

2022 NASCOE Midwest Area Rally Minutes **Friday, March 18 - Saturday, March 19, 2022**

Welcome

The 2022 Midwest Area Rally(MWA) convened on Friday, March 18, 2022, in person at the Tundra Lodge in Green Bay, WI. The business meeting was called to order at 8:30am. Opening ceremonies were conducted with a Presentation of the Color Guard, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance by all members present, the National Anthem, sung by Shelby Niskanen and an Invocation. WASCOE President, Shelby Niskanen then gave a warm welcome on behalf of WASCOE and thanked all those in attendance. Additionally, introductions were made for the Midwest Area Executive, Kayla Mattson (MN) and the Midwest Area Alternate Executive, Amy Mormon (OH).

Roll call of delegates

Kayla conducted roll call of the state delegates to establish and conduct any necessary business actions on behalf of the midwest area during the meeting. Present at the meeting were:

Illinois - Travis Eisele and Charlene Neukomm

Indiana - Jared Thomas and Katrina Miller

Iowa - Ron Pethoud and _____

Michigan - Jamie Wegner and Debbie Butchart

Minnesota - Kayla Mattson and _____

Missouri - Drew Walters and _____

Ohio - Annette Perky and Amy Mormon

Wisconsin - Lori Edquist and Shelly Daugs

PAC Presentation

Ron Pethoud, the MWA Legislative Chair, gave a brief presentation and promotion of the NASCOE PAC - our special interest group. He reiterated how very important it is to have NASCOE members contributing to the PAC. He also outlined a competition going on to gain and also increase PAC contributions and the possible rewards to gain if members choose to participate.

NASCOE Updates

Joining the MWA Rally virtually was NASCOE President, Marcinda Kester and in person was Joel Foster. They gave updates as to what FSA employees have accomplished over the last two years as well as what NASCOE leadership have been busy with. Comments were given regarding COVID vaccination and testing requirements. At the moment, there was no plan for testing, even though a GovExec article stated as much. The national office has also ceased working on reasonable accommodation requests for the time being. The White House has and will continue to give the COVID guidance. Currently, if employees want to upload their vaccination cards, we are still able to do so. There has been no discussion on booster vaccinations.

As for telework and return to work decisions, the policy is leaving the decisions at the local level - even though we are still under maximum telework authority. If no circumstances are different for any particular office, then maximum telework is still viable.

There have been 36 SED's appointed throughout the country.

Negotiations between NASCOE and Washington DC leadership took place a few weeks ago. Marcinda reiterated that even if we don't see immediate action on negotiation items, it is still good that we are able to have these discussions with the administration.

Discussions also included re-doing COT classifications and currently also in the process of re-doing 27-PM. Very lengthy discussions as well about PT classifications. It was brought forth by the National office that the recent telework policy was rolled out as a recruitment and retention tool and that the policy is the beginning stages and policy can change.

Several questions and some brief discussion around those questions took place. Questions asked included if Marcinda/NASCOE was planning to do monthly video updates, if NASCOE was planning to put together something for employee retention and if NASCOE had been made aware of any updates or discussions on the next Farm Bill.

As suggested by Joel and Marcinda, if anyone has an interest in being on a task force, please let their STO/NASCOE leadership know.

Wisconsin SED - Gene Schriefer

The membership was joined by Wisconsin SED Gene Schriefer for an update from WI STO and leadership. Currently, WI has approximately 12% turnover rate of employees. He stated that was not sustainable in WI or in any state. He questions what the differences and expectations of employees are at this time. He suggested four items he considers to be substantial at this time regarding employee retention: 1) workplace flexibility - we are all amazed at what we were able to get done remotely, BUT our office doors were locked during that time, 2) what is rewarding for employees?, 3) wage competition is at an all-time high - state administrations are pushing OPM to do a wage equity study, and 4) why farmers are getting program notifications before the agency employees.

Discussion with National Office leadership via Teams

Our day continued with a Teams meeting with National office leadership which included Scott Marlow - Deputy Administrator for Farm Programs, Zach Duchenaux - FSA Administrator, Steve Peterson - FSA Associate Administrator, Marcus Graham - Deputy Administrator for Field Operations, as well as others. Several National office folks were able jump in and out of the meeting as there were available.

They sympathized with members regarding workload and exhaustion. They went on to state that we will see additional disaster programs coming - two programs and two rounds. No estimated timeline was announced for the program implementation. Along this vein, it was stated by a

member that we are happy to have programs and happy to have our jobs, but we are tired; we want to do a really good job - for our producers and our co-workers. Could we possibly get information on programs prior to producers getting that information and good software to go with it?

The national office understands that people are stressed out on both sides of the desk; the fatigue level is noticed for both employees and producers. FSA employees have done extraordinary work and managed amazingly in a radically changing work environment. FSA needs to acknowledge that the need for the programs we are standing up is extraordinary. National leadership will do their best to help suit County office needs. It was encouraged to continue dialogue between County office and National office.

A member pointed out that on a positive note, employees have noticed the improvements and software upgrades and we greatly appreciate them.

