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CONTACT: Foreman Robert Stewart

Tel: 805/477-1600

Email: Robert.Stewart@ventura.org

Getting Hired by the County: The Grand Jury Looks at What It Takes

The Ventura County government is the second-largest employer in the county—after the US military—with more than 8,000 people working in numerous locations. County employees work as lawyers, firefighters, administrative assistants, forensic specialists, nurses, public-safety officers, groundskeepers, veterinarians, human resources personnel and just about any other profession you can name. So what does it take to get hired into this huge workforce?

The 2014-2015 Ventura County Grand Jury received a public complaint about the county's recruiting/hiring/promoting processes. Of particular interest were applicant screening, testing and interviewing procedures, which the complaint alleged could hamper selecting the best employees. Why don't hiring department's key staffers get to review applications of potential hires, instead of just human resources personnel? Why are persons who serve on a rating panel for applicants taking civil service exams told not to ask or answer *any* questions not on a preapproved list? Why can't a "subject matter expert" who helps write exam questions also serve as a rater?

The grand jury investigated by gathering information from the county's personnel rules and regulations, interviewing county personnel, studying county webpages, performing general Internet research and reading news articles.

The grand jury learned the following key facts:

- The county's 28 organizational entities have highly specialized personnel needs, from police officers to children's services experts, as well as more general needs, for example, administrative assistants.

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- A Human Resources Division consisting of more than 125 staff members provides services from a central location or from satellite units within agencies located elsewhere. They have wide-ranging responsibilities. Hiring and promotion alone involve at least 15 strictly defined and consistent steps; among them are assigning job classifications and salary ranges, recruiting and screening applications, overseeing interviews and doing background checks.
- Personnel rules and regulations adopted by the county's Board of Supervisors govern every aspect of recruiting, hiring and promoting county employees. Many of these rules aim to make sure that personnel processes are fair and candidates compete on an even playing field. The county regularly updates its Equal Employment Opportunity plan, which includes activities to recruit applicants from among diverse cultural groups and women.
- Nationwide, the number of Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) filings alleging employment discrimination averages about 90,000 yearly and is trending upward.
- The Human Resources Division works to enhance its operations through setting goals, identifying tactics, using a respected process-improvement methodology (Lean Six Sigma) and sharing best practices.

The grand jury found that:

- The Human Resources Division is well organized to carry out its complex and demanding recruiting and hiring functions.
- The county's tightly structured recruiting/hiring/promoting process is intended to avoid the fact and appearance of bias and preclude legal actions based on charges of discrimination. The process sometimes results in by-passing well-qualified candidates.
- The Human Resources Division has applied continuous process-improvement methods to some steps of recruiting and hiring with impressive success.

The grand jury's final report makes two main recommendations to the Board of Supervisors:

- Direct the Human Resources Division to review the current restrictive recruiting/hiring procedures with the aim of discovering other fair and legally tenable applicant-filtering techniques.
- Direct the Human Resources Division to expand its use of Lean Six Sigma methodology to analyze additional parts of the recruiting/hiring/promoting process.

The complete report may be accessed at www.ventura.org/grand-jury; click on the Annual Reports tab and consult "Fiscal Year 2014-2015."