



Elections

Department of Executive Services

June 17, 2005

Elections Director responds to staff survey

After seven months of scrutiny, dozens of public records request, three elections, and an election contest, King County Elections' employees took the opportunity to tell their side of the story in a survey conducted by the Independent Task Force on Elections and released today. The task force asked staff to complete an anonymous and confidential survey last month answering a wide range of questions about the election office.

"The results of the employee survey highlight significant areas of concern," said Dean Logan director of Records Elections and Licensing Division.

"The survey results make it clear there is a lot of work that needs to be done. We are taking immediate action in each of these areas and we will track progress through updated surveys and employee work sessions. There is a very narrow window of opportunity to take the feedback and recommendations and turn them into tangible improvement for this year's election cycle. We are committed to doing just that."

"We have taken some steps already to address issues raised in the survey," Logan said. "For example, this week I reassigned Bill Huennekens, Superintendent of Elections, to a project manager position and launched an aggressive recruitment for a new Superintendent of Elections with a management background and proven success in the administration of a complex, highly scrutinized, public sector organization. More changes are in the works."

The survey provides an additional base for setting priorities and facilitating positive change. Of the 36 full-time employees, 34 participated and had several encouraging points to make:

- 91 percent of the elections workforce surveyed said they felt personally responsible for maintaining proper standards of conduct and compliance with elections laws;
- 88 percent thought their coworkers were committed to complying with Elections standards, policies and laws;
- 79 percent would feel comfortable reporting election violations to a supervisor or management;
- 57 percent thought they can freely raise questions about problems in meeting those standards;

- 68 percent rated their working relations with their coworkers as good to excellent; half the employees rate the level of confidence they have in their immediate supervisor as high or very high;
- 56 percent rated their confidence level of the Elections Director as either high or very high – with 79 percent rating his technical expertise in election laws and rules as high or very high;

Employees were clear in citing the improvements that need to be made:

- 58 percent rated their training as fair or poor;
- 61 percent believed they are overworked;
- 59 percent rated Elections written procedures and manuals as poor or non-existent;
- 61 percent rated the office space as only fair or poor;
- 74 percent rated the overall communications within Elections as poor;
- Morale is at a low 82 percent and 73 percent rated their own job satisfaction as fair or poor.
- About half the workers were embarrassed to be an employee of the Elections office.

“My staff is as embarrassed as I am about the problems and mistakes made last year,” said Logan. “They are also committed to transparency and excellence despite hundreds of headlines that suggest otherwise. The reality is these employees endure a pressure-cooker environment as many as eight months of the year.”

A majority of employees (59 percent) felt pressured by supervisors/managers to produce results in order to meet media deadlines. Answers were nearly split in regards to whether political election observers make it more difficult for elections workers to do their job well: 39 percent said no to 42 percent said yes. When asked if it was more important to meet deadlines versus comply with elections rules, staffers were about split: 42 percent said they agreed with 49 percent disagreeing.

“To me,” said Logan, “Our employees – most of whom have been with us for more than five years – deserve the right to be heard. They are asking for more training, rewritten and updated training manuals, a better, more consolidated space to work, and more and improved communications.”

“Unfortunately, election days, up to six a year, don’t wait for new training manuals, changes in state laws and regulations, court decisions or statewide standardization. Our improvements have to take place while we get the absentee ballots mailed for the next election. That said, there is no excuse for this year’s past performance,” said Logan.

Actions being taken to address issues highlighted in the survey:

Leadership:

- Appointed seasoned, experienced Assistant Director with 25 years public service experience at state, county and municipal levels, former Kitsap County Auditor, small business owner.
- Reassigned Bill Huennekens, Superintendent of Elections, to a project manager position and launched an aggressive recruitment for a new Superintendent of Elections with a management background and proven success in the administration of a complex, highly scrutinized, public sector organization.
- Initiated a comprehensive, independent personnel investigation of mail ballot operations associated with the November 2004 General Election and subsequent special elections in 2005; when finalized, appropriate administrative actions to be taken.
- Issued customized performance improvement plans to managerial and supervisory staff of the Elections Division.
- Secured two quality assurance positions and initiated recruitments to develop production standards, performance measures and quality control protocols throughout the section – including ballot accountability, voter registration processing, and reconciliation of votes cast to voters' credited with voting.
- Conducted a thorough analysis of organizational structure in order to better match employees' skills and position requirements.
- Established a model compliance program for provisions of Section 203 (minority language) of the Federal Voting Rights Act.

