

DIVERSITY NEWS

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Yvonne: VA's Office of Resolution Management (ORM) provides workplace dispute resolution services—to VA employees, applicants for employment, and former employees.

ORM also offers programs for the prevention and early resolution of workplace disputes, including an Organizational Climate Assessment Program that measures employees' perceptions of their work environment.

Additionally, ORM has recently integrated into its responsibilities overall responsibility for VA's alternative dispute resolution program (or ADR).

This is expected to result in a more effective and consistent ADR program, since the responsibility and control for all aspects of the program are now centralized in ORM.

Thomas: ORM's mission is to promote a discrimination-free work environment—focused on serving veterans—by preventing, resolving, and processing workplace disputes in a timely and high-quality manner.

In their vision statement, ORM describes VA as being “recognized as the leader in promoting a discrimination-free environment for those who serve our Nation's veterans.”

Yvonne: In 2005, an independent consulting group evaluated ORM to determine the effectiveness of its organization, its leadership team, its organizational climate, and the impact it was having on the early resolution of discrimination claims.

This assessment of ORM concluded that significant improvements were needed in the areas of leadership, process improvement, customer service, quality control, internal and external communications, and early resolution management.

As a result of this assessment—as well as feedback from ORM customers and stakeholders, and a series of town hall meetings with ORM employees—ORM began its own organizational transformation.

Thomas: In this edition of Diversity News, Yvonne will talk with Rafael Torres, the new Deputy Assistant Secretary for Resolution Management, about ORM's transformation, its new strategic plan, and the strategic planning process.

Yvonne: What prompted the organizational assessment of ORM?

Mr. Torres: First of all, there's widespread dissatisfaction throughout government with the discrimination complaint process. The Department of Veterans Affairs is no different from any other Federal Agency in that respect. Managers are frustrated because they believe the process is time-consuming and inefficient. Employees and unions are concerned for the same reasons, and also because they don't see that there are viable alternatives for resolving disputes.

ORM has always done a fairly good job at processing complaints, but that's just not enough any more. In spite of all of our efforts, complaints are taking hundreds of days to process and nobody is satisfied with the results.

Secondly, the Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration, R. Allen Pittman, has realized that ORM had to transform itself in order to take a more proactive approach and improve the process. After all, ORM stands for "Office of Resolution Management;" we're not the "Office of Complaint Processing." So, when you look at it that way, you realize that ORM should be spending a lot more time toward preventing and resolving disputes as early as possible. That's what prompted the assessment and led to the development of the new strategic plan.

Yvonne: What are the primary components of ORM's strategic plan?

Mr. Torres The new strategic plan is in alignment with both the Department-wide strategic plan and with the Office of Human Resources and Administration's strategic plan. It directly supports ORM's mission, which was reformulated early in the planning process. ORM's mission is now, "to promote a discrimination-free work environment—focused on serving veterans—by preventing, resolving, and processing workplace disputes in a timely and high-quality manner."

ORM's strategic plan consists of four goals and sixteen supporting objectives. The goals address the prevention of disputes, early resolution of conflicts when they do occur, improvements with the processing of EEO complaints and, perhaps most importantly, efforts toward improving the quality and morale of ORM's own workforce.

So, we've identified 170 strategies and initiatives to achieve the goals, and over 35 specific performance targets or indicators to measure our success. This would include 15 key performance indicators that we're going to be tracking on a monthly basis and reporting on to all ORM employees, managers, and stakeholders.

The strategies include efforts to educate employees and managers about resolving disputes at the earliest possible opportunity and giving them tools to help them work out their differences more productively. We're also encouraging the use of alternative dispute resolution techniques and making available more

trained mediators to help employees negotiate with managers in resolving their disagreements without having to file EEO complaints in the first place.

Because some employees will inevitably file EEO complaints, we also do the, we also plan to do the best we can to streamline the process. We want to improve processing time and quality and increase customer satisfaction.

With respect to our own employees, we're undertaking an effort to ensure that they have the training and the tools that they need to do their jobs well, and that we have clear and fair performance expectations that they will adhere to and be judged by.

ORM employees, managers and outside stakeholders alike are being asked to make a commitment to the success of this plan in order to transform the EEO process within the Department.

