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DETERMINATION OF DANE COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE (DCMEO) WORK ENVIRONMENT INQUIRY

Dear Dane County Medical Examiner's Office Employees:

This letter is to inform you that the discussions conducted from September – November 2020 by Kabura Mukasa - Human Resources Manager, and Carrie Braxton - Manager of Equal Employment Opportunity, regarding the DCMEO work environment have been completed. We appreciate your participation.

We have determined that the DCMEO work environment has challenges that are similar to other County work environments. While we cannot disclose the specific details of the individual discussions, we can provide some information on topics that were raised and expectations moving forward.

1. GENERAL WORK ENVIRONMENT AND EXPECTATIONS:

The majority of employees expressed their satisfaction with the work they perform and why they chose the field for their career.

2. STAFF MORALE/RESPECT/PROFESSIONALISM/CASE DISCUSSION:

Some staff expressed concerns about co-workers gossiping, spreading rumors and slandering other employees or Management. This behavior is inappropriate, prohibited in the workplace and must stop immediately. If there are questions or concerns regarding DCMEO processes, safety, or policies, you should speak directly with your supervisors.

Most employees do not want to hear or be involved in negative work politics. Employees are encouraged to seek out Management to inform them of the event and the offender so that they can deal with individual staff members directly. Progressive resolution of the issue cannot occur, however, without consistent reporting.

You are expected to treat each other professionally and respectfully and to follow all Civil Service Work Rules, Section 4, *Personal Actions and Appearance* in the Administrative Practices Manual. Examples of prohibited conduct include but are not limited to:

- a. Threatening, making false or malicious statements concerning other employees, supervisors, officials or the County.
- b. Failure to exercise good judgment or being discourteous in dealing with fellow employees or the general public.

Management concedes that talking about cases is therapeutic and appropriate, and staff are encouraged to do so. However, it is important to note that the layout of the DCMEO building includes shared common spaces, where interactions occur (e.g., phone calls with grieving families). Even if certain behavior is not meant to be disrespectful, the impression that loud or disruptive behavior can make on grieving families, funeral homes representatives, partner agencies and law enforcement, may damage the trust implicit to these relationships. So DCMEO staff should maintain professionalism and decorum. Additionally, all staff deserve a quiet, respectful, and professional environment to complete their work. Staff may socialize in the building's appropriate spaces (e.g., lunch room, kitchen, family room, garage, and outdoor picnic tables during warmer weather months).

3. SUPERVISION CLARIFICATION:

The chain of command is dependent partly on the issue to be resolved, or questions being asked. The list below should help with clarification:

Senior MLI/Lead MLI or Chief of Investigations: Real-time case evaluation and investigation by a "junior"/training MLI should be addressed to their assigned senior MLI, or to their more experienced co-worker helping them during their shift. If no other MLI

is available, the Lead MLI during business hours and Chief of Investigations, Director of Operations, and Deputy Director of Operations are always available for such questions.

On-Call Administrator (Chief of Investigation or Deputy Director of Operations): general investigative practice questions, case investigations and logistical questions.

On-Call Pathologist: Case clearance, or matters concerning case disposition (such as whether a case is releasable, or requires a forensic Pathologist review/examination. Daily autopsy and morgue operations, and all ancillary activities of autopsy procedures such as toxicology/histology/radiology, within the scope of the Autopsy Technicians.

Deputy Director of Operations or Director of Operations: All administrative questions – including Morgue Tech operations, transportation logistics, building maintenance issues, and other cases outside the scope of case investigation. Questions/concerns regarding morgue operations, including scheduling/maintenance/inventory/ logistics.

4. WORK HOURS/SCHEDULES:

MLI staff voted on their start times, how they wanted to rotate, and were given the choice of two (2) schedules which were deliberated for 18 months, and the rotation and schedule decided on was by a majority of the staff. Administration is willing to consider changing the number of weeks between changes in shift start times. Administration is also willing to revisit how MLI staff rotate through the shift start times. The current schedule is discussed extensively at interviews, including providing a copy of the schedule at the time of the interview.

