Research on Equity and Accommodations for Employees with Disabilities

Background

Recent Countywide Employee Surveys (2015 and 2017) revealed troubling results for employees with disabilities, including lower overall satisfaction, feeling negatively viewed by coworkers, and feeling less likely to advance. Based on these results, the Office of Diversity and Equity (ODE), the Evaluation and Research Unit (ERU), and the IDEA Employee Resource Group partnered on an in-depth qualitative analysis of the experiences of employees with disabilities, with particular attention to the accommodation process.

Fifty-four county employees participated in interviews, focus groups, or an anonymous questionnaire, describing the range of experiences people with disabilities have at the county. Half of participants reported having multiple types of disabilities, both visible and non-visible, with 70% having only non-visible disabilities, and 22% having both non-visible and visible disabilities. This executive summary summarizes the primary findings and recommendations of Research on Equity and Accommodations for Employees with Disabilities.

Need for Organizational Change and Culture Shift

Findings

Participants expressed fear of stigma and stress related to work environment, policies, and procedures.

> " [I am] exhausted/tired/fatigued all the time because of the amount of effort involved in working with a disability everyday. "

Recommendations

In partnership with IDEA ERG and other stakeholders:

- Use Universal Design in all county practices and policies as part of a larger strategy that also addresses stigma and structural and systemic barriers.
- Consistently communicate about and provide opportunities for input in decision making processes.
- Develop and implement mandatory training about disabilities, power, privilege, equity, and inclusion.
- Design and implement a broad communication plan about disabilities and best practices for the accommodation process.
- Ensure that county trainings and events allow all attendees to fully participate.

Impact of Leadership, Co-workers, and Other Staff

Findings

Leadership (especially Managers and HR) set the tone for work environment.

> " I trust my manager. She is very supportive and helpful. Other managers in the past have not been kind or helpful.

Recommendations

- Ensure that leaders consistently demonstrate Core Competencies of Promoting Equity, Leadership, Relationship Building, and Communication.
- Encourage managers to promote employees' well-being.
- Leadership should be held responsible for compliance with ADA accommodations and policies that affect a safe and respectful workplace.

Co-workers affect work environment:

- There are supportive and unsupportive co-workers.
- Co-workers can cause harm or exacerbate some disabilities.

- Ensure that all employees consistently demonstrate Core Competencies of Promoting Equity, Leadership, Relationship Building, and Communication.
- Strengthen relationships between co-workers and other staff.
- Encourage and support participation in IDEA ERG.
- Managers should be held responsible for addressing co-workers' behavior that causes harm or exacerbates employees' disabilities.

# Requesting & Implementing Accommodations

Findings

There is lack of clarity and knowledge about the accommodation process.

The accommodation process is not followed consistently across the county; including how departments, HR, and managers approve and implement accommodations.

The accommodation process is too difficult.

Recommendations

- Remove barriers and streamline the county's formal ADA accommodation process and ensure that it is consistently followed.
- Create a core group of ADA Specialists.
- Create a list to track accommodations and resources.
- Strengthen communication and awareness about:
  - How to request and where to find information about accommodations — this information should be up-to-date; easily and universally accessible on county websites; and managers should review information at onboarding for new hires and annually for all employees.
  - Confidentiality.
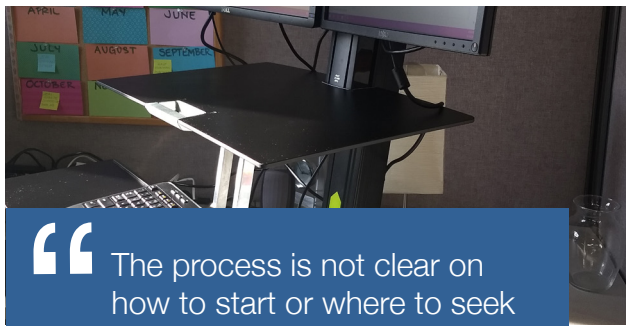
Recommendations (continued)

- Strengthen communication and awareness about:
  - The status of requests and plans for partnering with employees for on-going support and follow-up about accommodations.
  - Events and/or changes that may impact employees (e.g., painting, moving).

Some cases are more complex.	• Create and implement effective practices for complex cases.
Confusion about the difference between ADA and FMLA/OFLA; concerns about county FMLA/OFLA policies.	• Work with IDEA and others to better understand how county FMLA/OFLA policies may adversely impact employees with disabilities.
Some employees use "informal arrangements" when they cannot or choose not to use the formal ADA accommodation process.	• Remove institutional barriers to the formal accommodation process, while still encouraging managers to help employees get the support they need.
Physical/work space can be challenging. Adaptive technology and equipment is essential. There are issues with some services (e.g., ASL interpreters). Flexible work schedules are desirable.	• Create a centralized repository and inventory of equipment, software, and other materials and resources. • Ensure that equipment, technology, and software work properly. • Update and ensure ADA compliance of county buildings, services and events, materials, and resources. In particular, remove accessibility barriers to trainings. • Ensure quality and certification of contracted service providers meet users' needs. • Encourage flexibility of both work place and work schedule.

There are issues related to funding and budget.	• Funding or budget issues should not be a barrier to providing accommodations:
	  - Conduct needs assessment.
	  - Consider budget options.
	  - Require accommodations plan and budget for county events and trainings.

Multnomah County