

Q & A

Admin Department: Amanda De Jong, SED, Bob Wegand, AO; Tammy Zanoni, Admin Specialist; Pat Swanson, STC; Laura Cunningham, STC

Q: Changes in employee's PWP's due to FPAC. Can we get background on why updates were made and clarification on some of the additions, specifically under the "Supervision" element for CED's?

A: Language was added to support FPAC. Midyear face-to-face discussions are now mandated nationally, as well as quarterly.

Q: Iowa is currently 50+ F.T.E.'s under ceiling and falling. What is the plan to address the major holes appearing across the state? This is taking a toll on morale and leading to unhealthy stress issues in the offices affected; something needs to be done.

A: The SED's were notified of additional hiring phases coming. We are sympathetic for the field's staffing issues; Amanda and Bob are being proactive on this. DD's have given input for hot spots in the field, where employees are most needed. The workload tool for the state is being utilized as well; but, this is not used as a strict guideline. For example, if there is an office where there is only one employee, then this office will hire before another office due to safety and leave issues. In the short-term, TO's may be used. We have been slower to bring them on now to be sure they are on board during acreage certification.

Q: When we are authorized to hire, will Iowa fast-track, such as being able to test out of the COT training program?

A: This is a viable option to look into.

Q: 8-BU was recently issued "FSA Budget Process". Can you review Paragraph 18B—"Fund Expenditure Principles and Techniques" and how it is going to affect Iowa moving forward? Also, Paragraph 62D – "Flexing SY"—Is Iowa able to flex ceiling numbers from Federal to CO since CO is more understaffed at this time?

A: Bob feels that Iowa is already complying with Par. 18B. Options are sent to Amanda for budget efficiencies; analysis is used to identify the right hires in the right places; essential travel is identified. Maybe some deadlines can be alleviated. So, this is not new to Iowa; it's just a new handbook. In regards to Flexing SY, we want to flex as we can. We have a job to do, and both CO and GS should help each other as needed.

Q: Could we bring back S&W manufacturing for folder orders? It seems ridiculous to spend half my budget on folders. When I go to place this order in EZ print, it is going to cost \$428.10 out of my \$852.00 supply budget. S&W would have been \$310.70, allowing me an additional \$117.40 in spending.

A: We can only buy from approved vendors. S&W didn't get approved. We are checking with the National Office to see what we can do to get them approved.

Q: Are any updates coming to WebT&A? We still have frustration with the readability of the time sheet. Is it possible for the software to highlight the whole row when clicking in a cell, so users can easily see if they're reporting time under the correct program and activity?

A: Software developers are devoting time and resources at this time to addressing problems vs. making T&A more easy to read.

Q: There was a recent article in Government Executive about workforce cuts that agencies can expect due to FY 2019 budget request. It reported that the Department of Agriculture could expect to see a reduction of 8.8% from 2018-2019. How would this affect FSA?

A: Budget requests are just that. Congress decides what it thinks is appropriate. We would be affected at some level; but, it's hard to speculate.

Q: With the reduced work force, when will we see a simplification of the rules and regulations? We continue to have fewer employees and increasingly more specific and complex rules.

A: The Secretary is committed to efficiency, but we must maintain integrity. We are challenged to find regulations and processes where we can simplify things. DC wants to hear from the employees. Employees are encouraged to submit suggestions. Amanda challenges all of us to think about possibilities and submit them to her, FPAC, and/or the Federal Register. We have a sympathetic Secretary right now.

Q: Is there a way to streamline the way program guidance is delivered to the county offices? It's difficult to keep track of important updates when information is issued in so many different forms (emails, daily updates, memos, DD minutes, etc.) It would be very beneficial if we could find all the information in one place. Along with that, is it possible to send all memos out once per day, instead of all day long? It would be great to have a specific time each day that we could look for important updates. This would help ensure time to sit down and read the information, and make sure we don't miss any updates for the day.

A: We will take a look at how we put information out, aiming for more consistency and accuracy. We can improve in this area. We also want to ensure the information is readable. We are also trying to set up internal guidelines for issuing information.

Q: Dress code. Can the STO spell out what the exact dress code is for county offices, for example, items such as T-shirts, school T-shirts, USDA logo shirts sold through IASCOE specifically? If we are to be one with NRCS, then why can they wear T-shirts, jeans, hoodies and hats, and we can't?

A: We are a professional service organization. We are not NRCS. The October DD Summary addressed dress code, and the March DD Summary does as well. We will also issue a memo and post the information to SharePoint to ensure that the information is not missed. We need to look the part. When a farmer visits his banker, he expects to see him/her dressed professionally. It is a sign of respect for our customers.

Q: Are phone headsets something that could be added to a budget in the future? Think workplace ergonomics 😊

A: If an employee , needs a headset, then a doctor's note, written on letterhead will be used for eligibility to purchase that employee one. We don't have the budget to purchase 600 headsets, especially when some will be used and others won't be used.