5. ENHANCING WORK-LIFE BALANCE:

In the past, MLIs were asked if they would like to work on their own cases or have another MLI work on them when their work shifts were over. The consensus was that they wanted to work on their own cases. The purpose of having a single MLI assigned to a case is to provide the family and Dane County partners with a reference point for the case, and have consistent, unifying oversight of the case. Rather than making the family “feel like a number”, families have instead reported quite often that they felt taken care of rather than handed off from staff person to staff person who does not know about their loved ones’ case. For urgent issues, there is hand-off between shifts so that simple assistance can be provided. The lead MLI and Chief of Investigations are also available to assist an individual MLI as well. However, an MLI has responsibility for their own cases.

6. DRESS CODE:

Management is reviewing the DCMEO Dress Code policy with Employee Relations and the new policy will take into consideration employee preferences balancing them with safety, business professionalism, and client expectations.

7. IMPROVE MANAGEMENT-EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIP:

Management needs to be able to supervise, direct, and mediate between employees fairly, and there should not be a semblance of bias due to outside relationships. Due to these reasons, Management feels that personal relationships are inappropriate between Management and staff.

8. CREATE SPACE FOR EMOTIONAL RELEASE:

Appropriate spaces for conversations are described in #2 above. For emotional issues, staff are strongly encouraged to take advantage of the county’s Employee’s Assistance Program (EAP), behavioral health and wellness resources; or seek out supervisors to discuss these matters in private, rather than venting or releasing emotions in common shared spaces to their peers.

9. PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS:

The department acknowledges that with the work volume and level of Management staffing, that performance evaluations have not been done regularly. An Administrator has been assigned to oversee performance evaluations, which will occur yearly from this point onward and placed in the employees’ Personnel files. Management will also strive to provide positive feedback in the form of emails, so that they can be documented in the employee files.

10. EMPLOYEE DEBRIEFING AND MANAGEMENT MEETINGS:

MLIs have three (3) hours of overlapping shifts to accommodate debriefing between incoming and outgoing MLI on all shifts. A *Change of Shift* Excel spreadsheet has been available for the entire staff on the Shared drive for many years, and contains information such as cases scheduled for exams, times of exams, type of exams, donation status, LE attendance, and case information. Additional shared documents such as cooler/freezer inventory, driver schedules, and current transports under way, cremation viewing, and other data sets are available. The *Change of Shift* was updated in the summer of 2020 to include these items in one accessible document with multiple tabs. This allows for tracking of examinations and case type notes to/from physicians and MLI/morgue staff.

Morning gatherings are not feasible as it would require an adjustment to MT and MLI hours. MLIs have real-time feedback on a daily basis through the on-call Pathologist. By each morning, staff has available the day's cases (through the daily schedule) and the scene photographs, which are downloaded by the MLI for review. Case presentations are also available in the form of the triage notes emailed by the MLI on duty. After each examination, requested follow-up is given in the form of response email by the on-duty Pathologist.

11. ACCEPTING DIFFERENT WAYS OF INDIVIDUALS GETTING TO THE SAME GOAL AS LONG AS NO STEPS ARE MISSED:

Each investigation is unique and requires the MLI to use their skill set to best accommodate the situation. While policies and frameworks are provided to offer guidance and structure, all new trainees are repeatedly encouraged to learn from different MLIs' different styles. However, guidelines for safety, information/scene security, and best practice standards which dictate the majority of case process, must be followed as directed to provide accurate death investigation.

12. MLI TEACHING/CORRECTING EMAILS SHOULD NOT BE COPIED TO NON-INVOLVED INDIVIDUALS:

The purpose of the triage note group (#Triage) is to provide a broad support net to the MLI and the staff Pathologists in the triage of case calls. It is also a given that each member of the pathology and administrative staff will have unique skills which they can bring to the evaluation process. The administrative staff are significantly better versed in the logistics of the office and nuances of scene investigation, and can identify problems that the MLI may have missed. Only relevant individuals are copied on the emails.

13. RESPECTFULLY TEACHING/COACHING VS. REPRIMANDING MLIS AND AT/MTS:

The goal of MEO Management is to advance the knowledge and skill set of its staff. Direction, suggestions, and teaching materials can be unpleasant, particularly if the instructions are not well understood, not expected, or result in changes in workload for the employee. Critical intervention must occur in the immediate event to prevent irrevocable mistakes in case handling. These instances may not be amenable to an educational session at that time. Employees are encouraged to seek additional information after each new experience through the use of respected textbooks on the subject of forensic pathology and death investigation (available at the office), and follow-up with supervisors. Mistakes that are repeated, do require repeated correction as appropriate to ensure correct learning. The consequences of medical or investigative errors have significant weight in the office, and accuracy and consistency is important.

