

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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Staff exodus pinches counties

By Peter Felsenfeld
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A wave of retirements sweeping through California counties has administrators statewide scrambling to replace highly experienced top managers.

The departures involve a concentration of employees who entered the public-sector work force en masse during rapid government expansion in the early 1970s.

Those workers are now in their mid- to late 50s and often occupy leadership positions. Many have accumulated enough years of service to take advantage of enhanced pension benefits that allow public employees to retire at ever-younger ages.

Add everything together and the results aren't hard to predict, said Steve Keil, a legislative coordinator for the California State Association of Counties.

"We've seen this bubble of retirements coming for a long time," Keil said. "The question becomes whether steps have been taken to get ready."

The demographic trend has hit the East Bay. Contra Costa County over the past 10 months has experienced an unprecedented exodus, with 14 department heads and program chiefs having left since March 2004.

The majority of them retired; the retirees' average age was 59.

Some left for higher-paying jobs. One, former Community Services Department director Tony Colon, resigned as failings at county Head Start centers emerged.

Alameda County has lost four department heads over the past two years. But administrators there expect many more departures and have set up a special program to train replacements, said County Administrator Susan Muranishi.

"This has become a priority issue, and it's important to stay ahead of the curve," she said.

Workers leaving

Contra Costa's newly departed high-level workers make up less than 3 percent of the county's department heads and top program administrators.

But they take with them 263 years of institutional knowledge.

"It's been horrible to have all that experience leave," said County Administrator John Sweeten.

The turnover has stripped the county of budget expertise during a tough fiscal interlude and shaken up the labor relations team in advance of critical contract negotiations.

Other departments that lost top officials include animal services, probation, the auditor-controller's office, mental health services, debt management and the county health plan.

The county has never confronted such a large batch of retirements, said Supervisor Mark DeSaulnier of Concord. However, he said, departments are finding replacements.

"There hasn't been any noticeable disruption of services that I'm aware of."

Leaders have handled the vacancies by recruiting from the outside, promoting county employees and re-structuring some departments.

Getting ready

The cluster of Contra Costa retirements didn't come as a surprise. Soon after becoming county administrator in 2001, Sweeten said, he asked for a report showing the age of department heads and their top assistants.

It showed that many top staffers were approaching retirement age and had enough years of service to make leaving an attractive option, he said. However, the county's budget problems took precedence over succession and retention issues, he said.

"It's something we need to address," Sweeten said. "We need to find a way to get people to stick around, though it's hard with our fiscal constraints."

Worried about a looming brain drain, Alameda County leaders last year kicked off an initiative to facilitate smooth succession, Muranishi said.

The leaders identified qualities that make effective leaders, Muranishi said, such as a commitment to excellence and the ability to work effectively with diverse groups.

Departments are now devising a leadership development program for employees that exhibit these traits, Muranishi said. The county will use the qualities as criteria for new hires.

"Everybody's worried about the aging work force," Muranishi said. "We're trying to take our preparation to the next level."

The benefits factor

Contra Costa leaders have not made retaining aging workers easy. County supervisors in 2002 approved a multi-union deal that gave many workers an incentive to retire at age 55 rather than 58 1/2. Moreover, the deal increased public safety pensions by as much as 50 percent starting at age 50.

Alameda County supervisors have not enhanced retirement benefits for more than 30 years, said Human Resources director Denise Eaton-May.

Upon announcing his retirement last year, former Contra Costa Auditor Controller Ken Corcoran said the new package played a role in his decision. Former Animal Services director Mike Ross, 56, called the benefit a minor factor.

"I've been with the county 34 years," he said last week. "There were other things I wanted to do with my life."

Government employers that plan well should have little trouble finding qualified managers one step down the totem pole, said Steven B. Frates, a senior fellow at the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College.

"Losing experience doesn't have to be a big problem," he said. "But it's hard to get around the hit of paying the increased pension costs."

The intense turnover period for Contra Costa leaders has begun. The Mental Health Services Department is reeling from two recent key departures.

The county filled one position from within and folded the other into another health division, said director Donna Wigand.

"It was sad for us to lose individuals with decades of experience," she said. "But that's the cycle of life."

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