Training:

- Hosted two weeks of comprehensive, hands-on training and retraining of the new election management and voter registration system (DIMS), taking full advantage of the time period between the 2005 special election season and the start of the fall election.
Training emphasis has focused on deficient areas identified during the administration of the 2004 elections.
- Requested additional FTE authority to establish a full time Training Coordinator and Staff Recruiter for the Elections Section – body of work to include establishing baseline performance measures and productivity standards.
- Hiring of project staff to review, revise and document procedures and policies is in process.

- Contracted with system vendors for the Election Management/Voter Registration System and the Vote Tabulation System to provide on-site support and intensive off-site training for new Information Technology positions established to ensure technical support within the Elections Section.
- Established policy requiring election board worker (poll worker) training prior to all elections – including Inspector – specific training for primaries and general elections.
- Provided two weeks customized desktop computer application training.
- Additional steps under development include establishing an employee training committee to identify further training needs and to provide an evaluation of the effectiveness of training provided. In addition, initiated a Brown Bag Lunch program for more informal training opportunities – such as skills development, morale building, and communications.

Communications:

- Established a comprehensive public engagement and voter education program that focused first on voter education and input regarding the September 2004 primary and then focused on encouraging voter registration and educating voters on how to cast a ballot.
- Entered into a professional services contract for a series of comprehensive focus groups to identify and document public concerns, impressions and observations regarding King County Elections and the 2004 gubernatorial contest – contract to include facilitated round table sessions with employees, poll workers, election observers and a stakeholder survey. Contractors will present findings to employees at informal, interactive sessions in July.
- Introduced the “one and a half call” policy to encourage cross-work group communication on issues to allow for proactive vs. reactive response to issues wherever and whenever possible.
- Scheduled recurring all-hands staff meetings within the Elections Division.
- Initiating “Success Saturday” program – a once a month, four hour planning, team building session with key staff through the end of the year.

Additional steps to be taken include the following:

- To initiate meetings with individual staff members – debrief on election contest process, opportunity for one-on-one discussions about the work environment and future improvement efforts;

- Weekly email “Hot Topics” providing up-to-date information that can be disseminated to all staff;
- Capture “action items” and designate a “point person” for all staff, management and planning meetings to ensure efficient follow-up and reporting; and
- Publish and distribute summary notes from all management meetings.

On Wednesday, June 15, Logan sent the following letter to elections employees:

Team Elections –

Later this week, the results of the voluntary employee survey conducted by the Independent Task Force on King County Elections – along with the Task Force staff findings, will be released to you. I believe this is scheduled to occur on Friday via email. Additionally, the Task Force will be releasing the survey results and findings to local media who have made disclosure requests.

Because I will be out of town when the survey results are distributed, the Task Force staff met with me this afternoon and reviewed the results and findings with me. The results of the survey are significant and the findings/analyses very candid and direct. Frankly, the survey reflects the instability in our organization and highlights some clear deficiencies in leadership, communication, training, and morale. While I may not agree with all of the conclusions drawn in the analysis, the survey clearly demonstrates what I think, in many respects we all know -- we have much work to do.

I want each of you to know that I take the results of this survey and the analysis of the data very seriously. I appreciate the honest responses and candid comments. Part of being effective in addressing the real needs here in Elections is first acknowledging today’s realities – and they are harsh. The survey provides a good base for setting priorities and facilitating change. It also provides a way to measure our progress as we move forward.

When you receive the results, I encourage you to spend some time thinking about what they tell you individually about our operations and work culture and what role you play in it. When I return from vacation, I will be dedicating time to get out and discuss the results with you – individually and in groups – and to incorporating improvement initiatives into our 2005 fall elections planning process.

Clearly, we face obstacles in moving forward as a cohesive, healthy and functional work unit. We’ve endured a lot and face more ahead, but I remain committed and I hope you do as well. Let’s work together to use the survey results and analysis to take our organization to a new level.

Best regards,

-- Dean

Dean Logan, Director

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