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SPECIAL LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION TO  
STUDY AND PROVIDE RECOMMENDATIONS  
FOR CHANGES TO THE MERIT SYSTEM  
FOR PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATION AND  
PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT IN THE  
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES AND  
THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN, YOUTH  
AND FAMILIES

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Draft Report

Submitted January 29, 2023

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## Commission Members

- Representative Patricia Serpa, Chair – (Democrat, District 27)
- Representative Deborah Fellela Vice Chair – (Democrat, District 43)
- Representative Sherry Roberts, – (Republican, District 29)
- Brenna McCabe, Deputy Director, Department of Administration
- Kimberly Merolla-Brito, Director, Rhode Island Department of Human Services
- Michael Cronan, Director of Legislative and Constituent Affairs, Executive Office of Health and Human Services
- Colleen Walters, Interdepartmental Project Manager, Department of Children, Youth and Families
- Matthew Gunnip, President, Local 580, SEIU AFL-CIO
- James Cenerini, Legislative Affairs, Political Action Coordinator, RI Council 94, AFSME, AFL-CIO
- Jennifer Griffith, Esq., Public Member
- Mary Archibald, PH. D., Public Member

Dear Speaker Shekarchi:

I am pleased to provide you with the findings and recommendations of the Special Legislative Commission to Study and Provide Recommendations for Changes to the Merit System for Personnel Administration and Personnel Management in the Department of Human Services and Department of Children, Youth and Families.

This eleven-member Commission included three members of the Rhode Island House of Representatives; the Director of the Rhode Island Department of Administration, or designee; the Director of the Rhode Island Department of Human Services, or designee; the Secretary of the Executive Office of Health and Human Services, or designee; the Director of the Department of Children, Youth and Families, or designee; the President of Local 580, SEIU, AFL-CIO, or designee; the President of the Rhode Island Council or designee; and two members of the public appointed by the Speaker of the House.

The Commission was convened to make a comprehensive study and provide recommendations for changes to the merit system of personnel administration and personnel management for the Department of Human Services and Department of Children, Youth and Families. Accordingly, the Commission heard and discussed various topics including: the structure of the Department of Administration, Division of Human Services; the hiring processes at the Departments of Health and Human Services and Children, Youth and Families and the perspectives of the unions representing employees in the departments.

This final report is a culmination of five hearings that began in September, 2023 and ended January, 2023. It contains information presented by various witnesses who testified before the Commission, including professionals and representatives from Department of Administration, as well as testimony submitted by members of the public, which the Commission has studied.

I would like to express my gratitude to all members of the Commission for their willingness to take part in these discussions, and we appreciate the investment of the time and talent that they graciously provided.

Sincerely,

Representative Patricia Serpa  
Chair

## Findings

The Commission studied the Merit System for Personnel Administration and Personnel Management in the Department of Human Services and Department of Children, Youth and Families and, based on such study, testimony and material presented to it, and discussions by and amongst its members. Accordingly, the Commission finds as follows:

- The Civil Service Exams are tested tools that ensure that the applicants have the capacity to provide vital services to some of our most vulnerable populations. The tests also guard against patronage and the use of subjective standards in hiring decisions.
- The state is facing a persistent labor shortage, particularly in the social services.
- The average time to hire a new employee, while improving, is still over 100 days.
  - The average time to hire:

DHS	CY22	202 days
	CY23	105 days
DCYF	CY22	220 days
	CY23	104 days
- The Personnel Action Request system is causing delays in hiring. The Personnel Action Request process at the Department of Human Services has 10 steps and must be approved by seven separate people.
- There are many factors making it difficult to fill positions at DCYF and DHS outside of the merit system and civil service exams including:
  - Rhode Island state jobs are less attractive due to policy decisions and multiple rounds of pension and benefit cuts.
  - Neighboring states pay more for comparable jobs (including eligibility technician and social case worker).
  - Few applicants for state jobs is a national issue.
- There have been delays in administering the civil service exam which can stall hiring. The last list for names for DHS Eligibility Technician expired in April of 2023 and the test was administered in August.

