



PUBLIC FINANCE WORKFORCE | CASE STUDY

PIERCE COUNTY, WASHINGTON

Updating Hiring Practices and Increasing Inclusivity

➔ How Pierce County, Washington championed change to improve its hiring processes

In 2017 Pierce County's Human Resources Department was struggling with outdated and inefficient hiring practices. To add pressure, the COVID-19 pandemic produced high turnover and depleted applicant pools. This candidate crunch particularly affected positions in wastewater positions as well as civil engineers, medical examiners, and corrections officers. By breaking out of old mindsets and innovating its hiring practices, Pierce County has been able to reshape its culture and vastly improve its hiring rate. Here is how staff led this change.

PIERCE COUNTY, WASHINGTON

POPULATION: 921,000



Pierce County is the second-most populous county in the State of Washington and encompasses a major urban area, a large portion of Puget Sound, and Mount Rainier. As of 2020, Pierce County employed over 3,000 people, making it one of the biggest employers in Tacoma, the county seat.

GFOA spoke with Pierce County's Director of Human Resources Judy Archer and its Recruitment Manager Lindsay Derrick. When she was hired in 2018, Archer brought over two decades of human resources experience in the private sector. Derrick started her career in the armed services. She was hired by the county in 2017 and promoted to her current role in 2022.

THE SITUATION

Outdated hiring practices, lack of inclusivity, and shrinking applicant pools

Lindsay and Judy were hired into a very different environment than the one thriving in Pierce County today. Lindsay described the department in 2017 as "stagnant," "transactional," and struggling to meet the unique needs of each department they serve. Many employees and departments were clinging to inefficient hiring practices simply because 'that's the way we've always done things.' In addition to existing cultural challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic brought high turnover and depleted applicant pools, which affected almost every county position. Skill-specific national labor shortages have compounded these trends, hitting wastewater positions, civil engineers, medical examiners, and corrections officers particularly hard.



PIERCE COUNTY, WASHINGTON

THE SOLUTION

Customized position descriptions and proactive scheduling collaboration

With many governments receiving record-low applicants, Pierce County understands how vital it is to ensure that quality candidates don't slip through their nets. For Lindsay, that effort starts long before a job opening is even posted. Her recruitment team often updates and customizes position descriptions to ensure they are specific, dynamic, and concise. They also review each job posting's minimum and preferred qualifications and clarify that equivalencies are accepted. Not only do these practices increase the number of applications a job posting receives, but they also increase diversity within the applicant pool.

Staff also use analysis of historical data to take a proactive approach. When a position opens in Pierce County that recruiters have identified as 'hard-to-fill' (based on past applicant flow, past time to fill, specialized skills required, and market trends), a recruitment planning meeting is quickly scheduled. At this meeting, the recruiter, the department hiring manager, and the sourcer—who targets passive applicants—begin preparing for each stage of the hiring process. Preparing for interviews is one of the most crucial tasks at this meeting. Meeting attendees identify who will be on the interview panel and place holds

PROBLEMS TO SOLVE

- ❓ Modernize hiring processes
- ❓ Reduce inefficiency
- ❓ Reduce vacancy rates
- ❓ Create a culture of inclusivity

RESULTS

- ✅ 23 days faster time to fill vacancies
- ✅ 26% reduction in time to hire

on their calendars weeks in advance. This way, the department is ready to conduct interviews before the opening is even posted.

After applications come in, the next step is to conduct phone screenings for those candidates who meet the minimum requirements or demonstrate equivalence. These screenings happen long before the position is closed. During these calls, recruiters or hiring managers ask candidates basic questions to tease out whether they have skills that are complementary to the position they are applying for. Those candidates who show some potential are booked into one of the already scheduled interview times. Although some hiring managers initially pushed back against the idea of calling candidates with questions before the

official interview, this practice has now become a vital piece of Pierce County's hiring process.

THE RESULTS

As Pierce County's Human Resources Director, Judy Archer's advice for other government employees is all about representation. "You can't separate recruitment from DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion). We have to care about people where they are and who they are if we want them to trust us and work with us." Through their efforts to review and refine each aspect of the hiring process, Judy and her team are ensuring that they recruit a talented workforce that reflects the constituents they serve. To check on their progress, visit <https://open.piercecountywa.gov>.

After helping reshape the recruiting culture at Pierce County, Recruitment Manager Lindsay Derrick knows what it takes to break down bad habits. "We must pivot away from a 'that's the way it's always been done' mentality. Encourage collaboration and inclusivity. It will make your team feel safe and comfortable sharing great ideas." Thanks to this new culture of innovation, recruiters and hiring managers at Pierce County now treat each hiring effort as an adaptable and individualized process. As a result, they are receiving more applications in response to openings and their time to fill has reduced from an average of 87 days in 2017 to an average of 64 days today.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT**Workforce 2023: Solving Hiring Challenges**

GFOA has heard consistently from members about the difficulties of hiring in local government. In search of solutions, we identified eight municipalities across the country that have grown their applicant pools and reduced hiring times through process change. Their solutions are lessons to inspire other local governments to solve their hiring challenges.

Learn more: gfoa.org/workforce2023