

The WASCOE Officers met with the State Committee (STC) on February 27, 2023, as the first of our quarterly meetings with the STC. STC members present on the teleconference were Gene Schriefer, SED, Joe Koch from Wilson, Tina Hinchley from Cambridge, Heidi Randall from Cambria, and Clara Hedrich from Chilton. Unable to join the call was STC member Josh Tranel from Hazel Green, Committee Chair due to prior commitments.

The STC and SED were genuine in their responses to our questions, showing interest in our concerns, questions, and the well-being of CO employees. They asked questions and were concerned about training needs and employee retention – What can the Agency do to hire and retain employees? Clara Hedrich complimented the WI CO and STO staff for their perseverance and dedication in doing our jobs.

The responses to WASCOE member's concerns are below.

1. Add another District Director

We had five districts in the past and then it decreased to 4 districts. With the new shared management that was recently implemented, I believe that increasing the number of District Directors would benefit from this new change and benefit the existing offices.

The DD's are not able to visit as many offices as they used to or be involved in helping the management of offices with all the job openings either. With the new CED's that we have and newer employees all around the state this additional oversight would benefit everyone, they help develop and maintain stakeholder relationships with customers and other agencies. I've searched through 27-pm, 7 CFR, and Google searches and am not able to find a position description to reference.

Response: COC's and CED's are managed through 27-PM. There is a separate and equivalent handbook for GS employees and DDs would be in that category and governed by that handbook. There is also an OPO section for DD workload. Although it would be ideal to add another DD back into the WI management of FSA, shared management was a higher priority.

2. Bring the State Office personnel back into the office

All CO employees and FL employees are back in the office, so we don't understand why the STO employees are not? Every call has disruptions with Teams when other employees in the STO do not know who is on the call or not, when there is a question from a CO, it can take more than a day or two if at all to get a response. There has been turnover in the STO, so there are a lot of new employees in the STO along with the CO new employees. How can you effectively train someone over a Zoom call or even collaborate with each other effectively. Most of the people that I have talked to in our CO cannot understand why the STO employees are still working offsite. Employees looking "upstream" to get direction for their day-to-day items and not getting it, affects what they send "downstream" to the producers.

Response: The national policy is that supervisors are eligible to telework up to 2 days per week and non-supervisor up to 4 days per week. The difference between STO and COF is that STO personnel are not public facing. They do handle some public calls but generally do not have a lot of regular interaction with the public sector of customers. They can answer phone calls and emails while teleworking. The generally scheduled day in office for STO employees is Wednesday and that way

they can collaborate and meet face to face. Telework is a benefit that came from COVID that many employees are seeking. There will likely not be any change at this point, but with any future incoming administration, the telework policy could change.

3. Shared management

WASCOE would like to understand the standards used to establish the proposed shared management changes. For instance, were office workload numbers used as a consideration on the development of the proposed changes? Will these criteria and standards be used in future evaluation of any proposed changes to share management scenarios in the next administration? How were these standards communicated to the offices involved? Will these same standards be used to determine if an office becomes a stand-alone office again?

Response: The goals in revising the shared management were to equalize workload, get more time for CED's to manage and train staff, and spend less wasted hours of drive time between offices. It was stated CED's are spending 25% of their time in travel status. They also considered burnout of CED's because of factors such as having to manage multiple COC's and staff. Optimally Productive Office (OPO) numbers were used for at least part of this workload balancing. OPO was used when comparing Wisconsin to other similar states like Illinois in terms of workload, employee and manager numbers and ratios. It was stated when shared management began to be implemented, it was fairly new and as time progressed, we were able to see the successes and failures of shared management. Based on these results and feedback, shared management is being tweaked to make improvements and which will provide better service to county offices as CED's will spend less time in travel status and have more time to manage their offices and focus on areas such as training as many offices have new employees.

4. County Executive Director in Training

A new class of CEDT's has been opened. What criteria will be used to determine when the CEDT is trained and ready to go to work? How will the new CED's be transitioned into the County Offices? Who will be the trainers and who will mentor these individuals?

Response: The job announcement has closed and the STO is currently screening applications. No interviews have been requested or set yet. Curt Norgard and Deb Schut will be trainers and have had success in training CED's in the past. DAFO has a list of topics that CED's should be trained in. DD, Tyler Radke, is the CEDT coordinator for the CEDT program and is mentoring the group. It was stated Tyler interviewed 10 previous employees who went through the COT/CEDT program to get feedback on their experiences during their CEDT training. He was interested in finding out what each person thought was beneficial and valuable and what wasn't helpful in their development. The goal is to develop a curriculum and experience that will develop successful CED's. Some thoughts are to have short assignments across the state but there is a challenge in asking CEDT's and CED's (during hiring) to move or relocate are still factors in developing the training program. Management would like to involve the COC's somehow in helping to decide who to bring into the training. There are limitations to this in policy and may present a challenge. The time frame to have a graduating class is about 12 months. There is a thought to train this class as a group.

