



# COUNTY OF HUMBOLDT

## HUMAN RESOURCES

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### Appointed Department Head Reporting Structure Study – December 2024

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#### I. Introduction

In response to the Board of Supervisors' (BOS) direction, the Human Resources Department conducted a comprehensive study examining Humboldt County's current administrative reporting structure and potential alternatives. The primary purpose of this analysis was to provide the Board with detailed information to inform their evaluation of possible structural changes, particularly regarding the reporting relationships between department heads, the County Administrative Office (CAO), and the Board itself. Through a mixed-methods approach, the study gathered perspectives from Board members, department heads, and neighboring counties to present a balanced view of the current system and potential modifications. Rather than advocating for any particular outcome, this report aims to equip the Board with the necessary data and insights to make an informed decision about whether structural changes would benefit the county's operations. The findings encompass stakeholder perspectives, regional comparisons, and potential implementation considerations, allowing the Board to weigh various factors in determining whether to maintain the current structure or pursue alternatives.

## II. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach across three distinct phases of data collection to comprehensively assess the current organizational structure and potential changes to Humboldt County's administrative reporting relationships.

### a. Phase 1: Board of Supervisors Interviews

Individual interviews were conducted with members of the BOS to gather their perspectives on the current organizational structure and potential changes. These one-on-one interviews allowed for in-depth exploration of each supervisor's views regarding administrative efficiency, oversight requirements, and constituent service needs. The interviews focused particularly on the relationships between department heads, the County Administrative Officer (CAO), and the Board. For the purpose of the study, general considerations made by Board members were used rather than individual opinions and perspectives so as to not violate the Brown Act.

### b. Phase 2: Department Head Survey

A comprehensive survey was distributed to all county department heads, both appointed and elected, to gather their perspectives on the current and potential future organizational structures. The survey aimed to assess their experiences with the existing reporting structure and their views on possible modifications to the system. While the survey was distributed to all department heads, the response rate was limited, with 11 out of 20 department heads participating. This response rate suggests that the findings should be interpreted with caution, as they may not fully represent the views of all department heads.

### c. Phase 3: Regional Comparative Analysis

The final phase consisted of two parallel data collection efforts to understand regional practices and compensation. Direct outreach to personnel offices in 15 Northern California counties was conducted via telephone and email correspondence to gather information about their organizational structures and reporting relationships. Nine counties provided detailed information about their administrative structures. Salary data for CAO/ County Executive Officer (CEO) positions was collected from the California State Controller's Office public compensation database ([publicpay.ca.gov](http://publicpay.ca.gov)), providing standardized compensation information across the surveyed counties.

### Study Limitations:

Several limitations should be noted when interpreting the study's findings:

- a. The limited response rate from department heads (11 out of 20 responses) may not provide a complete picture of departmental perspectives.

- b. Five counties (Del Norte, Mendocino, Modoc, Lassen, and Butte) did not provide information about their reporting structures.
- c. The complexity of county organizational structures may have led to varying interpretations of reporting relationships by responding personnel offices.
- d. The analysis does not account for differences in county population sizes or budget scales.

### **III. Summary of Data**

Among Board members, a key consideration emerges in balancing administrative efficiency with effective oversight and constituent services. Any change must allow for communication between Board members and department heads to quickly resolve constituent concerns. Among department heads, the proposed change has sparked varied reactions. In a survey of the 11 department heads who participated, opinions ranged from support to skepticism. Three department heads strongly favor the change, seeing potential for improved organizational efficiency. Another four stand firmly opposed, concerned about losing their operational autonomy. The remaining four either offered conditional support or stayed neutral on the issue. Many expressed worry about potential micromanagement under a new structure and the possible disruption to their established working relationships with the Board. Overall, the results showed a slight leaning to maintaining the status quo. The current system, while inconsistent in terms of Board interaction and performance evaluations, offers a level of flexibility that many department heads value.

