

DHS explores options for merit-based hiring

Over the last few months, the Department of Human Services (DHS) has begun exploring options to eliminate gaps, find problem areas, and address challenges in recruitment, performance, and retention.

DHS employs more than 900 individuals to fill approximately 70 roles, and approximately 98% of these positions – which include case workers, care managers and administrative staff – are filled through the state’s civil service process, a merit based system of employment that requires applicants to complete an examination to test job related knowledge, skills and abilities.

“We’ve found that the civil service process can be somewhat confining as the tests are offered based on the civil service cycle and not based on our unique needs. More importantly, we’ve found that a standardized test is not necessarily reflective of our agency’s current demands,” said Randolph Brockington, deputy director in the Office of Administrative and Information Management Services (AIMS). “We felt it was time to examine ways that we could make the process more efficient and effective.”

While the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services requires that county DHS workers go through a merit-based system to apply for open positions, counties can create their own systems that may or may not include standardized testing. In June 2016, DHS began exploring options for merit-based hiring by appointing representatives from each program office to form a steering committee designed to review the civil service process and brainstorm ideas for recruiting and retaining staff members. These 20 committee members have been examining what would be needed for DHS to operate under its own merit-based system, focusing on the areas of information technology (IT), training, competency/behavior-based interviewing, alternative dispute resolution and performance management.

“Moving to our own merit-based system will require many moving parts. We want to make sure that we are exploring this from all angles – initial and ongoing costs, obligations, as well as accountability,” said Randolph.

“This process is in the exploratory phase; nothing is set in stone and none of this will affect anyone’s job stability,” said Jamie Regan, administrator in the Bureau of Human Resources. “Ultimately, our goal is to find ways to improve recruitment and retention – whether it is to make modifications to the current system or move forward with something new. Regardless of if we decide to pursue our own merit-based system or not, the formation of these subcommittees has proved extremely valuable. The work that has been done in these groups will bring continuous performance improvement to the Department.”

A list of merit-based steering committee members has been posted to the [DHS intranet](#), which is accessible to staff members while on the DHS network. To learn more about the efforts around merit-based hiring, please contact one of the committee representatives.