14. PROVIDE MORE TRAINING FOR TRAINEES, AND BE MORE PATIENT WHEN THEY MAKE ERRORS:

MLIs at the Dane County Medical Examiner's Office get a minimum of six (6) weeks of training, with checklist milestones that they have to accomplish prior to completing their training. If milestones are not met, additional weeks of training are provided. Direct interaction with on-call Pathologists is part of the training. Their progress is discussed with administrative staff, and implementation of each progressive step towards full independence is introduced. Even after completing their training, at no point is an MLI without recourse to call a senior MLI, administrator, or on-call Pathologist for aid/supervision. The office also provides a significant amount of reading material for education, and will be placing educational lectures in the shared drive for further learning. Finally, as MLIs meet requirements they are sent to the ABMDI course for certification, as staffing and budget allows.

15. OPERATIONS AND INVESTIGATION-RELATED PROCESS IMPROVEMENT SUGGESTIONS

- a. **Increase MLI staff:** The office currently has doubled the MLI staff since contracting with Rock, Brown, Door and Oconto Counties to address issues of training and additional workload in scheduling outside county cases. Currently, all full time MLI staff positions are filled. Dane County has also implemented double coverage on most shifts, so that two (2) staff members are on duty per shift, with three (3) hours of shift overlap to facilitate transfer of critical case and operational information during transitions. Finally, no more than one (1) trainee is placed on a shift at a time to keep training burden on staff at a minimum. Recruitment of new MLIs is an ongoing process for all counties supervised by Dane, due to normal turnover. Administration has clustered hiring in the past due to work volume restricting availability for interviews, but will try to spread out hiring (and secondarily, training) as the work permits. However, training is an expected duty of MLIs.
- b. **Remove Requirement of MLIs to Attend Autopsies:** Administration is willing to amend this requirement as it makes scheduling easier for the office.
- c. **Use LEAN Management strategies:** This is essentially implemented at the DCMEO already. The DCMEO has logistical guidelines in case reporting, case investigation/triage, and applies the same management principles outlined in various sources. The concerns being addressed here are not about direction or daily function, but rather broad – sometimes conflicting – perspectives and agreement with implemented strategies. However, management strategies do exist, and are functional for the operations of the DCMEO. Additional policies and procedures continue to expand with the office operations and ability of the administrative staff to develop them.

