

Mentor Program

Office of the County Assessor, Loudoun County, VA



Submitted by:

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on behalf of
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MENTOR PROGRAM

Overview of the Program

This innovative program developed and implemented by the County Assessor in 2009 ensures thorough, consistent, and standardized training of newly hired staff. Mentors must have experience working through at least two assessment cycles with the Assessor's Office. Mentors work on a voluntary basis and must possess expertise in three key development areas as defined by the Assessor. Furthermore, they must be reliable, have a positive attitude, and possess professional expertise that is recognized by the mentor's peers and senior management. Mentors must consistently demonstrate efficient and innovative approaches to their assignments. The program was designed to guide new employees through areas such as: customer service protocol, standard operating procedures, operational guidelines, complicated automated operating systems, and standardized methodology related to organizing and prioritizing assignments. In addition to the new employee's specific assignments, the program complements a Department focused orientation process that employees are required to complete. The program prescribes a high work standard ensuring that all employees are exposed to an appropriate level of training. The program encourages continuous self-development and the achievement of the mentor status by existing employees. Moreover, it enhances the ability of all employees to provide superior levels of customer service to internal and external customers.

The Need for the Program

The Office of the County Assessor's principle mission is to ensure compliance of State Codes and County Ordinances while producing an assessment roll and providing accurate information in a timely, professional, effective, respectful fashion to all internal and external customers of Loudoun County. Customer service is a priority of the Assessor's Office. Without a competent and motivated workforce, the highest level of service cannot be provided to internal staff and the citizens of Loudoun

County. The Mentor Program is integral in carrying out this mission and utilizes readily available resources to achieve intergovernmental cooperation and first rate customer service.

The development of the Mentor Program was prompted by the desire of the County Assessor to focus on staff development, consistent work flows, and efficiency related to training and orientation at minimal cost. By developing highly competent and motivated staff, the Assessor's Office is able to provide a high level of customer service to departmental staff and the citizens of Loudoun County. The Mentor Program is introduced during the hiring process, therefore attracting and assisting in the retention of new appraisal staff. It also serves as a motivational factor for existing appraisal staff by creating leadership opportunities for them, while providing exceptional in-house training for new appraisal staff. These new staff members easily acclimate into a new work environment by learning from professional, seasoned staff. The program keeps the existing appraisal staff engaged and motivated by recognizing their performance, positive attitude, and ability to consistently demonstrate efficient and innovative approaches to their work while performing in a team environment.

Every newly hired employee is trained in a highly competent and efficient manner, providing the employee the opportunity to quickly assimilate into his or her work assignment. The new employee is exposed to the "core knowledge" requirements of his/her job and receives hands on training in all relevant areas. This allows the new employee to become more efficient and acquire greater expertise in a shorter time period. It also provides existing staff with the opportunity to exhibit a higher level of knowledge and customer service. Existing Appraisal Staff have the option to volunteer to become a mentor. A mentor candidate must have a positive team-oriented attitude toward newly hired staff as well as the established appraisal staff. A mentor is also recognized by his/her peers as a reliable authority who has consistently demonstrated efficient and innovative approaches to work assignments.

Participation in the program creates leadership opportunities for the mentor and promotes upward mobility within the Assessor's Office.

Description of the Program

The purpose of the Mentor Program is to ensure that newly hired employees are thoroughly trained in a consistent and standardized manner as it specifically relates to his or her job function. The program guides new hires in the learning process related to such areas as standard operating procedures, operational guidelines and policy, customer service initiatives, regularly used software programs as well as standard methods for organizing and prioritizing their assigned portfolio. Further, the program also augments the office orientation process.

Senior Staff are responsible for developing a pool of mentors. Appraisers (S3 grade or above) who have been through no less than two assessment cycles with the Loudoun County Office of the County Assessor volunteer to be a Mentor. The assessment cycle includes Office Reviews and reconciliations, Board of Equalization appeals, appeals through the court system, field reviews and stratification, reassessment and other aspects related to the management of a real property portfolio. One cycle typically equals one calendar year. It is at the discretion of senior management to accept personnel into the mentor pool who are not S3, but do meet the requirements of two assessment cycles, and possess core knowledge, positive attitude, and ability.

