

2010 KASCOE Second Quarter Meeting with SED

On June 8, 2010 the KASCOE Officers met with the Kansas FSA State Executive Director, Adrian Polansky and other State Office Staff. Employee organization representatives from KASCOE, KACS, KASE and AFGE attended. Notes were taken by KASCOE.

STO Topics for Discussion- June 2010

The following are STO comments/updates as provided by the SED and his staff.

New Activity Reporting System (ARS)

State office staff noted the importance of the new activity recording system. All employees are encouraged to accurately document their activities. More details will come later on how the agency will use this data.

Personnel Changes

The STO reviewed all personnel changes between April 29, 2010 and June 3, 2010. Recent COTs that were hired all came from within the agency. Some training times will be shortened due to agency experience. It was noted that one of the COT's selected was a PT from Dickinson County. The Dickinson County vacancy will not be backfilled and the slot will be moved to Morton County where a third PT will be added to the COF. At this time there is one other COF in the state that still has two PTs that is in need of adding a third staff member. That office will need to wait until another vacancy occurs in an overstaffed office and some shifting can be made.

NASE, NADD & NACS Joint Meeting

Adrian will be attending the NASE, NADD and NACS joint meeting in Portland Oregon this summer.

Infants in the Workplace Update

The Kansas Infants in the Workplace proposal is currently being reviewed by WDC.

Work Schedule Report

The SED updated the group on work schedules. The Flexi-place work schedule has been very beneficial for STO staff. The STO will continue to utilize this schedule unless negative impacts are realized.

EC Messages

In 2009 698 EC Messages were issued by the STO.

SharePoint

Information can be posted at all times throughout the course of the day. National news is typically posted in the evenings before Kim Schmidt, the STO LRA leaves work. Benefits of SharePoint include: data management, data consolidation and the ability to search by topic. COF's have the opportunity to receive e-mails letting them know which items have been posted in a 24 hour period. This allows them to only check SharePoint once a day.

Leasing

An overview of the current leasing process was presented by Patty Hageman.

MIDAS Positions

Kansas did have some interest in the MIDAS positions that recently opened up in WDC, however no one from KS was selected.

Re-Hiring Annuants (Retired Employees)

One person has been hired under the authority to re-hire retirees. The STO encourages county offices to let their District Directors know if they have some interest in this provision.

Staffing/Budget

At present the Kansas CO ceiling is 451. Recently five COTs were hired- of those five three are non-ceiling positions granted by WDC and two are covered under the Kansas ceiling numbers. In addition to the five that were just hired there are two existing COT's on board that are non-ceiling positions that were granted by WDC. Kansas has been authorized 45 temp slots and at present 30 temps have been hired through the end of the FY.

This year the CO budget is over and the GS budget is under what is needed for 2010 funding. On the CO side KS will likely have an extra \$200,000 and the GS side will be short \$120,000. CO and GS funding is largely used to pay employee salaries and benefits. The difference in funding originated from an accounting error made by WDC. It is unknown at this time if WDC will correct this error. This excess FY 2010 CO money is being spent on COF equipment requests (\$50,000), retirement training and GSA vehicles. The decision to fund GSA vehicles with CO money was made this year since the GS funding was short. Funding GSA vehicles with CO funds instead of GS funds will save \$85,000 this FY. It was noted that GS vehicles are used by DD's to travel to COF's, therefore it made sense to apply CO funding for GS vehicles. [\(KASCOE did not ask and was not told if funding GSA vehicles with strictly GS funds will continue in future years\)](#) The STO has also decided not to fill empty GS positions at this time to save money.

KS FSA Cost of Providing Service to the Public

To deliver programs to agricultural producers it cost 7 cents for every dollar of benefits paid out. This seems to be a good figure.

LincPass Update

There are will be three LincPass activation sites located in Kansas later this summer. The sites will be located at Sheridan, Butler and Riley/Geary Counties. Employees can go to these sites and get their cards activated or a new password. There is no date on when all offices will get card readers that utilize the LincPass. Westy Westenmeyer is the STO contact for LincPasses.

Performance Awards

Pay period 12 is when performance awards will show up in the recipient's bank accounts. These awards are for the Superior or Outstanding performance during the period starting in October of 2008 and ending September 30, 2009. The breakdown of awards is as follows: CO: 188 Superior, 54 Outstanding; GS: 49 Superior and 44 Outstanding.