The following two questions were brought up to the State Committee together as they address different aspects of training needs for Program Technicians and County Executive Directors. The response for both of these questions is located below question 6.

5. Training and continuing training

With the influx of new employees, a district trainer, or someone that has experience in most of the programs, should be sent to offices with new employees for a few days and then be “assigned” to the new employee as a mentor for their first 90 days, kind of like the STO personnel in the past were assigned to new employees. I’ve been in an office and district with a lot of turn over and the number one reason is lack of training. We expect our CED to help in the training. It is hard for CED’s when they transition between two offices and are not there all the time. We are losing the ability to retain good employees in the process due to their frustration, lack of training and their lack of “knowledge” when interacting with producers and co-workers. Employees hear “read the handbook” and take that as people not wanting to train them or help them. New employees don’t understand that the handbook is the place to learn and understand policy and procedure for 100% of FSA, including personnel information. Employees who have had a couple cycles of crop reporting know office procedures and help train the new staff. It gets harder for office staff to administer programs, train staff, work with the producers and not get anxious.

6. Counter skills training

The Agency has many new employees. In the past we have had counter skills training. This was good training in that we were reminded of how to interact with employees and with our producers. Will counter skills training be added to HR training? How about a chapter or two of conflict management? When the supervisors go to supervisor training there ought to be conflict management training. Many of our offices suffered in the last couple of years due to conflict in the office. It is part of human nature to disagree. Supervisors need to get ahead of it, and it would help all staff learn a process to deal with conflict.

Response: The SED understands that there has been a lack of training in the last three years. He acknowledged that was primarily due to the COVID pandemic and the challenges with the protocols we had to follow. He informed us that State Office Specialists are developing training agendas and will be getting to our DTM’s and leading training in their programs over the upcoming months.

The State Committee members were very interested in training needs for us. They sincerely asked if we felt employees were getting the training we need. They also understand the value of employee retention. One STC member stated she runs a business and told us that it is more cost-effective to retain an employee than to have employee turnover. We discussed ideas such as utilizing program mentors to help provide basic program training. This would allow new employees to learn from someone directly and gain a better and quicker understanding of their programs than by just reading handbooks. Some mentors are more centrally located within their district, which would make it feasible for the mentor to travel to the new employee’s office and work and train with them in their own office.

We brought up that County Executive Director’s last attended management training in 2018. Shared management has evolved in the last 10 years and new opportunities such as teleworking have become a reality. Management training is needed which allows CED’s to understand and be able to address and integrate these factors into their office plan with the staffing levels they currently have so employees can feel valued and equally participate in these opportunities.

7. Availability of State Committee regular agenda minutes

The availability of staff to have access to the STC regular agenda minutes. I've inquired with STO staff about it (approximately 4 months ago) and was told that they print out a copy and it's available to STO visitors. Obviously, we're not going to actually go visit the STO to look at those. I asked if it would be possible to put them on the STO shared drive so all employees would be able to see the regular minutes and have a better idea of things that are being discussed at the STC meetings. I was told they'd investigate it but have never heard anything back. I fully understand that we can't (and why we can't) have access to executive minutes, but I'm not understanding why access to regular minutes would be an issue. Available minutes would help to provide more transparency between STO/STC and FSA staff.

Response: The STO is currently busy with onboarding new staff. The STC minutes haven't been posted timely. The minutes will be provided when the new administrative assistant is hired.

8. How is the State Committee dealing with the USDA Equity commission as it considers restructuring or doing away with the County Committee system?

Response: The SED has some concerns with offices in the state telling producers to view farmers.gov versus employees really trying to help producers with various program information or sign up. He is also aware that language barriers are an issue in some areas of the state. Again, where more training would be beneficial. Minnesota is finding success in reaching out to underserved producers. Wisconsin may learn from them in the area of outreach and serving new customers. The Equity Commission is not really looking at all the same things across the country. Doing away with the COC's is an advisory or recommended action, but the current administration is not going there.

Other notes that may not have been part of any question:

Shelby: NASCOE drafting a joint letter with the DD Association to DAFO about changing the grade at the discretion of the CED.

Gene: OPM is the jurisdiction of the grades, not FSA, FPAC, or USDA. It is a long-term challenge to get this adjusted. Control what we can and what we can't, work through the system to try to help everyone with more dollars. We can reach out to our legislators during the Farm Bill process and explain that there is not enough financial incentive for new employees to come on board or stay on board.