

SPECIAL EMPHASIS PROGRAM MANAGERS



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1st Quarter Report FY 2014– October
through December

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Special Emphasis Program Managers

1ST QUARTER REPORT FY 2014– OCTOBER THROUGH DECEMBER

NATIONAL SPECIAL EMPHASIS PROGRAM MANAGERS

Sharyn Alvarez, National Federal Women’s Program Manager (NFWPM)

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Carol Crouch, National American Indian/Alaska Native Emphasis Program Manager (NAIANEPM)

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Meghan Walter, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Emphasis Program Manager (NLGBTEPM)

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RECRUITMENT

For the purpose of recruitment, all vacancy announcements are distributed throughout all the state SEPM's through the National SEPM's. These vacancy announcements are also distributed to educational institutions and various groups and organizations.

The following educational institutions were targeted for recruitment during the quarter:

- Northwestern Oklahoma University, OK
- Delaware Valley College, DE
- Iowa State University, IA
- Rhode Island College, RI
- Fresno State, CA
- California Poly Technical Institute, CA
- Delaware State University, DE
- Purdue University, IN
- Ball State University, IN
- Indiana University, IN
- University of Arizona, AZ
- University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, WI
- University of Wisconsin-River Falls, WI
- Utah State University, UT
- Rochester Institute of Technology, NY
- Bryant College, NY
- Stratton College, NY
- University of Buffalo, NY
- Cornell University, NY
- National Technical Institute for the Deaf, NY
- Tennessee State University, TN
- Alabama A & M University, AL
- University of New Haven, CT
- Oklahoma State University, OK

Recruitment Highlights

- DEPM worked with Operation Warfighter to help place disabled veterans into temporary government positions in New Mexico.
- A total of 53 Career Expos/Recruitment Fairs were attended.
- A listing of the top 25 LGBT friendly campuses was provided to LGBT State Managers.
- Texas posted 30 Student Internship Openings in the Pathways Program in USAJOBS.
- NAIANEPM is mentoring five American Indian college students.
- The Iowa State University Disabilities Resource Center received information about vacancy announcements.
- NAIANEPM represented NRCS at the National American Indian Science and Engineering Society Annual Conference in Denver, Colorado.
- NFWPM serves on the USDA Recruitment and Outreach Working Group and the NRCS Engagement and Retention Strategy Team.
- AIANEPM spoke at three American Indian events on career development.
- Arkansas Collateral BEPM worked on a National Student Recruitment and Retention 1890 qualification analysis tool.
- Alabama soil survey office has an MOU with Alabama A & M University to provide a government office on campus. Through this agreement, scholarships and internships are provided to students.
- Montana created a statewide Outreach toolbox for recruitment purposes.
- West Virginia DEPM created a Step-by-Step packet of information on How to Apply to Schedule A including a sample letter.
- 103 veterans received information on NRCS agency careers.
- 38 veterans received skills, qualifications and Career Matching.
- 80 veterans received information on the federal application process.
- 53 hiring fairs were attended by State VEPM's.
- 15 Veteran's Administration Vocational Rehabilitation events were attended by State VEPM's.

RETENTION

The SEPM's are engaged in mentoring state SEPM's and other employees. The state SEPM's are engaged in mentoring new employees and providing support to existing and new employees.

A subcommittee of state LGBT SEPMs was formed during the first quarter of 2014 to address relocation challenges facing LGBT employees and their family members. Nondiscrimination protections for sexual orientation and gender identity and expression vary across states lines in employment, marriage recognition, housing, anti-bullying, adoption, and other major life functions and values. This state-by-state variation has an impact on the agency's ability to find and retain talented employees, particularly in rural areas. For example, if an LGBT employee is applying for promotions and detail opportunities, it is less likely that they will seek these opportunities in states that do not offer nondiscrimination protections. The subcommittee will develop a short guide to relocation for LGBT NRCS employees, including how to find LGBT resource and support groups in rural communities, where to find information on nondiscrimination protections by state, and general relocation tips.

Retention Highlights

- A subcommittee of state LGBTEPM's was formed to address relocation challenges facing LGBT employees and their families.
- NAIANEPM is mentoring four new American Indian employees.
- Mentoring by NSEPM's is an ongoing effort involving new and existing employees.