Partnership Council – Federal Register has been issued with an Executive Order to establish a Partnership Council that is in the pre-decisional state to gather and share information. This will be the first step towards implementation to improve government services. At present the KS employee organization quarterly meetings are very similar to this proposal.

KASCOE Topics for Discussion- June 2010

The items listed below were submitted by KASCOE officers for discussion at the meeting with the STO. These discussion items were submitted by KASCOE members and reviewed by the KASCOE board of directors prior to submission. Comments and responses from administration officials are in blue.

Question #1

In the past, employees have been able to access work e-mail from a personal computer at home. Last year this was changed due to computer security issues. Realizing that computer security is important, can the STO see if there is any way to revisit this issue and see if there would be another method or alternate way to check e-mail at home without compromising our IT systems integrity? This would be beneficial to a large number of employees that are on leave who would like to stay current with e-mail at work.

Response: In the foreseeable future the answer is no. This change came about as a decision made in by IT staff in WDC for security reasons (FSA had no control over this). It is permissible to take a government computer home and have e-mail and SharePoint access, however you must have a laptop for this to be an option. **Note: KASCOE then asked if it would be possible to issue an employee a laptop if they were at home for an extended period of time such as sick leave, pregnancy etc. This could be helpful with keeping up on e-mail and doing some limited work from home. The STO thought this would be acceptable if managers were ok with it and a laptop was available. Laptop availability is variable.*

Question #2

Requests from COF's have been made to pass knowledge on from current PT's to new PT's that have recently been hired to the agency. This knowledge transfer could be similar to the old PASS and counter skills training. Courses similar to these provide new employees a good start in building skills, getting acquainted with agency policy and meeting other personnel.

Response: The STO was receptive to "pursuing" this idea and would be interested in getting feedback from COF's on who would get trained and how this training would be structured. The STO also highly encouraged COFs to look into re-hiring retirees to come back to work for a few months to help train new employees. This is an option that we now have that offers training flexibility that the agency has not had before. **NOTE: NASCOE suggested this item to the Secretary of Agriculture last year during a discussion on retirements. More details on this program are contained in FSA National Notice PM-2754. NASCOE encourages employees to try this program out and see how it works.*

Question #3

What is the status of the upcoming SURE software and the current interim SURE workbook? Would there be the possibility of additional SURE training at the district level? Additional training would be helpful so that employees can feel assured that they are implementing the program properly.

Response: The STO noted that the 2008 interim workbook is what we will be continuing to use. The learned that in May WDC dedicated one person full time to SURE software development, hopefully this will speed up the process for new user friendly software. In KS there will be not additional training prior to the receipt of SURE Amendment #9. Some additional training will take place, however it will not be district by district. It was also noted that there were no SURE COR findings in KS.

Question #4

We are hearing requests for re-consideration of the 4/10 work schedule in the field. What is the STO position on this issue?

Response: The SED noted that the 4/10 work schedule wasn't something that worked particularly well. The 4/10 work schedule would create problems for meetings, trainings and office coverage. It was noted that there are other options at this time that can accommodate needs of employees and the agency such as credit hours, and comp time. Compressed schedules can also help out here. At this time point no 4/10

schedule will be granted since other options are accessible and flexible to employees. The SED is open to ongoing discussions about this issue. **NOTE: KASCOE noted that there was a lot of feedback on this issue. KASCOE took approximately eight comments from members on this topic. Most responses wished for management at the local level to be able to handle the issue of the 4/10 work schedule as it pertained to their offices. Other responses were received were not in favor because it would be difficult to manage or concerns of peer pressure and stress associated with the schedule.*

Question #5

We would like to discuss SharePoint and EC Messages.

