

Leaders' Alert

*A newsletter for Executives, Managers, and Management Officials
of the Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services*

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ELR CORNER

Protecting Employee Medical Information from Disclosure

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Believe it or not, employees are human. As humans, employees may have medical conditions which could affect the employee's ability to perform the duties of the employee's position. Because of this the Agency may come into possession of an employee's medical information. Various privacy laws such as the Privacy Act, the ADAAA, and the Rehabilitation Act require federal employers to treat all medical information as confidential, kept separate from personnel files, locked up, and seen only by those who have an official reason to see it. Failure to protect an employee's confidential medical information can serve as the basis for disciplinary action.

Employee medical information includes medical information obtained from a disability related inquiry (i.e. reasonable accommodation request) or medical examination. It also includes medical information voluntarily provided by the employee and employee sick leave information. While this information may be necessary to administer the work of the agency, it retains its confidential status. Medical information provided in support of sick leave requests should be maintained separately from time and attendance records.

Unauthorized disclosure of medical information violates the employee's right to privacy. Informing customers or other employees that another employee is having surgery, went home on sick leave, or that an employee is on sick leave or has used sick leave are examples of unauthorized disclosures of medical information.

However, there are some disclosures that are appropriate. Allowable disclosures can be made to supervisors who need to know about work restrictions and necessary accommodations, to first aid/safety personnel if a medical condition might require emergency treatment or special procedures, to government officials investigating compliance with the Rehabilitation Act

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Protecting Employee Medical (continued)

or the ADA, to workers' compensation offices, and to insurance carriers for coverage purposes. If an employee openly and publicly discusses his/her medical information in front of other employees, employees may discuss among themselves but not to others. If an employee applies for the voluntary leave transfer program and chooses to publicly disclose medical information for that purpose, employees may discuss among themselves but not to others.

Anytime medical information is discussed there is always the risk of accidental disclosure. The best practice is not to discuss another employee's medical information. Sometimes the question of an employee's medical condition may come up in conversation. Here are some examples with suggested responses:

"Where is employee?" Response: "Employee is on leave today. How can I help you?" Do not say that employee is on sick leave.

"How is employee doing following surgery?" Response: "I don't know." or "I haven't heard." or

"You can ask employee." "What else can I do for you?"

Tactfully avoid answering the question and then quickly move on to another topic.

This article is simply a reminder that an employee's medical information is private and confidential and should be kept that way.

Workforce and Succession Planning Website

Joice Trout, Human Resources Specialist
Human Resources Information Systems Branch

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) defines Workforce Planning as:

The systematic process for identifying and addressing the gaps between the workforce of today and the human capital needs of tomorrow.

Effective workforce planning enables an organization to:

- Align workforce requirements directly to the agency's strategic and annual business plans
- Develop a comprehensive picture of where gaps exist between competencies the workforce currently possesses and future competency requirements
- Identify and implement gap reduction strategies
- Make decisions about how best to structure the organization and deploy the workforce
- Identify and overcome internal and external barriers to accomplishing strategic workforce goals.

OPM identifies 5 steps in successful workforce planning:

1. Setting a Strategic Direction
2. Analyzing your Workforce, Identifying skill gaps and Conducting workforce analysis
3. Developing an Action Plan
4. Implementing the Action Plan
5. Continuously Monitoring, Evaluating and Revising



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Workforce and Succession Planning Website (continued)

To assist FFAS managers with conducting successful Workforce and Succession Planning, Human Resources have developed a Workforce and Succession Planning website. Workforce planning is not a onetime event, but a continuous effort to ensure that the competencies are being developed over time. Leadership must know and understand their current workforce needs in order to make valuable and educated decisions for future workforce decisions.

The new [Workforce and Succession planning website](#) captures *Quarterly Workforce Snapshots (overall current workforce, grade, age, gender, length of service, veterans and length of service)* at the Deputy Administrator level. Information is also available for a variety of existing web tools you can use to obtain your workforce information. These web tools include the *Executive Information System (EIS)*, and the *NFC Reporting Center*.