CAREER DEVELOPMENT

- The NFWPM serves as a member of the USDA-Recruitment and Outreach Working Group headed by Michelle Jordan-Hedgeman.
- The NFWPM serves as a member of the NRCS Engagement and Retention Strategy Team headed by TMD Director.
- The NFWPM serves as the NRCS NHQ Co-Mentor Coordinator.
- THE NFWPM serves as Chair of the National Council of FWPM's.
- Several BEPM's attended the NOPBNRCSE Conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

Producers/Landowners

- The AIANEPM organized five outreach meetings to promote NRCS farm bill programs to Oklahoma tribes, Hispanic landowners and underserved populations.
- Alabama participated in a “Beginning and Small Farmers” workshop held at Alabama A & M University.
- Georgia held a Small and Beginning Farmers Multicultural Conference at the Gwinnett Center Arena.
- Texas BEPM attended the Texas Small Farmer and Rancher Community Based Organization meeting.

Nonprofits/Groups/Organizations

- Asian Pacific Islander Organization membership was briefed on issues of interest.
- National Organization of Professional Hispanic NRCS Employees council was briefed on issues of interest.
- American Indian Alaska Native Employee Association received assistance from the AIANEPM on creating a career development survey.
- The NFWPM is the Chair of the National Council of FWPM's and organized a meeting for members to receive insight regarding the Employee View Point Survey.
- North Carolina DEPM coordinated a Cultural Diversity Celebration Day in Halifax for approximately 100 members of the Haliwa-Saponi Indian Tribe.

COLLABORATION WITH LEADERSHIP

- The AIANEPM is working with the NRCS Tribal Relations director on reaching socially disadvantaged landowners.
- The NFWPM submitted a final copy of the NRCS National Lactation Support Policy for approval by the TMD Director.

COMMUNICATIONS

- All NSEPM's conduct quarterly meetings with their state collateral SEPM's.
- NSEPM's meet monthly through telephone conferences.
- The NFWPM, NHEPM, NLGBTEPM participated in the Department's monthly meetings.
- An American Indian/Alaska Native Newsletter was developed and distributed.
- Monthly "Nursing Mothers' Support Group" telephone conferences were hosted in September, November and December.
- In general, State LGBTEPMs report they are actively involved with their civil rights advisory committees.
- Most State LGBTEPMs collaborated with their civil rights committees and leadership to develop business plans and budgets for FY14.
- In general, sharepoint is being utilized in most states by State SEPM's.
- Communication to veterans was done through phone, email, face-to-face, mail, facebook and twitter.

TRAINING

- The AIANEPM developed and delivered a training workshop to historically underserved populations on how to apply for farm bill program and becoming eligible through the Farm Service Agency.
- AIANEPM updated the training notebook for the NRCS NEDC Course “*Working Effectively with American Indian Tribes*”.
- Several BEPM’s attended the Special Emphasis Program Management Graduate School for the Black Emphasis Program Managers in Washington, D.C.
- NHEPM, NDEPM, NLGBTEPM, NBEPM and NFWPM provided training sessions to state SEPM’s.
- NDEPM provided employees and private citizens training with Schedule A documents.
- North Carolina DEPM coordinated a Cultural Diversity Celebration Day in Halifax for approximately 80 NRCS employees.
- The 2014 first quarterly LGBT teleconference for program managers was held December 3, 2013. 36 SEPMs and one National SEPM (Tiffany Justus, BEPM) attended the session, along with former National SEPM Sharon Nance. During this session, state LGBT program managers received an update and fact sheet on the Employment Nondiscrimination Act (ENDA) legislation.
- The NLGBTEPM attended a webinar on the Macy decision sponsored by the Transgender Law Center. The webinar presentation and close-captioned notes were shared with state LGBT program managers via email, along with some background on the Macy decision and links to the Transgender Law Center website. At least two state SEPMs also attended.
- The NLGBTEPM received new National SEPM training from Sharon Nance and Sharyn Alvarez via VTC.
- The Nebraska LGBT program manager attended a FEDQ training event.
- 65 veterans received training and development counseling.
- 31 veterans received resume review and assistance.

HERITAGE MONTH ACTIVITIES

- The 2014 American Indian Heritage Month poster was developed, printed and delivered to all states and the Pacific Islands basin.
- Emails were sent with cultural and educational information about American Indian Heritage.
- National Disability Awareness Month celebrations were cut short due to the furlough but information was sent out to remind everyone.
- State LGBTEPMs have shared information with employees in their states on the topics of National Coming Out Day, LGBT History Month in October, Transgender Day of Remembrance, benefits available to married couple as a result of the Supreme Court's ruling on DOMA, and Presidential Medal of Honor recipient Bayard Rustin.