Response: A general discussion on Share Point took place at this point in the meeting. KASCOE noted that there was some SharePoint discussion on information overload and that it was difficult to read. The SED suggested that employees who have concerns with information overload should check SharePoint only once a day. The group noted that SharePoint is still fairly new and that a discussion on SharePoint would take place at the next quarterly meeting with management. **NOTE: KASCOE only received one comment on SharePoint prior to the meeting with management. The KASCOE president wants more input on SharePoint and will ask all KASCOE directors to solicit comments/constructive feedback prior to the next quarterly meeting. Kim Schmidt STO LRA said she is always looking for feedback on SharePoint.*

A detailed discussion on EC Messages also took place. KASCOE noted that there are too many directives coming from too many places. This makes it particularly difficult for employees to know which directives are valid and where to go look for directives and instructions. At present employees may find state created directives and policies in amendments, notices, e-mails, EC Messages and DD memos. KASCOE noted that according to 1-AS directives are only binding and valid if they are in the forms of handbooks/amendments and notices. KASCOE suggested that in the future directives should only be in the form of amendments and notices. KASCOE also noted that COF's could print amendments off on green paper to save the expense of printing at the STO and mailing to the COF's. KASCOE noted that EC message should still exist as they can be helpful to COF's. EC messages should only contain clarifications, guidance and comments. **NOTE: Feedback received from KASCOE members on this issue overwhelmingly mirrors the comments noted above.*

AFGE Topics for Discussion- June 2010

The items listed below were submitted by the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) officers for discussion at the meeting with the STO. AFGE is the union that represents farm loan program technicians. Comments and responses from administration officials are in blue.

Question #1

We would like an over-view on lease procedures regarding buildings are handled. Who is eligible to bid, how they are advertized etc.

Response: Patty Hageman shared items here on leasing procedures.

Question #2

We would like to discuss cell phone usage, including texting, in county offices regarding employees and customers.

Response: It was noted that some offices are having problems with employees and customers using cell phones at work. At times using cell phones for personal use in the work can create disturbances. The SED noted that cell phone usage in the COF should be addressed at the local level by managers and DD's if needed. The SED saw merit in perhaps a state wide policy regarding customer cell phone usage in the service center.

KACS Topics for Discussion- June 2010

The items listed below were submitted by the Kansas Association of Credit Specialists (KACS) officers for discussion at the meeting with the STO. Comments and responses from administration officials are in blue.

Question #1

It is our understanding that we are scheduled to have 7 group meetings in FY 2010. These group meetings generally involve a very small amount of time devoted to FLP issues and generally 1/3 of the meeting time to FLP-related items in admin, etc... The rest of the group meeting is spent on FP issues. It is my understanding based on DD's comments, that the SED wants FLP to sit in on the FP discussions at group meetings for "cross-training" purposes. Although cross training is beneficial, would it be possible that FLP could be required to attend group meetings not more than quarterly and have Bi-District Meetings once or twice per year to discuss specifically FLP issues?

Response: The SED noted that at this point FLM's will be required to attend county group meetings. FLM's need to understand all of USDA programs so that they can fully serve their customers. FLM's can have the opportunity to have mini break-out sessions at these meetings if the opportunity presents itself.

KASE Topics for Discussion- June 2010

The items listed below were submitted by the Kansas Association of Support Employees (KASE) officers for discussion at the meeting with the STO. Comments and responses from administration officials are in blue.

Question #1

What is the status of the GS salary budget? And what are the plans to fill the vacant Farm Loan PT positions?

Response: The GS budget is short this year on salary, benefits and expenses. Vacant FLP PT positions will not be filled at this time due to lack of money.

Question #2

Has STO heard anything from DAFO on "Infants in the Work Place"?

Response: No response has been received after submitting the plan to DAFO.

Question #3

What is the status of the PT mentoring program?

Response: Arlyn and Janet have been busy. Selections for the program need to be made and it is their intent to move ahead with the program.

Question #4

When will Phase II training be held for Farm Loan staff?

Response: Arlyn is still working on this issue. Hopefully he will catch up on this soon. Phase II training will also depend on when the agency receives extra money.

Question #5

Explain the criteria of why interviews are not always held for all vacancy announcements? (Recently a PT position was open in the state and the position was filled internally, the vacancy position was removed and current FSA employees who were interested in the position were not given the opportunity to apply.)

Response: These situations are rare and when they are made they are made with the best interests of both the agency and the employee.

Question #6

Has the policy regarding depositing checks (payments) in outlying offices been discussed? Are we still to be guiding the outlying service centers with the payment information for FLP payments or has the decision regarding processing the payments been given to the FLP servicing office?

Response: COF will have the choice of doing what works best in their situations. There will be no requirement requiring the depositing of checks in outlying offices.