investigated adequately by the personnel department.

6. The director of personnel is genuinely concerned about the welfare of the county's employees, but does not have sufficient staff to perform her duties as mandated by the Personnel Code.
7. Resignations of employees with expertise and experience have resulted from the poor management practices and lack of response to employee concerns as expressed in exit interviews. Additional costs to the taxpayers are the inevitable result.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Grand Jury recommends that the director of personnel take the lead in matters pertaining to personnel issues, and that all department heads and other management personnel be instructed by the CAO that the director of personnel has the authority to enforce the Personnel Code.
2. The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors supply the Personnel Department with necessary staffing.
3. The Grand Jury recommends that all job descriptions be updated and job announcements define the minimum standards required for the position. All job description updates should be signed and dated by the director of personnel. The director of personnel should seek expertise in creating job descriptions as needed.
4. The Grand Jury recommends that the Personnel Department take a more active role in securing employee information for personnel files, including notifying the various managers that many current employee evaluations are not realistic.
5. The Grand Jury recommends that the director of personnel continue the laudable efforts to improve the quality of the county work force as indicated by the recent surveys on why county employees quit their jobs. The Grand Jury further recommends that the director enlarge the scope of effort to include personnel matters, as described in this report, for current employees.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Director of Personnel
Due August 30, 1998

County Administrative Officer
Due August 30, 1998

Board of Supervisors
Due September 30, 1998