## Recommendations

Based on its study of Merit System for Personnel Administration and Personnel Management in the Department of Human Services and Department of Children, Youth and Families along with various related issues, testimony and material presented to it, and discussions by and amongst its members, the Commission suggests the following recommendations:

### Recruitment

- Strengthen partnerships with higher education institutions to look at innovative programming and help create a pipeline for social service workers.
- Explore creating the capacity for the state to match applicants to appropriate opportunities if they initially apply for a state job and are not qualified for the position.
- Explore certificate programs for candidates who have experience in the field and the desire to do the work but do not have the specific degree required.
- Explore opportunities for staff incentive programs.
- Continue the continuous recruitment status for Eligibility Technician (ETs), social Caseworkers (SCW) and Customer Services Aides (CSA's) and explore extending it to other hard to fill positions. Consider developing an open and continuous application and exam process on the state website.

### Accessibility of the Civil Service Exam

- Explore providing a study guide and/or sample questions for the civil service tests.
- Provide more frequent testing on a regular schedule (for example: quarterly).
- Explore offering the civil service tests in Spanish and, potentially, other languages or possibly give more time for multilanguage speakers. The state would need to ensure the candidates possess sufficient English verbal and written language skills to perform the job that is subject to testing.
- Explore computer-based testing to reduce the bulk of administrative burden and evaluate computer skills. This would need to account for security, identification and proper scoring capabilities. The state could possibly partner with a state university or college; or hire an external vendor. This proposal would need a full review/assessment.

### Hiring Process

- Continue to explore opportunities to streamline the PAR process.

- Clear language that allows DCYF and DHS to call through the list by ranked score but eliminate excessive waiting periods for a response. As long as the department makes a diligent effort to contact the candidate there should not be a long wait time.
- Set a reasonable time that exams expire. There is a DCYF social casework exam list from an exam offered in 2019. The statute needs clarity.
- Exams should be administered more often.
- Explore forwarding all qualified candidate's names at once to the agency and/or expand the number of certified/ranked names that can be given to an agency at a time following a civil service exam allowing for a more nimble list certification process that can flex during individual FTE and mass onboarding.
- Standardize an exit interview process during offboarding process. (Human Resources is already reviewing via the Enterprise Resource Planning implementation.)
- Assess the effectiveness of the DCYF Pilot program in terms of best practices and outcomes. This program should run for one year to fully gather all data and account for any variables that occur over time.

**Appendix A – Resolutions**

**House Resolution 2023-H 6436**

**<https://webserver.rilegislature.gov/BillText/BillText23/HouseText23/H6436.pdf>**

**(See attached)**

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## **Appendix B - Meeting Agendas and Presentations**

### **1. September 28, 2023**

Agenda:

<https://www.rilegislature.gov/commissions/MSC/commdocs/2023-9-28%20Agenda.pdf>

### **2. October 16, 2023**

Agenda:

<https://www.rilegislature.gov/commissions/MSC/commdocs/2023-10-16%20Agenda.pdf>

Presentation:

<https://www.rilegislature.gov/commissions/MSC/commdocs/2023-10-16%20Presentation.pdf>

### **3. October 24, 2023**

Agenda :

<https://www.rilegislature.gov/commissions/MSC/commdocs/2023-10-24%20Agenda.pdf>

Presentations:

<https://www.rilegislature.gov/commissions/MSC/commdocs/2023-10-24%20DHS%20presentation.pdf>

<https://www.rilegislature.gov/commissions/MSC/commdocs/2023-10-24%20DCYF%20presentation.pdf>

### **4. November 16, 2023**

Agenda:

<https://www.rilegislature.gov/commissions/MSC/commdocs/2023-11-16%20Agenda.pdf>

### **5. December 6, 2023**

Agenda:

<https://www.rilegislature.gov/commissions/MSC/commdocs/2023-12-6%20Agenda.pdf>

## **Appendix C - Written Testimony and Material**

**(These documents have been posted in the Merit System Commission section of the Commission/Task Forces tab of the State of Rhode Island General Assembly website: <https://www.rilegislature.gov>)**

1. Written Testimony Submitted by Kate McGovern  
<https://www.rilegislature.gov/commissions/MSC/commdocs/2023-12-6%20McGovern%20testimony.pdf>
2. NeoGov Quiet Quit Crisis Report  
<https://www.rilegislature.gov/commissions/MSC/commdocs/2023-11-16%20NEOGOVQuiet-Crisis-Report.pdf>
3. DHS Hiring Data  
<https://www.rilegislature.gov/commissions/MSC/commdocs/2023-11-16%20DHS%20Data.pdf>