



Winnebago County

The Wave of the Future

DATE: August 24, 2022

TO: Personnel and Finance

FROM: Doug Gieryn, Public Health Director

RE: Extending Project Employees past two-year limit

Background:

During the COVID-19 pandemic the Winnebago County Health Department (WCHD) found a need to hire temporary staff to assist with the response. Roles included: contact tracing, disease and outbreak management, communications, data analytics, planning for testing and vaccination efforts, administration of vaccines and much more.

The longevity of the pandemic resulted in the continual utilization of these staff and warranted their conversion from temporary staff to project employee status after 26th weeks. As the HR handbook indicates, project employees 'may be used for a maximum of two years.' That provision is in place to assure that if a department is truly in need of an employee for that long, the employee should be reclassified as a regular employee.

However, the pandemic posed a challenge to that provision as no one imagined it would last longer than two years. As such, a request to extend project employees past the requisite two-year limit was made (April 2022) for a limited number of project employees whose end date was approaching. This request was approved with a deadline of December 30, 2022.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 continues to be an issue especially with our most vulnerable populations, namely those residing in long term care settings such as nursing homes, daycares, etc. WCHD is managing outbreaks in those settings with the assistance of project employees. Furthermore, WCHD continues to provide multiple access points for vaccines and this effort requires the work of project employees to staff and coordinate the vaccine clinics during both the work week and weekends. In addition, WCHD is planning for a surge in vaccine seekers as news of a new bivalent COVID-19 vaccine will soon be available. Finally, in addition to COVID-19 response efforts, some project employees are assisting with the monkeypox outbreak as well as other tasks.

Project employees not only allow for WCHD to respond promptly to these situations but also allow our permanent employees to transition back to their routine work, much of it was put on hold due to the pandemic.

WCHD has funding from various sources to continue to support COVID-19 response and the extension of project employees past their two -year limit (and an extension past 12/30/22) will not result in any budgetary issues. Funding for COVID-19 currently has a deadline of October 2024. Currently there are four project employees whose contract will have to end on 12/20/2022 unless an extension is granted. These project employees provide invaluable work in the pandemic response and their departure, if an



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extension is not granted, would result in permanent staff returning to work on pandemic response and additional duties for many regular staff in leadership to continue to provide both COVID and non-COVID related services to our clients.

WCHD has supported project employees to interview for permanent positions within the county and some have successfully found a position. WCHD hired one of the nurses that initially was a project employee with the COVID-19 response team when WCHD had an opening for a nurse. Others have interviewed with other departments.

Currently WCHD employs 10 project employees, four of which will not be able to continue to work with WCHD if an extension is not granted past 12/30/2022. The other six project employees' contracts have 2023 or 2024 contract end dates.

Policy Discussion:

The Winnebago County Human Resources Handbook lists the different types of employees and their definitions.

Under Human Resources Policy 3.03, Project employees may only be employed as such for a maximum of two years. An extended COVID-19 pandemic response is putting some well-seasoned and valued staff at risk of termination. These staff are funded with grant dollars for the pandemic response.

3.03 Employee Types

Employee types are governed by the following definitions:

Full-Time Regular – A Full-time Regular Employee is one assigned to a position on the County Table of Organization and who is ordinarily scheduled to work at least 37.5 hours per week on average.

Part-Time Regular – A Part-time Regular Employee is one assigned to a position on the County Table of Organization and who is ordinarily scheduled to work less than 37.5 hours per week on average, or to whom is assigned a base schedule averaging less than 37.5 hours per week.

Regular Project – A Regular Project Employee is a full-time or part-time employee hired for a particular project, or to fill a vacancy expected to last more than six months, or in other special circumstances where it is desirable to add staff for a particular temporary need without adding a permanent position to the table of organization. A Regular Project Employee may only be used upon a showing that the department has sufficient available funding, and is considered a regular employee for benefit purposes. A Regular Project Employee for a particular project or need may be used for a maximum of two years, and when a Regular Project Employee has been used for two years another may not be used for the same project or purpose without adding the position to the table of organization.

Temporary/Seasonal – A Temporary or Seasonal Employee is one hired for a particular project, purpose or season, which will not include work during more than 26 weeks in any calendar year. A temporary or seasonal employee who works during 26 weeks during a calendar year will be removed from the payroll at the end of the 26th week, and will not become a regular employee unless hired for a regular position.



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Casual – Casual Employees work on an incidental or on-call basis when needed, with no expectation of regular hours of work.

Client/Restitution -- A Client or Restitution Employee is one hired through a program administered by a County department or for the purpose of providing restitution, and are governed by the rules pertaining to the sponsored program.

The alternatives to not suspending the two-year limit for project employees are:

- Discontinue employment and recruit new staff. WCHD would lose experience, capacity and incur costs of recruitment and training of new staff. Dismissive of the commitment to serve our community in crisis.
- Hire on as regular employees. This would require a table of organization change and funding is not secure to support the positions once grant funding is no longer available.

Requested Action:

To approve the extension of current project employees working for WCHD past their two-year limit (as well as past the previous extension granted before which is to expire on 12/30/2022). This extension will not remain past October 2024 which is when grant dollars are set to expire.

Committee Action:

The Board of Health took up this resolution on August 19, 2022 and voted 7-0 in favor of suspending the project employee limit of two years for the pandemic response with an end date of October 2024.