The Human Resources Information Systems Branch (HRISB) will be updating the Snapshots on a Quarterly basis. In addition, as new Workforce and Succession Planning information becomes available we will add it to the website for your reference, so book mark the website to stay updated.

If there is additional or different information you need assistance with in your Workforce and Succession Planning efforts please do not hesitate to contact Joice Trout, HR Specialist at joice.trout@kcc.usda.gov.

Supervisors Ensuring Workplace Safety by Identifying Victims of Domestic Violence

Irene Seastrum, Coordinator
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Supervisors can play a key role in ensuring employee safety in the workplace by being knowledgeable of various definitions of what constitutes “domestic violence” and signs of victimization. Here are some examples of how domestic violence is defined:

“Domestic violence is a pattern of behavior in which one intimate partner uses physical violence, coercion, threats, intimidation, isolation, and emotional, sexual, or economic abuse to control the other partner in a relationship. Stalking or other harassing behavior is often an integral part of domestic violence” (FBI, 2001).

“Domestic violence, sometimes called battering, relationship abuse, or intimate partner violence, is a pattern of behavior used to establish power and control over another person through fear and intimidation, often including the threat or use of violence. Domestic violence is a crime that can include physical abuse, emotional abuse, economic abuse, and sexual abuse” (Safe Horizon, 2007).

“Domestic violence may include not only the intimate partner relationships of spousal, live-in partners and dating relationships, also familial, elder and child abuse may be present in a violent home. Abuse generally falls into one or more of the following categories: physical battering, sexual assault and emotional or psychological abuse, and generally escalates over a period of time” (National Coalition against Domestic Violence, 2005).



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Supervisors Ensuring Workplace Safety (continued)

Domestic violence typically escalates in frequency and intensity over time. For example, an abuser may first begin to harass an employee via email and/or telephone calls, and then escalate to making threats to come to the workplace. The next step may be for the harasser to actually come to the workplace to harass, threaten or attack the employee.

It's important for supervisors to watch out for signs of victimization. They include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Injuries such as black eyes, bruises, and/or broken bones, especially if the employee tries to conceal them or volunteers unconvincing explanations for how they occurred;
- Uncharacteristic lateness or absenteeism, exhibiting poor concentration, an increase in work errors, and inconsistent quality in work products;
- Requests for special accommodation, such as leaving early or time off to attend court;
- Exhibiting signs of emotional distress such as a withdrawn or depressed demeanor, crying, expressing suicidal thoughts, and appearing to deliberately stay away from others;
- Receiving an unusual number of phone calls, faxes, or emails from a current or former partner;
- Exhibiting a reluctance to respond to phone messages or converse on the phone with the caller;
- Making abrupt changes of address or employee appearing reluctant to divulge where he or she is staying.

Over the years, there have been many instances in FFAS in which employees have informed supervisors that they are victims of domestic violence. In a number of these cases, the FFAS WVP&R Program Coordinator has assisted supervisors/managers in taking appropriate measures to increase the employee's safety in the workplace. An example of these measures includes, but is not limited to, management barring an employee's abusive partner or spouse from the workplace. Additionally, the Coordinator has acted as a bridge to facilitate employees getting in touch with the National Domestic Violence (NDV) Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233), and TDD at 1-800-787-3224. The Hotline has assisted employees in developing a plan that increases their safety and that of their family and co-workers. In some instances this has included obtaining temporary shelter away from their abusers.

For more information regarding assistance the FFAS WVP&R Program can provide in cases involving workplace victims of domestic abuse, call 202-401-0641. Finally, keep in mind that victims of domestic abuse - even if they are not ready to leave their abuser -- can benefit greatly from contacting the NDV Hotline to learn about assistance available to them, should they finally decide to leave their abuser.

Communicating Change

Brian Marincic, Human Resources Specialist
Leadership and Employee Development Branch

As the Farm and Foreign Agricultural Service continues to face a number of changes related to budget, onboarding, and employee performance, it is invaluable for leaders to effectively communicate change to their teams. Change can be intimidating at any professional level since it implies that a given employee must trade his or her comfort zones for a whole new why, what, when, where, and how. Listed below are some pointers that Leaders should consider when communicating change to their teams.

