

Human Resources Program

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The Municipal Assistance Center (MAC) is pleased to announce the launch of a new Human Resources Program, whose mission is to “serve and strengthen Vermont local governments by delivering quality HR services in an innovative and cost-conscious manner.”

The impetus to create an HR assistance program for VLCT members occurred during the summer of 2014 when the former Unemployment Insurance Trust (now merged with the Health Trust to form the VLCT Employment Resource and Benefits Trust, or VERB) funded an HR needs assessment. That in-depth research project, undertaken by MAC, encompassed several steps:

- interviews with a sample of 25 small, medium, and large VLCT members;
- review of the wide array of HR services and approaches of ten other state leagues and municipal insurance pools;
- cataloging the HR-related services VLCT already provides;
- analyzing loss control issues and PACIF liability claims related to employment; and
- reviewing HR-related inquiries fielded by MAC attorneys and staff.

Vermont’s municipal human resources needs proved to be broad for many reasons. The field of HR is becoming ever more complex at a time when municipal budget pressures are intense and time and resources increasingly scarce. Most VLCT members do not have a dedicated HR professional, yet they must comply with many –sometimes confusing – employment laws. Federal and state laws intersect with one another in complex ways and there are additional legal requirements unique to local government. Turnover among elected officials, including some who supervise or are responsible for the overall HR management of their towns, fosters an ongoing need for training. Personnel policies, job descriptions, and performance review systems may be outdated, inconsistent, or nonexistent.

The average cost of one PACIF employment practices liability claim hovers around \$100,000 and such claims can and do run higher. Sometimes there is a related unemployment insurance claim or workers’ compensation claim that could have been prevented with improved hiring methods or other HR best practices. Clearly, members would benefit from assistance and resources that target Vermont municipalities.

A report of the research findings and a five-year business plan proposal were presented to the three boards, which then appointed a subcommittee comprising two representatives from each:

- VERB: Todd Odit, Jericho Town Administrator, and Joe Colangelo, Shelburne Town Manager;
- PACIF: Mel Adams, Randolph Town Manager, and Pete Johnson, North Hero Town Clerk;
- VLCT: Sue Janssen, Benson Selectperson, and Sandy Pinsonault, Dorset Town Clerk.

This subcommittee developed the mission statement, program content, and a shared funding strategy. Based on that work, all three boards approved initiating the HR program. The subcommittee will continue to meet periodically in order to guide priorities and evaluate results.

As the first task of the program launch, MAC hired Jill Muhr on October 7. Jill brings a background of more than 20 years of human resources experience, including ten overseeing the League's internal HR function and, more recently, leadership roles at Goddard College and HRSentry. Additionally, during the past ten months, Jill has assisted Abby Friedman, MAC Director, with tasks such as coordinating executive searches and the municipal compensation and benefits surveys.

A top priority of the new program will be to update MAC's Municipal Employment Law Handbook and Model Personnel Policy and create other templates and resources that are accessible to members online. Additionally, an HR audit program will be developed to help members assess their strengths and vulnerabilities and to help the League create the most effective types of assistance and targeted methods of delivery.

Pressing HR topics will also be addressed on a timely basis. For instance, the U.S. Department of Labor recently proposed Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) rule changes which could double the current salary threshold to be met in order for positions to be considered exempt from overtime requirements. The HR Program will help members understand the new rules and the implications of such changes as they arise. Stay tuned for further developments and announcements on VLCT's website and in future issues of the *VLCT News*. For more information, contact the Municipal Assistance Center at info@vlct.org or 800-649-7915.

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