SPECIAL PROJECTS AND SUCCESSES

- Georgia has a High School Fostering Program. The purpose is to inform high school students about NRCS programs and opportunities. Vocational Agriculture Programs from six high schools were added to the program.
- The NFWPM developed an NRCS Working Mothers' Employee Handbook that was approved and distributed among the employees.
- The NFWPM represented NRCS in the "USDA Get Connected: Employee Resource Day" event. She sponsored a booth and provided attendees with information about NRCS's employee resource groups and career development.
- Georgia BEPM worked through an NRCS Fostering Program to assist the Rockdale FFA department and students to maintain their interest in Agriculture and USDA and provided technical assistance to develop a nature trail at the school.
- NRCS employees coordinated and participated in the Rhode Island Wheel Chair Challenge for Disability Awareness Month. During the challenge, employees volunteered to spend a work day in a wheelchair.
- Idaho DEPM Stan Haye was featured in the NRCS National newsletter in December for helping local disabled veterans get active again. Both Stan and his wife Diana organized "Warriors Rock" to give veterans suffering from physical or mental trauma an opportunity to challenge themselves, look past their disabilities, and return to a full, productive life by learning to rock climb. The event was attended by fifteen climbers and was used as a recruitment tool for NRCS to recruit persons with disabilities.

ISSUES/CHALLENGES/COMMENTS

- National SEPM's have worked under three different divisions over the past three years and it takes time to adjust to new direction from leadership in the division.
- AIANEPM position should not have term limits.
- Connecticut BEPM commented that barriers keeping African American from moving to Connecticut may be due to lack of open positions, relocation funds, and general lack of diversity amongst the population.
- New SEPM's have requested SEPM training. Most states do not have the budget.
- A suggestion to provide financial support and resources at the national level since there is no funding at the state level in some states.
- A recommendation was submitted that if states have at least 20% black employees then states should be encouraged to not combine its commemoration program with other emphasis groups. Each emphasis group needs to be recognized in their official month.
- Proceeding with procurement of ergonomic tools/equipment/furniture has met a roadblock. The USDA Target Center on Ergonomics identifies their goal is to support all USDA employees in their efforts to remain safe and comfortable at their workstations.
<http://www.dm.usda.gov/oo/target/subjects/ergo.html>
- If my role as a DEPM is to identify policies, practices, and procedures which may present barriers to the hiring and advancement of persons with disabilities I would like to receive some specific guidance from the national level on how to do this and do it better.
- It seems like the state DEPMs all operate independently with no collective strategy on how to go about operating their programs.
- EEO and Civil Rights seem to be talked about a lot in this Agency, and the impression is that the Special Emphasis Programs are an important part of changing the culture of the NRCS, yet SEPMs are only collateral duties with a target time commitment of 20% of working hours. I believe that for most SEPMs, especially those who manage multiple programs, much of this 20% is time wasted focusing on the wrong things mostly because we get very little guidance on what it is we should actually be doing.
- I would like to see a disability support group for employees. These employees could meet possibly once a month and talk about issues that they are facing in the work force or in general just talk to someone that has the same issue.
- Many states report that they share NRCS vacancy announcements with their contact lists, which include local colleges and universities. Often these vacancies are at the GS-11 level and above, which are not typically a good fit for a new college graduate looking to join the agency. SEPM's need to target the vacancies they share with local colleges and universities to boost the overall effectiveness of outreach and recruitment. For example, if a college frequently sees only GS-11 and above vacancy announcements from their local NRCS contact, they may not view NRCS as a great source for entry-level employment for their students.

ISSUES/CHALLENGES/COMMENTS (Continued...)

- Program managers report several communication issues regarding their SEPM activities: 1) volume of SEPM emails sent to employees, 2) inconsistencies across the states in communication policy and 3) a perception of increased scrutiny of communications regarding the LGBT program. Issue 1 is relative to all special emphasis programs, as some employees feel their inboxes are overloaded with emails related to special emphasis programs. However, Issues 2 and 3 seem to be specifically related to the LGBT program. For example, some states are required to provide a disclaimer on their communications regarding the appearance of external hyperlinks while other states do not. Some states can send out as much information as they would like, while other states must receive approvals from leadership prior to disseminating information. Several program managers report they have encountered resistance, push back and a general lack of understanding and awareness regarding the LGBT program, both at the field level when communicating with peers, and at the leadership level, when trying to obtain approvals for communications and/or events.
- The LGBT Program is one of the most challenging programs to manage, as demographics and statistics are limited.

OTHER DUTIES

- The NFWPM led the process for the announcement of the NBEPM and the NLGBTEPM.
- The NFWPM led the process for the announcement and selection of the Acting NHEPM.
- The NFWPM led the process for producing the vacancy announcement package for the NHEPM position.