Ten Manager Tips for Communicating Change

1. **Only communicate to your team what you have been authorized to do so.** This is critical so that communications are consistent across the organization and because of the sensitive nature of some changes. Closely review and follow any communication guidance provided by your company.
2. **Communicate the business rationale for the change** and the events leading up to it. Clarify the vision and specific change plans.
3. **Explain the benefits of the change** to the broader organization *and* the individuals on your team.
4. **Update your team regularly on the progress of the change.** Communicate any alterations to the change plan and how it will affect you and your team.
5. **Specify how your team members' jobs will be different** before, during, and after the change.
6. **Acknowledge the negatives of the change.** While they can be difficult to discuss, the downsides will be apparent to your team and you may lose credibility if you don't acknowledge them.
7. **Provide as much detail as possible to minimize rumors and the anxiety of your team.** However, remember to only communicate information authorized by your organization.
8. **Acknowledge when you don't have the answers** to questions posed by your team, and escalate those questions to your own manager or designated contacts. ***Do not guess*** or answer questions you do not have permission to address.
9. **Provide opportunities for private face-to-face dialogue.** While initial announcements will likely be delivered by your company using less personal methods, your team will be anxious about the affects of the change and have many questions.
10. **Emphasize that the change *will* happen.** A common response to change is denial, particularly if your employees consider it unfavorable. When communicating with your team about the change, emphasize that the change will indeed happen.

Taking this detailed approach will serve useful to FFAS Leaders since these tips speak to any given scenario when communicating change. Additionally, these tips promote open and continuous dialogue between Leaders and their teams which ultimately enhances mission effectiveness at the end of the day.



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Hiring Reform, Hiring Cycle

Ranay Brady, Customer Service Advocate
Operations

One of the Hiring Reform objectives outlined by President Obama focused on improving the quality and speed of the hiring process. OPM originally defined the hiring model as the End-to End (E2E) Hiring Initiative. The [hiring model](#) measures the hiring process from the date a hiring manager initiates a SF-52, Request for Personnel Action to fill a vacancy to the date in which the employee reports for duty. The model suggests that the hire should be accomplished within 80 calendar days.

Since the beginning of FY-11, HRD has been reporting Time to Hire metrics. The average number of calendar days for FSA is as follows:



HRD has made significant strides working collaboratively with hiring managers to identify barriers and take needed steps to streamline and improve the hiring process. Some of the strategies include:

- Implementation of an automated Position Description Library. The library provides managers and HR professionals the capability to search and locate standard position descriptions and also build new positions.
- Implementation of a [Hiring Reform](#) website. The website supports attaining the manager's engagement and provides many tools to facilitate the hiring process.
- Distribution of vacancy reports at the Deputy Administrator level to reflect current hiring activity in progress.
- Increased communication focused on the 80 day model across all management levels.
- Decreased open period for announcements and reduction in the time for managers to act upon certificates.
- Standardized templates for vacancy announcements. This serves to reduce the preparation time for announcements and ensures consistency in maintaining no more than 5 pages per announcement.
- Standardized job analysis and assessment tools for many of the mission critical occupations. The job analysis process includes subject matter experts and focus groups to develop well defined, measureable assessment tools that provide a talented, well qualified applicant pool from which management may select.

Hiring Reform (continued)

HRD recognizes the contributions made by hiring managers through advanced planning, effective use of technology and continuous communication to facilitate the reduction in the time to hire. Your efforts are valued and appreciated. We look forward to continued success that provides hiring managers with the desired talent to accomplish their mission effectively.

HRD is committed to continuous improvement and the development of meaningful changes internally and externally to improve the hiring process, improve communication, outreach and diversity, hire top talent and raise the bar on candidate quality.

Leaders' Link

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Leadership Quote of the Day

“A leader is one who sees more than others see, who sees farther than others see, and who sees before others see.”

- *Leroy Eimes*



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