Yvonne: What progress have you made so far in the transformation of ORM?

Mr. Torres We've already begun to make significant measurable progress toward realizing our strategic goals. For example, we've reduced the number of informal contacts. In fiscal year 2005, we had something like 3,935 informal contacts; in 2006, we lowered that to 3,719 informal contacts. We're also reducing the number of formal complaints that are filed. In 2005, we had 2,128 complaints filed; in 2006, we had 2,038 complaints filed.

We're increasing the number of requests to mediate. In 2004, we had a 10 percent participation rate in the ADR process. In 2006, we were able to raise that to 25 percent participation. And in terms of resolving complaints through ADR, we've managed to maintain a 69 percent resolution rate.

We've decreased the overall processing time as well, from 187.3 days in 2005 to 183.1 days in 2006. And we've made significant inroads in terms of customer satisfaction: in 2005, 63 percent of our customers reported that they were satisfied with our efforts; in 2006, that increased to 79 percent.

Beginning with this fiscal year, ORM has taken on the responsibility for all workplace alternative dispute resolution processes in the Department. This function was previously carried out by the Bureau of Contract Appeals. The Bureau will soon be consolidated under the General Services Administration and so the Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration, Mr. Pittman, has now become the Department's dispute resolution specialist. Mr. Pittman has in turn, delegated the responsibility for the ADR programs to me. And this delegation fits in quite nicely with our efforts under the strategic plan to prevent and resolve disputes Department-wide.

During the first quarter of fiscal year 2007, ORM successfully transitioned the Department's Mediator Certification Program, and we have certified four new mediators and re-certified 35 of our existing mediators.

Since June of 2005, we have been marketing our ADR program throughout the Department with really good results. And as I previously indicated, the ADR participation rate increased from a baseline of 10 percent in fiscal year 2004 to 17 percent in 2005 and, most recently, we reached a participation rate of 25 percent for fiscal year 2006. This means that if ORM continues to succeed in attaining its strategic targets, we can probably reduce the overall number of EEO complaints filed by, probably, 25 percent.

Yvonne: What can you tell employees about the future of ORM, and what advice do you have for other offices who want to institute organizational change?

Mr. Torres We're asking ORM employees to make a commitment to the goals set forth in our new strategic plan and to help us achieve our vision to ensure that the VA is recognized as the leader in promoting a discrimination-free environment for those who serve our Nation's veterans.

I would like to assure all ORM employees—and, for that matter, all VA employees—that ORM will continue to play a major role in this process. Together we have to dedicate ourselves to the mission of resolving workplace disputes as early and efficiently as possible in order to make the Agency a better place to work. At the same time, I want to make sure that ORM itself becomes an example for the rest of the Department by recruiting and retaining a high quality workforce, and ensuring that we have the resources to do our jobs effectively, and promote a positive work environment through training, education, and fairness.

With respect to promoting organizational change throughout the department, I really believe that we must take the long view of where we need to go. We need to concentrate, not just on short-term gains, but think strategically at least five or ten years into the future. In addition, we need to involve employees and stakeholders directly in the development of our plans in order to gain commitment and ensure success.

Thomas: "Involving employees and stakeholders directly in the development of our plans." That sounds like a good idea. We'll have to follow up with ORM to see how that goes.

Yvonne: We WILL be following up with ORM, to get more information on the ADR process and on the Organizational Climate Assessment Program. Until then, you can find more information on ORM, including a copy of their strategic plan, on their Web site at www.va.gov/orm.

Thomas: That's all we have time for in THIS edition of Diversity News. We appreciate your watching, and we hope you'll tune in again next month. Until then, for more frequent updates of diversity news, sign up for our free weekly e-mail news service: NewsLink. Just send an e-mail message to dmeeo@va.gov, with the words SUBSCRIBE NEWS in the subject line.

Yvonne: And check out our bimonthly newsletter, Diversity@Work, available as a download on our Web site or by e-mail from our office.

Also, we want to hear from YOU! If you'd like to share your story ideas, comments, or suggestions, please e-mail us at dmeeo@va.gov with the words "Diversity News" in the subject line.

Until next time...

Both: Have a great month!