

2025 NASPEs AWARD

Eugene H. Rooney, Jr. Award Nomination Innovative State Human Resource Management Program

Nominations from dues-paying states are considered for eligibility. Nominated leaders and programs should have a positive effect on the administration of state human resource programs. A state's central human resource department or line agency human resource operations may administer nominated programs.

Programs and projects must have been operational for at least six months and must be transferable to other states. Selection criteria are based on the questions asked on the award application. Included in this packet are the specific criteria for each award and their categories. Nominations are encouraged in all areas of human resource management administration.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

Program Title: Human Resources Division, Center of Expertise for Investigations
State: MA

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NOMINATOR INFORMATION

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DETAILS

Please attach a one-page summary of the program. Provide a narrative answer for each of the questions. You are limited to four pages (based on regular 8 1/2 x 11-inch paper double-spaced in 12-point font). The four-page limit does not include the one-page summary.

1. Please provide a brief description of this program.

The Center of Expertise for Investigations (COE) is a twelve-person unit dedicated to the investigation of allegations of violations of the sexual harassment, discrimination, workplace violence, and domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking policies. The unit also investigates allegations of retaliation related to complaints made pursuant to one of the policies. The unit is a resource to all executive department employees (approximately 50 thousand employees). Our employees are able to report allegations through their agency human resources or directly to the COE. The unit's goal is to conduct the investigation within 60 business days and produce a quality fact finding report that will support the agency in any necessary action it needs to take post-investigation.

2. How long has this program been operational (month and year)?

The COE was established in February 2019, with a staged roll-out throughout the Executive Department. It became available to all employees by January 2020.

3. Why was this program created? (What problem[s] or issues does it address?)

The advent of the "Me Too" movement caused Massachusetts to look at its processes for reporting and investigating complainants of sexual harassment. At that time, sexual harassment investigations took place at the agency level. We learned that having a decentralized process impaired our ability to determine how many complaints had been made, investigated or remediated. In addition, it was apparent that agencies were determining their own standards for when to

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investigate, the investigation process, and any remedial efforts. This discovery reaffirmed that it was important for leadership to be certain that the employees work in safe and supportive environments and are heard and have their complaints taken seriously. As a result, the decision was made to create a centralized investigation unit, staffed with a team of specially trained investigators, whose sole purpose is to investigate these complaints. This centralized approach allows for consistency across the executive departments so that each employee involved with an investigation could expect the same experience regardless of their employing agency. The initiative was expanded to include all the state-wide policies related to a hostile or unsafe workspaces, therefore, complaints related to discrimination, workplace violence, domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking as well as sexual harassment were included in the unit's mission.

The program provides:

Consistency of approach: best practices are consistently applied across the

Commonwealth so that each employee's concern is managed thoroughly and fairly

Efficient use of resources: full-time trained investigators dedicated to the work of managing investigations

Accountability for results: the COE tracks key metrics for all of its investigations including: Types of allegations; time to resolve complaints; cost of paid leave, if

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applicable, and outcomes

Reporting that informs necessary training: the outcomes of investigations

informs training needs across the Commonwealth to reduce workplace violations

4. Why is this program a new and creative method?

Based on survey results, we believe Massachusetts to be an innovator with a centralized investigation unit that can be accessed by any executive department employee and is dedicated to allegations of these policy violations. This process allows for an unbiased investigation without any pre-conceptions based on rumor, conjecture or favoritism. In addition, we have found through this unbiased process, the COE has been able to identify worksites that have issues that are simmering, which allows management the opportunity to address them, objectively, thereby avoiding additional complaints or litigation. Further, the investigators serve as witnesses in any litigation that results from an investigation.

5. What was the program's startup costs? (Provide detailed information about specific purchases for this program, staffing needs and other expenditures, as well as existing materials, technology, and staff already in place.)

The COE was initially projected to be staffed by a director and five investigators budgeted at \$400,000 for the first year of operations. Since then, staffing has increased to twelve, with one director, three senior investigators, seven investigators and one intake specialist.

6. What are the program's operational costs?

1.2M annually

7. How is this program funded?

The program is funded through the Human Resources Division's appropriation.

8. Did this program originate in your state?



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9. Are you aware of similar programs in other states?

If yes, how does this program differ?

We recently became aware of a new program in Rhode Island

10. How do you measure the success of this program?

The COE has become a safe space and an effective resource for employees to report issues in their workplaces. The number of complaints filed at the COE grew at the rate of 20% over the first three years, finally leveling out at around 750 annual filings. Following intake interviews, ultimately 36% of complaints went forward with a full investigation. The complaints that were not investigated because the complaint was not related to one of the policies the COE investigates were referred back to the employing agency to be addressed. Since the unit's inception, the number of substantiated complaints is trending downward with only 26% of investigated complaint having an outcome of substantiated.

11. How has the program grown and/or changed since its inception?

The number of complaints filed, far exceeded those predicted by the cross-secretariat working group that advised on the establishment of the unit. The number of investigators doubled within the first two years. The unit is also proactive to provide education and resources to Commonwealth agencies. The COE hosts drop-in sessions and monthly seminars to promote the unit and address workplace issues prior to complaint.

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“The measure of a country’s greatness is its ability to retain compassion in times of crisis.” – Thurgood Marshall. It is within this spirit that the Massachusetts Human Resources Division’s Center of Expertise for Investigations (COE) is nominated. Like many organizations, the Commonwealth looked inward when the “Me Too” movement came into the forefront. We asked ourselves, “how are we doing?” and we realized we could not satisfactorily answer the question. Why? Because across our 11 secretariats that employ almost 50,000 people, our processes were decentralized and complaints were not tracked. As an organization we were left in the untenable position of not knowing if our workplaces were safe and supported.

The COE was established in 2019 to serve as a centralized investigations unit for employees’ complaints related to sexual harassment, discrimination, workplace violence, and domestic violence. We wanted a vehicle that would be compassionate to complainants but fair to respondents during the process. We believe we have landed on a system that does just that. The unit is staffed with ten specially trained investigators, an intake specialist and a Director. Any employee within the Executive Department can file a complaint if they want to report a policy violation. The complaint is reviewed within days to determine whether it falls within the COE’s scope and should be investigated. The investigations are confidential and unbiased, with the goal of all participants to be treated with respect. There is a two-tier report review to ensure consistency in the application of the policy and the law before being sent to agencies for appropriate action.

While growing steadily, the number of filings has leveled out in recent years to 750 new complaints annually. We now have insight into employee complaints, consistency in investigations, and the ability to adjust our annual mandatory trainings to address problem areas. We believe this process is truly innovative.