

Brattleboro Knows to Call the League for Help

When Peter Elwell started work as Brattleboro Town Manager, he knew that the staff of 140 year-round employees did not include a human resources (HR) professional and that these skills would need to be supplied for the time being by existing staff. Also, having been a town manager in other states, he knew where to call for the help he would need: the state's municipal league! He was pleasantly surprised to learn what VLCT offers for HR support. "The services are so abundant – and relevant," Peter says. "We've used a lot of them and made real progress. Brattleboro is a very happy customer of VLCT and PACIF."

On a daily basis, Brattleboro continues to perform most personnel functions in individual departments, with the Town Manager's office overseeing HR in general and getting involved when necessary. To help them in this, Peter and Assistant Town Manager Patrick Moreland often pose questions to VLCT's Human Resources Consultant Jill Muhr. By phone and email, they receive useful information on a variety of topics – Paid Sick Leave law, the U.S. Family and Medical Leave Act, and more – that they would otherwise not have the time and perspective to research and decipher.

As Peter puts it, "I think we have done a decent job of handling difficult issues effectively, being fair to everybody involved and complying with all the rules, but the approach has always been to respond to situations as they arise – being reactive, rather than proactive. I know that HR best practices involve creating and reinforcing a healthy workplace." To help his management team get a better grounding in proactive HR, he had Jill lead a training she calls Employment Law 101. "It was excellent. Jill was well prepared, not just with general content but also the specific local needs that she and I had discussed earlier. She also had her antenna up and responded to people's thoughts and questions in the room that day. She made it a really valuable session." In fact, they had Jill return to train all supervisors, and that was great, too.

Brattleboro also appreciates PACIF's Employment Practices Liability (EPL) Referral program. Through it, they can obtain free legal advice on their most complicated HR situations. "If you call PACIF at the *first* need, you can get good guidance *on the front end*," Peter says. "The

guidance we receive helps us resolve most of these issues. And, if you follow the guidance but the situation doesn't go well, you get the continuity of representation." The town has used EPL referrals several times, usually without paying an extra dime. "I can't emphasize enough how valuable PACIF's EPL Referral program is."

Peter has turned to VLCT for help with two special HR projects. One was reviewing and critiquing Brattleboro's employee manual. Jill confirmed what Peter suspected. "Parts of it are out of date, and we really need to change that," he says. He and Patrick have tried but not been able to find the time to work on it. "Updating the employee manual is a vivid example of just how hard it is to make the time necessary to do HR well." The long-term answer is to add an HR professional to the town's staff. So another topic arose for Jill to research: Do comparable sized towns, with employee unions (Brattleboro has four), tend to have dedicated HR Directors? If so, what is the salary range? In considering whether to hire an HR director, the Brattleboro Selectboard found this information both compelling and practical. They have decided to add an HR director to the town's management team, and the community is very supportive of creating and funding the position.

Brattleboro is now in the final stages of the search for its HR director, yet Peter knows that the town still has plenty of room to improve how it does human resources. "This will be just one person rather than a whole HR department, so most of the actual HR work will remain decentralized in the different departments. But we look forward to more HR consistency and continued improvement throughout the organization. And even the new HR director will have plenty of reasons to call VLCT and PACIF for assistance along the way."