The Mentor Program is team based. This helps eliminate logistical concerns associated with new employees working on group projects that require expertise in a variety of different areas. For example, a new employee assigned to a residential division working with a commercial appraiser on a residential assessment project would not provide the best mentoring experience for either employee. Therefore, a collective approach at training by using a team of mentors with expertise in different work related functions promotes cross-training and knowledge sharing.

In addition to the required years of service and grade level, mentors must possess expertise in three key development areas. These areas are **core knowledge, systems applications, and office protocol** as defined by the Assessor. These factors may be demonstrated in a supervisor's evaluation of performance, by earning and maintaining professional designations or state licensure, by demonstrating a positive attitude and exceptional ability, and/or by being recognized by peers as a reliable authority that has consistently demonstrated efficient and innovative approaches to their daily work.

The mentor must be able to demonstrate expertise in the following three areas to the satisfaction of senior management. Each area includes unique systems or sub-areas of specialization.

1. **Core knowledge** includes expertise in assessment and reassessment practices and procedures, general valuation expertise, field review, and appraisal methodology.
2. **Systems applications** includes expertise with the Computer Assisted Mass Appraisal (CAMA) system, Microsoft Office Suite applications, Land Management Information System, Permit Tracking Systems, WEBLOGIS and CITRIX (Mapping systems), and the Automated Review and Board of Equalization Appeal systems.
3. **Office Protocol** includes a thorough knowledge of standard operating procedures and operational guidelines and administrative and Human Resources policies. The mentor should also expose the employee to available training programs offered by the Department of Information Technology and the Human Resources Division that relate to functional areas of the Office of the County Assessor. The mentor should guide the employee through the electronic enrollment process related to selecting and signing up for the appropriate Department of Information Technology and the Human Resources Division training classes that are provided at no additional cost to County employees.

A mentor candidate will have a positive team-oriented attitude toward new hires and the established appraisal staff, a commitment to service, and will be dedicated to carrying out the mission of the Office of the County Assessor. Mentors will maintain a high ethical standard encouraging the professional growth of each new hire. A mentor candidate will show a willingness to positively impart the learning experience and show a genuine interest in the development of new staff members. They will exemplify the *high standards* that the Office of the County Assessor portrays to the public. The Mentor Program is a training partnership between the mentor and the new hire, which the quantifiable success or failure is a direct reflection of the mentor's ability to effectively communicate, teach, and lead; combined with the new hire's ability to actively listen and learn.

Not every appraisal staff member who meets the threshold criteria has the core knowledge or the appropriate demeanor to be a mentor. A mentor candidate's ability to effectively communicate, teach and build rapport is an art not a science. Supervisory staff will identify and develop appraisal staff members who have the acumen to be a mentor through observation and feedback from new staff completing the Mentor Program.

Mentors will be responsible for training all new hires in regularly used software programs, databases, web-based tools, and the standard operating procedures. Additionally, at the end of the training, mentors will help new hires develop a work plan for their assigned duties, which will include planning, organizing, implementing, and revising their work plan. This work plan should include a complete review and understanding of the employee's performance plan.

Currently, the Mentor Program is designed to extend through the duration of a new hire's probationary period, which is one year. Since this is a new program that was designed and implemented specifically by and for the Office of the County Assessor, the duration period will be monitored and may be amended as the process develops. If exceptional circumstances, prior service, or experience warrant

an adjustment, the duration may be shortened to a minimum of six months. At the completion of the program, a final evaluation must be certified as complete by the new hire, the mentor, and assigned supervisor of the new hire. This certification becomes part of the employee's personal record establishing acknowledgement of proper training and orientation.