Looking at the broader regional context reveals that Humboldt County's current structure is somewhat unique. A survey of 15 Northern California counties showed that most follow a more traditional model where department heads report to the CAO rather than directly to the Board. Among nine counties that provided organizational data, seven use this hierarchical structure. This regional comparison suggests that while Humboldt's current structure is uncommon, any move to align with regional norms should be approached thoughtfully and with careful consideration of local needs and concerns. The survey also examined CAO and CEO compensation across these counties, finding that Humboldt's salary range of \$219,066 to \$255,280 sits squarely in the middle - lower than Bay Area-adjacent counties like Napa (\$364,998) but competitive with similar inland counties.

### **IV. Overview of Board Perspectives**

The BOS presents a range of views regarding potential changes to the county's organizational structure. These perspectives particularly focus around the question of modifying reporting relationships between appointed department heads to flow through the CAO rather than the BOS, or whether the status quo should be upheld. The discussion centers on finding an optimal balance between administrative efficiency, direct oversight, and effective governance.

The proposed changes primarily involve restructuring how department heads receive guidance and report their activities. The current system allows for direct interactions between Board members and department heads, which has both advantages and challenges. Potential modifications aim to create a more streamlined communication process while maintaining the Board's ability to serve constituents effectively.

Key considerations in the proposed structural changes include:

a. Communication and Decision-Making

The current system sometimes results in inconsistent guidance, with multiple Board members potentially providing conflicting directions to department heads. A restructured approach could establish clearer communication channels, potentially leading to more efficient decision-making processes.

b. Oversight and Strategic Focus

There's a recognized need to balance administrative oversight with strategic policy development. A revised structure could allow Board members to concentrate more on long-term planning and policy matters, while the CAO manages day-to-day operational oversight.

c. Constituent Services

A critical concern is maintaining the Board's ability to rapidly address constituent needs. Any structural change must preserve the responsiveness that currently exists in department-Board interactions.

d. Departmental Relationships

The proposed changes must carefully consider existing relationships, particularly with elected department heads who have their own voter-mandated responsibilities. The goal is to enhance coordination without undermining departmental autonomy.

e. Potential Implementation Approach

Stakeholders suggest a cautious, phased approach, to any structural changes through pilot programs with select departments which maintain clear communication channels throughout the transition, establishment of specific metrics to evaluate success, and maintaining structured interactions between the Board and department heads.

f. Analysis of Key Considerations

Key considerations for potential changes include streamlining communication processes, ensuring consistent management across departments, preserving direct constituent services, maintaining appropriate oversight, and respecting departmental autonomy. The proposed structure could lead to more efficient decision-making, establish clearer lines of authority,

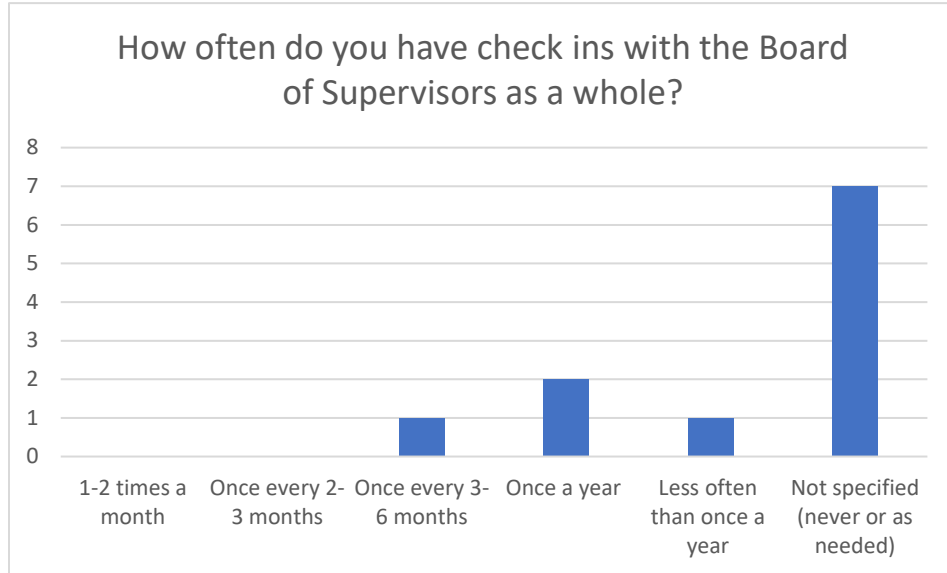
allow Board members to focus more intensely on policy matters, and create more equitable power dynamics within the county governance system. However, the proposed changes are not without potential challenges. There are legitimate concerns about concentrating too much power in the CAO position, potentially losing the nuanced direct relationships between Board members and department heads, increasing the workload for administrative staff potentially beyond their capacity, and facing resistance to structural changes from various stakeholders.