- d. **Action Item Follow-Up:** This is done at the end of every examination with the Pathologist's results email. Upon completing an examination, the Pathologist replies to the MLI and select DCMEO staff on duty at that time with the final results of the autopsy, any anticipated ancillary testing, information about property and evidence, release status, and preliminary diagnosis. If additional records, investigation or donation information is needed, the MLI will be given direction in this note. In order to prevent the MLI from being woken up, disturbed on scene, or constantly needing to be vigilant, the email system has been in place at MLI request since 2015.
- e. **Not Everything Needs to be an Emergency:** It is the understanding that ANY AND ALL questions which immediately impact a case MUST be addressed by direct conversation or phone call. Emails and texts have been known to fail due to IT errors, technical difficulties, weather, and other malfunctions of technology. Thus, when the MLI has a question, it must be addressed to the on call Pathologist directly by phone or conversation, never by email. Likewise, if the Pathologist has a question that must be answered immediately, the Pathologist will reach out with a phone call or direct conversation.
- f. **Improve Case Management:** Dane County Information Management (IM) is working on CM, but this has taken a backseat during the COVID epidemic. The DCMEO has limited control over the workload and progress of the IM department.
- g. **Provide More Opportunities for Employee Growth Development:** Employees are always encouraged to contribute to the office, especially in providing training to other staff, inventory, and office coordination. Additional duties and responsibilities available to employee staff include maintenance of disaster response equipment, digitizing paper records, establishing teaching protocols and programs for trainees, equipment maintenance, and vehicle maintenance. Opportunities for advancement in the department (particularly into leadership or management positions) have occurred multiple times in the recent past (e.g., lead MLI, chief of investigations, deputy director of operations), but have been met with little interest, despite encouragement. Employees interested in additional responsibilities or advancement should reach out to Administration.
- h. **Training:** 1) Fit mask testing was performed this year. Administration is working to establish this yearly due to the changing staff roster. This has budgetary limitations, however. 2) Regular formal DCMEO blood borne pathogen training has been established through Dane County for two (2) years now, and will be repeated yearly. 3) Standard operating procedures are online in a shared drive.
- i. **Inform Clients of their Rights for Unclaimed Bodies:** While an infrequent occurrence, on occasion next of kin has difficulty in arranging for the disposition of their loved ones' remains. In these cases, the MLIs are encouraged to seek out the assistance of the lead MLI or the Chief of Investigations, who provide guidance and direction for the process to follow. MLIs are encouraged to provide as much assistance as possible while still being advocates for the County and realizing the budgetary impact of the decision of a family not to claim their loved one's remains.
- j. **Washing/Cleaning Investigative Vehicles:** All MLIs are responsible for cleaning and maintaining the vehicles, which have been provided to them from Dane County. The vehicles represent a shared resource for MLIs and keeping the vehicles clean is common courtesy. The vehicles should be left for the next shift in the condition they were received.
- k. **Open to New Ideas/Ways of Doing Things:** Staff are encouraged to email suggestions for new ways of doing things to Management; off-the-cuff statements made in hallways, or comments made to the inappropriate staff are not substitutes for a professional approach to change. Implementation of new ideas and approaches must often still fall within general parameters of best practice, and there may not be "shortcuts" to these protocols. In addition, changes in policy are sometimes tied to the work of other office staff, office budgets, and practicality of change on balance, and these factors must be weighed by the Administration for the benefit of the office as a whole.
- l. **Create/Provide Written Not Oral Policies/Processes:** While time is at a premium due to the workload and staffing, Management is systematically working through written policies for the office that will be posted in common shared drives. In lieu of formal signed policies in the staff policy book, employees are provided with written direction in emails, many of which are distributed regularly to accommodate new staff and changing environments. It should be emphasized, however, that there is no way to write policies/processes for every situation that staff will face. These policies provide a general guideline for approaches to a variety of circumstances, but there can never be an answer to every question. When in doubt, an employee is strongly encouraged to seek guidance from supervisors, who are always available 24-7.

- m. **Hold All Employees to Same Standard – No Gender Bias:** No exceptions will be made for gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation; however, it is important to note that not all employees have the same skill sets or level of experience. Requesting a more experienced employee to accomplish a task that a less experienced employee may not be able to do is appropriate (or where possible, supervise the less experienced employee so that they can learn the skill).
- n. **Follow Safety Protocols:** All equipment, clothing, and environment at the DCMEO is acquired through licensed medical vendors and is appropriate for the tasks at hand. All staff are expected to follow safety protocols that are in place for their own and others' safety. If you do not follow the protocols, corrective actions/progressive discipline will be initiated, up to and including termination.
- o. **Fix Morgue Freezer Door Release Latch:** The freezer door has inner safety release mechanisms that make it impossible to be locked from the inside. The morgue staff can take the lead on teaching each other the safety measures in place to educate the staff on how to work the freezer door release latch.

CONCLUSION

All staff have been advised of Dane County's *No Retaliation* and *Harassment* policies. It is expected that all staff abide by these policies. If you believe that you are experiencing any retaliatory or harassing behavior, contact HR Manager, Kabura Mukasa (Mukasa.Kabura@countyofdane); (608) 283-1665) immediately.

This letter concludes this process. The concerns that have been covered during this process will no longer be investigated by DCMEO Management or Employee Relations (ER). If there are new questions/concerns regarding the work environment at DCMEO, you should first speak with your supervisors to attempt to work through them. It is everyone's responsibility to play their part in making the DCMEO work environment conducive, welcoming and peaceful for all. What part are you playing?

Thank you, in advance, for your commitment to DCMEO. Please continue to display the level of professionalism that DCMEO is known for, and follow the work rules that facilitate teamwork and mutual respect among co-workers and supervisors.

Sincerely,

Amy Utzig

Amy Utzig, MS, PHR, SHRM-CP
Human Resources Director

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