

Opinion: The Vacancy Crisis

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Del Norte County currently has a vacancy rate of over 30% (32.7% in the Miscellaneous and Professional units). These vacancies are concentrated in the Department of Health and Human Services. These are the employees who investigate children and seniors who are at risk; who provide benefits and support to new mothers; who oversee vital public health programs; and who help our most vulnerable residents get essential benefits. This is unsustainable. County residents are not getting the support or services necessary to keep them safe.

Every day the county continues with departments experiencing 30-40% vacancy rates, putting overburdened county staff under crushing workloads. This high level of vacancies leaves some staff in Department of Health and Human Services who would normally have a caseload of 250 clients, struggling to serve 700+ clients. Del Norte County residents should not have to wait for responsive and effective services.

Del Norte County is Failing to Use all the funding available

The high vacancy rate is particularly concerning since these positions are primarily funded by State, Federal and grant funding, not general fund dollars. The General Fund is made up of property taxes, sales taxes, transient occupancy taxes etc. The county ends up sending funds back to the state and other funding institutions because they don't have the positions to carry out the work. Residents also miss out on receiving benefits that they are eligible for because of the backlog. The lack of qualified and experienced staff also

results in the county not billing for all the services that it provides, depriving the county with much needed revenue.

The Retention Challenge

The county's current recruitment and retention problem is directly attributable to two issues-substandard wages and short staffing. These issues are strongly linked. The county cannot get applicants because they are not offering a competitive wage. Employees who do join the County often find the workload unmanageable and many end up leaving.

In terms of wages, many of the county's classifications fall well behind what is offered in other small rural counties. Here is a small sample of where Del Norte County salaries line up against Glenn, Humboldt, Tehama, Modoc, Siskiyou, San Benito, Mariposa, Trinity, Lassen, Calaveras, Inyo and Amador counties. If we base the market rate on the average of these other similar counties, Del Norte does not fare well.

OES Coordinator	29% below market
Office Assistant III	16% below market
Facilities Maintenance Worker II	15% below market
Child Support Supervisor	15% below market
Child Support Specialist II	11% below market
Custodian II	13% below market
Deputy Probation Officer II	10% below market
Social Worker II	10% below market

Is it surprising that we lose employees to other counties and employers? Del Norte should not be a training county for other counties that pay better.

Possible Solutions

It is time for the county and the Board to get realistic. Many of the unfilled positions have been vacant for a long time. Low wages and the stress created by short staffing is leading to higher turnover and higher vacancy rates. The county needs to provide competitive, living wage salaries first, then determine how many positions can be funded. It should take the same approach that it took with the Sheriff's office.

The annual savings to the county in unpaid salaries and benefits based on its current vacancy rate is about \$7 million. Those dollars should be repurposed to stabilize staffing and make positions more attractive to applicants.

The county should certainly conduct a compensation and structural analysis, but it also needs to take action now. A wage increase now would show county staff that the Administration and Board is paying attention and understands that staff is struggling.

Let's stop the losses, let's stabilize the staffing, and let's put ourselves on a footing to be able to hire qualified staff.

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