The fundamental challenge lies in creating an organizational structure that balances administrative efficiency with direct oversight and constituent responsiveness. Any successful approach will require careful consideration of both operational and political realities, with a commitment to maintaining the Board's core mission of effective county governance. Budget control and performance oversight remain critical components of this potential restructuring. The Board continues to explore ways to enhance its ability to guide and monitor departmental activities without creating unnecessary bureaucratic barriers.

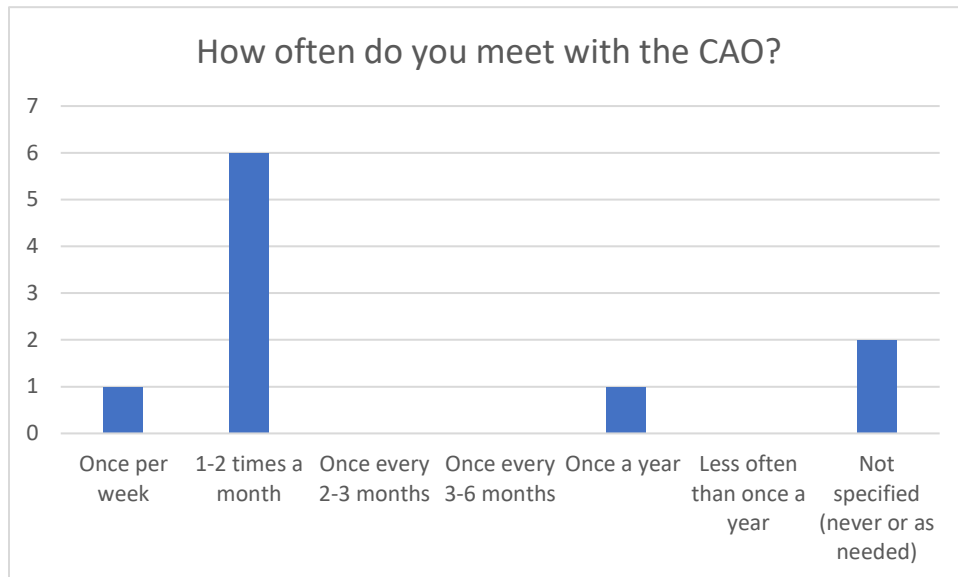
Suggestions for implementation include a cautious, phased approach. The goal is to create a flexible system that can be adjusted as needed while maintaining the core principles of effective county governance. The path forward involves finding a nuanced solution that improves administrative processes while preserving the Board's ability to serve the community effectively. Continued dialogue, careful planning, and a willingness to adapt will be crucial in developing an optimal organizational structure that meets the evolving needs of the county and its constituents.

## **V. Overview of Department Head Perspectives**

A total of 11 responses were collected amongst appointed and elected department heads. Department head perspectives were varied regarding the current reporting structure and the proposed change; however most participants did not express support for the proposed idea. Under the existing system, appointed department heads report directly to the BOS as a collective body rather than to a single individual. However, the degree of interaction and direction they receive from the BOS collectively and on an individual level varies significantly amongst department heads and Board members. *(Figure 1)* Additionally, there was also varying responses amongst participants in the degree of interaction they have with the CAO in the current model. The survey reveals significant inconsistencies in how often department heads meet with the BOS, ranging from monthly to yearly to never. *(Figure 2)* While not consistent across the CAO and Board, the results showed that department heads are meeting with the CAO more regularly. Similarly, experiences with performance evaluations differ greatly, with some receiving them annually and others never undergoing a formal review process.