FSA Administrator, Duchenaux continued with asking how we can improve delivery of services, find flexibility and serve the producers; a goal of extending flexibilities to as many employees as we can. A couple concerns given by a member was about managing teleworking and also concerns with leasing and shared spaces, more specifically with RD. The scenario given was that there are customers coming into the office and they are not able to get ahold of an RD employee.

Additional concerns to be noted by the National office included a producer appeal that is older than 18 months out; filling vacancies in offices is much more difficult because of the environment we are working in; CRP 848's are confusing for staff and producers alike; staffing, retaining staff, and training accesses (NRCS has access to things like Rosetta Stone).

Response was given that we have temporary help and intermittent help. It was also underscored that FSA employees should be doing Receipt for Services and that data could be pulled at any time for a workload study. When Marcus spoke to the group, he said a new RFS dashboard is getting ready to go, 21-AO is revised and there will be a new ARS training in AgLearn soon.

Afternoon session

After we returned from lunch, we heard a brief set of comments from WRASCOE President Mary Behm. We also were informed to visit www.congress.gov to see a full explanation of legislative items. Jamie Garriot, Program Manager that was in attendance, gave comments on DAFP training site videos and provided a short presentation.

We then had a breakout session with a goal to generate ideas around gaining and retaining NASCOE members. We were divided into four groups and had some activities to prompt ideas and then shared them with everyone else.

Blue Cross Blue Shield gave a presentation on the topic of stress management.

We then adjourned into the evening dinner banquet and scholarship auction portion of the MWA Rally.

Dinner Banquet and Scholarship Auction

The dinner banquet was well attended and folks enjoyed company and socializing. After dinner was complete, there were two drawings as well as the raffle drawings.

The first time attendee drawing winner for \$50 was Janice Acree from Indiana.

The free night hotel stay winner was Jon Beam.

The raffle drawing winners were:

\$1,000 - Faith Daug

\$500 - Ty Larson

\$250 - Jackson Jones (he was sent a text message right away from an attendee and replied that he would donate it back to the scholarship fund)

\$100 - Steph McCarthy-Wondercheck

\$50 - Amy Mormon

\$50 - Jared Thomas

\$50 - Lisa Backus

Prior to the start of the scholarship auction, the award winners were announced, 1) Jake Bourget, 2) Maggie Schut and 3) Caleb Lokker. Both Jake and Maggie were present during the banquet and helped showcase items throughout the auction for the rest of the evening.

Saturday, March 19 Welcome Back

Joel Foster, NASCOE VP gave comments and information about the upcoming National convention in August in Savannah, Georgia.

Dillard Financial Solutions, a NASCOE partner and major sponsor of the WASCOE Convention and MWA Rally, gave a very informative presentation and answered questions from members.

Following Dillard's presentation we heard additional updates from Joel, as well as, NASCOE position candidacy announcement intentions.

Kayla proceeded with a MWA update and stated that if any of the MWA States would like herself or Amy on a meeting, to set it up with them and they'd be glad to speak with any boards and members.

We moved into committee chair reports and respective State President's reports. After hearing all the reports, Charlene moved to accept all the reports as read and Shelby seconded. The delegates present passed the motion. The committee reports and President's reports will be sent to Kayla by the respective member to place on file.

Final Updates and Closing Remarks

In closing, there was an item brought to the floor regarding the NASCOE travel policy. Discussion had ensued recently about the NASCOE stipend reimbursement policy for delegates to the National Convention and the like. The question really was, is NASCOE adequately and fairly compensating the State Associations appropriately for travel to the National Convention.

After clarification of current policy and then discussion of suggestions that have been made, there were several comments from the floor. These comments included a question - have they [NASCOE] looked at actual expenses of the travel versus the research or current policy engaged. Another question was if a suggestion of percentage of State membership used as a basis for reimbursement percentage was actually being fair. An additional question was if it mattered where the delegate(s) live. It was pointed out that State associations should not be making money on any travel reimbursements. Also suggested was a flat rate reimbursement stipend. If there are ideas or concerns that need to be addressed for the travel policy, members should send them to Kayla.

Further comments added were that it seemed simple before and simplicity will be the way to go. It was asked what was previously spent and budgeted for travel reimbursements and if it was feasible to continue that long term. Clarifying point made was that pro-rating the travel by percentage of State membership means that states are already required to be at least 50% to be affiliated with NASCOE and then NASCOE would reduce reimbursement by the prorated percentage on travel. Because of that reasoning, it was suggested that the membership percentage contingency be excluded - NASCOE wants those delegates and members to attend. The monies reimbursed for 2021 was >\$18,000, 2019 was >\$29,000, 2018 was \$27,976 and 2017 was \$18,126. A final point made during that discussion was that the amount spent depends on various factors.

Discussion on the travel reimbursement dwindle down to a close. Janice moved to adjourn the MWA Rally and Travis seconded. Motion passed.

Respectfully submitted,
Shelly Daugs - MWA Rally delegate and designated meeting recorder