The mentor role is a voluntary position that does not provide any additional monetary compensation. Notwithstanding, appraisal staff who volunteer or who are asked to be mentors will benefit directly as a result of their service to the office. Successful mentors will be recognized in their annual performance evaluations and have the opportunity to build leadership and supervisory skills that may not otherwise be afforded. Further, at the discretion of a mentor's supervisor, a paid day off will be granted to the mentor for each new hire successfully completing the program.

Implementing the Mentor Program has reduced errors at all levels of the assessment process. It reduced repetitive work associated with incorrect data collection and input, data lost or never recorded, as well as standardizing the way appraisers within the office complete their work. Having properly trained employees who have expertise in their craft and can confidently and accurately answer questions that arise from the public will increase public confidence and perception of the Assessor's Office.

Use of Technology

The following technology was utilized when developing and implementing the Mentor Program:

Microsoft Office Suite: Outlook, Access, Excel, PowerPoint, Word

Computer Assisted Mass Appraisal System (CARAT)

Automated On-Line Review and Board of Equalization Appeal Systems

Automated Building Permit Tracking System

Land Management Information System

GIS System: WEBLOGIS and CITRIX

Internet: web based programs and the Assessor's web page

Intranet

Windows Local Network Drive

The Cost of the Program

There are minimal, if any, operation and capital costs incurred in developing and implementing the Mentor Program. During implementation, the program utilizes computer programs, Human Resources training, and Information Technology training that are already available to staff. Minimal costs will be incurred if another locality chooses to replicate the program. This makes it possible for other public entities to easily model this program into their own unique setting. By utilizing resources already available to management and staff, there are also minimal costs involved in maintaining the program. Conversely, there are cost-saving benefits. In-house or on-the-job training is the most cost efficient way to train staff and often results in reduction in errors at all levels of the assessment process. It also alleviates staff turn-over and promotes tenure.

The Success of the Program and its Worthiness of an Award

Two appraisers in the Assessor's Office have already successfully completed the Mentor Program. The success of the program is evident in the quality of work and high level of customer service that these two employees currently provide to both the Assessor's Office and the general public. This is coupled with an increased speed in which new job assignments were learned along with the ability of the new employees to make positive contributions to the organization and the public sooner. Furthermore, these employees stated that having the opportunity to work directly with their mentors during the program period greatly assisted them with the learning and orientation process. It also formalized and stabilized their professional foundation and their new roles in the office.

They spent their first six months under the direct guidance of their Mentors. These relationships continued for a full year; through each training phase of their job related duties. The ability to rotate from team member to team member also provided the newly hired appraisers with the opportunity to

better understand all office functionality. The end result is a more knowledgeable and motivated workforce which directly benefits the citizens of Loudoun County by providing the best customer service to Loudoun County and its citizens. The desired result of enhancing customer service while maximizing employee training and productivity is achieved.

The Mentor Program is worthy of a 2010 VACo Achievement Award because it is an innovative county government program that enhances the working environment, increases morale and empowerment of staff, and provides for standardized and maximum levels of training for newly hired county employees. The program has proven measurable results which include the award criteria for cost savings, enhanced employee productivity, improved customer service to the public, and improved intergovernmental cooperation.

The Assessor's Office has effectively utilized readily available resources and produced a program that creates a highly competent workforce that delivers the highest level of service to the county and county employees. Having a properly trained staff who have a high level of expertise in their profession, and who can effectively and efficiently address the needs of the public confidently and accurately, will increase the public's confidence and perception of the Assessor's Office and the Loudoun County Government in general.

It is clear that the Mentor Program is an innovative program that enhances and contributes to the development of new hires, existing staff, and supervisory staff. The Mentor Program is directly tied to the initial phase of the Career Development Program, which provides the opportunity for professional advancement. The Assessor's Career Development Program won a NACo and VACo award in 2008. This program re-enforces the Assessor's ongoing initiative and innovative efforts to empower and motivate staff to excel professionally while at the same time making significant contributions to the organization at minimal or no cost to the tax payers of Loudoun County.