*Figure 1*



*Figure 2*

Some department heads reported that they feel the current structure works well for them and their departments, providing the necessary autonomy and support from the Board. They appreciate the ability to operate with discretion and autonomy, only needing to involve the Board when necessary. These participants do not foresee any major difficulties with the current

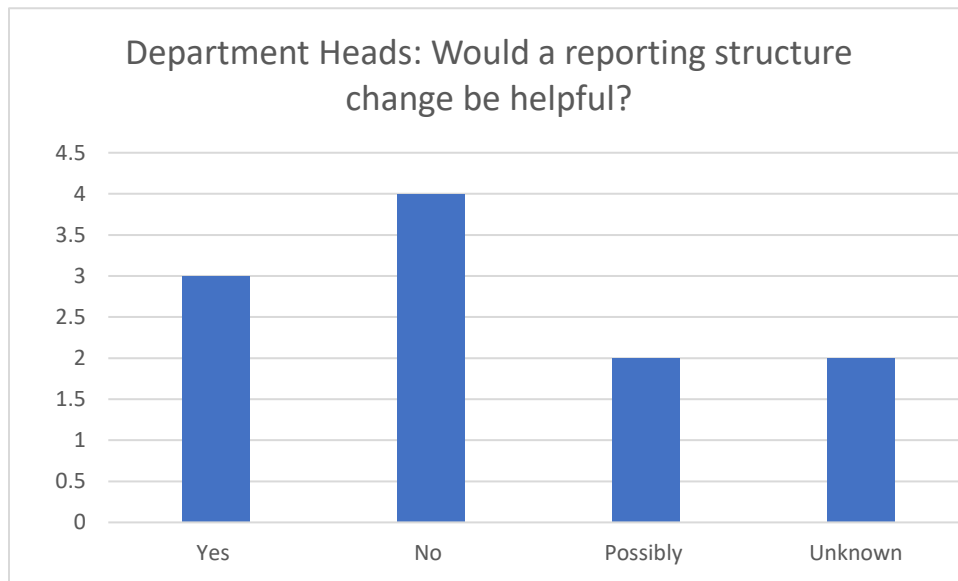
arrangement and would prefer to maintain the status quo. Regarding the proposed change to have appointed department heads report directly to the CAO rather than the BOS as a collective body, opinions are mixed. A few participants see potential benefits in this structure, such as having a single point of contact and more streamlined processes. They believe this could improve efficiency and communication.

However, many of the participants express significant concerns about this proposed change. One participant, for example, worries that it could lead to micromanagement and interference in departmental operations, potentially eroding the autonomy they currently enjoy. Others, anticipate that reporting to the CAO would make communication and collaboration with the Board more difficult, disrupting their existing working relationships. Some department heads note that the success of the proposed change would largely depend on the personality and communication style of the CAO. They emphasize the importance of maintaining a strong, collaborative relationship with the CAO to make the new reporting structure effective.

Overall, the survey responses highlight the diversity of experiences and perspectives among department heads regarding the current and proposed reporting structures. While a few see potential advantages to the change, others express reservations, fearing a loss of autonomy, increased micromanagement, and disruption to their established working relationships with the BOS. Three department heads stood firmly in support of the change, seeing potential for improved organizational efficiency. Four others were resolutely opposed, viewing the proposal with deep suspicion. Another three occupied a middle ground, offering conditional or lukewarm support, while one respondent remained essentially silent on the matter.

When directly asked about the potential helpfulness of the change, the responses painted an equally complex picture. Three enthusiastically endorsed the idea, four flatly rejected it, and two hedged their bets with a noncommittal "possibly." Two others remained silent on the question. *(Figure 3)* One participant reported feeling that appointed department heads reporting to the CAO would benefit the county, its employees, and its citizens. This stood in stark contrast to those who saw the proposed change as nothing more than a political power grab, fearful of losing the autonomy they had carefully cultivated within their departments.

