**ICMA 2010 PROGRAM EXCELLENCE SUBMISSION**

**STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE**

**EMPLOYEE RELATIONS PROGRAM**

**Problem Assessment:**

 As any city manager knows, the best way to ensure that a municipality runs efficiently is to make sure the employees are invested in excellent customer service. To achieve that goal, employees must want to work as a team, must feel that their voices are heard.

 When Ronald Miller became Aurora’s city manager in 1997, he thought employees did not feel that the city manager’s office was accessible. Realizing that the rank and file are often the people who have the best ideas for how to streamline procedures, Miller wanted to create a more welcoming atmosphere. With nearly 3,000 employees working in 34 different facilities, Miller wanted to find a way to unite employees, given them a voice and help them feel they were able to implement changes when needed. More importantly, he wanted to find ways to reward them when their ideas streamlined a process and helped the city run more efficiently.

**Program implementation and costs:**

 Miller’s first step was to establish an employee relations group called PACE – Partnership of Aurora City Employees. The group is comprised of members from each department. At the group’s monthly meetings, the members set the agenda and often raise issues brought to them by other employees in their department. Those conversations have, in some cases, led to a change in policy, but more importantly, the forum has helped build a feeling of camaraderie among employees. It also has helped employees meet their colleagues from other departments, which has increased interdepartmental cooperation.

 Miller runs the meetings, and in order to increase comfort, the meeting atmosphere is quite casual. Meals are served at each gathering, and the location changes each month so employees have a chance to see the various city facilities. Each meeting also includes a presentation about the facility in which the employees are meeting, which expands employee knowledge about the range of services the city provides.

 Membership on PACE is voluntary and rotates every six months, giving all employees a chance to participate in the process. It’s become so popular that there has to be a random drawing to choose new members.

 In order to increase the sense of unity, members on PACE are given a button-down shirt with the PACE logo. While that type of gesture might seem insignificant, it’s been a great way for PACE members to feel as if they are part of a solution

 The PACE group also has PACE “power forms,” available on the employee intranet. The forms can be filled out anonymously and can be used to ask virtually any question. The forms are routed to the PACE staff liaison who researches the issue and posts the response.

 The PACE program takes very little money to run: it operates on a $3,000 a year budget, which includes the cost of shirts and food provided at each meeting.

 While PACE members have been an essential tool for communicating to other employees, the city’s efforts don’t stop there. Aurora also publishes an online monthly –e-zine called “City Scene.” The e-zine covers a wide range of topics including how to be an environmentally responsible employee, to tips on protecting themselves from workplace violence.

 And once a year, “City Scene” highlights winners from the city’s employee recognition program, which honors staff members for their years of service and for their extraordinary accomplishments. Employees can be nominated by their colleagues, and one award category recognizes an entire division or department for a job well done.

 The awards ceremonies are held during business hours so employees can easily attend, and each year, hundreds of employees attend to celebrate their peers’ accomplishments.

 While being honored publicly helps employees feel valued, the Extraordinary Service Program puts extra money in employee’s pay checks.

 ESP encourages employees, work groups and committees to develop ideas and business process improvement recommendations that result in operational benefits to the city. Those ideas can cut costs, raise revenues, improve service or improve the general welfare of the city’s work force. Employees who generate ways to streamline efficiency are rewarded 15 percent of the first year’s net savings. For example, one employee suggested that the city handle its own collection procedures for checks that bounced after being presented for payment of fines. The city was using a collection agency, but only received the face value of the check plus a $7 returned check free. In the first year the city ran its own collection procedures, the collections staff garnered $35,136 from 251 customers. The employee received a check for $3,000

**Tangible results:**

 PACE members have been instrumental in implementing a host of changes and creating a variety of programs that have increased morale, improved efficiency and helped employees work together. Some of those efforts include:

* PACE members helped the city complete an employee compensation study that compared Aurora’s compensation to other comparable municipalities. Salaries and benefits were adjusted as a result.
* PACE members have organized fundraisers and raised thousands of dollars for the Children’s Hospital, the American Heart Association and breast cancer awareness and education.
* The PACE program has increased morale, improved interdepartmental cooperation and created an atmosphere in which employees feel comfortable approaching the city manager with comments or concerns.
* Creation of “Annual Employees and their Families Art Exhibit and Competition” which provides scholarships and financial awards to winners.
* Organization of “Summer Splash,” a citywide employee picnic and 5k run held at Aurora Reservoir.

In addition, the Extraordinary Service Program has rewarded countless employees for their innovation and in the 13 years it’s been in effect, the program has saved the city more than $4 million.

**Lessons learned:**

 Municipalities simply cannot take their employees for granted. As workloads increase and resources shrink, employees must be recognized for the important and hard work they do each day. When they are given a voice, an opportunity to express concerns – large and small – they feel more valued. That translates into more willingness to stay a little later or work a little harder or just to do their jobs with a pleasant attitude. Residents often gauge their opinion of a municipality on their experiences with an individual employee, and if their interactions are positive, it can make a world of difference. Aurora’s employee relations program provides numerous ways for employees to be proud of their jobs and the city in which they work.