The hesitation ran deep and was rooted in genuine operational concerns. Department heads worried about potential micromanagement that could strangle their departments' effectiveness. They feared reduced communication with board members, whose district-specific knowledge and direct engagement they valued. The prospect of losing their current operational flexibility troubled many, and a pervasive uncertainty about how exactly such a restructuring would be implemented cast a long shadow of doubt. Ultimately, while no overwhelming majority emerged, the sentiment leaned slightly towards preserving the status quo. Most department heads approached the proposed change with a mixture of skepticism and caution, their responses revealing a profound commitment to maintaining the delicate balance of local government operations.



*Figure 3*

#### Department Head Perceptions of Current Reporting Structure:

- Some participants feel the current structure works well for them and their department, providing the necessary autonomy and support from the BOS.
- Others feel they receive very little direction or interaction with the full Board.
- There is inconsistency in how often department heads meet with the Board, ranging from monthly to yearly to never.
- Experiences with performance evaluations also vary greatly - some receive them annually, while others have never had a formal evaluation.

#### Department Head Reactions to Proposed Change:

- A few participants feel the proposed change to report to the CAO could be beneficial, citing advantages like having a single point of contact, less politicized decision making, and more streamlined processes.
- However, many expressed concerns about this change, fearing a loss of autonomy, potential micromanagement, and disruption to their existing working relationships with the Board.
- Some feel the change would make communication and collaboration with the Board more difficult.
- A couple participants note the importance of the personality and communication style of the CAO in determining whether this structure would be effective.



## VI. Overview of North State County Data

This analysis draws from two distinct data sources. Information about county reporting structures was gathered through direct communication with county personnel offices via telephone calls and email correspondence during the data collection period. This primary research approach allowed for direct insights into each county's organizational structure, though it's worth noting that organizational complexities and variations in institutional knowledge among staff members may influence the precision of the reported structures. Salary data was obtained from the California State Controller's Office through their public compensation database ([publicpay.ca.gov](http://publicpay.ca.gov)), which provides standardized compensation information for public employees across California's local government agencies.

An examination of administrative reporting structures and CAO and CEO compensation across 15 Northern California counties, including Humboldt County, reveals significant variations in both organizational structure and executive compensation. (*Figure 4*) These variations have important implications for county governance and administrative efficiency. The data indicates that among responding counties, the predominant administrative model follows a hierarchical structure where appointed department heads report to the CAO or CEO, who then reports to the BOS. Among the nine counties that provided structural information through their personnel offices, seven counties (Trinity, Siskiyou, Shasta, Glenn, Lake, Napa, and Plumas) utilize this traditional hierarchical model.

Several counties employ alternative approaches to their reporting structures. Tehama County has implemented a joint reporting structure where department heads report to both the CAO and BOS. Sonoma County operates under a hybrid model, dividing reporting responsibilities between the CAO and BOS. Notably, Humboldt County employs a distinct approach where department heads report directly to the Board as a collective body, representing a minority approach among the surveyed counties.

### Salary Analysis:

The analysis of the CAO salary data reveals substantial variation across the region, with clear patterns emerging based on geographic location and economic factors. (*Figure 5*) Napa County offers the highest compensation amongst counties viewed in this study, with a salary of \$364,998, followed by Sonoma County with a range of \$299,627 to \$364,202. At the lower end of the spectrum, Trinity County provides a salary of \$147,161. The median salary range across all surveyed counties falls approximately between \$219,000 and \$250,000. A notable pattern emerges when examining the salary structures: counties closer to the Bay Area tend to offer higher compensation packages. Several counties, including Mendocino, Trinity, Siskiyou, Lassen, and Napa, reported single-point salaries rather than ranges. Among counties using salary ranges, Shasta County shows the greatest spread of \$66,427 between its minimum and maximum.

Humboldt County's CAO salary range of \$219,066 to \$255,280 positions it squarely within the median range for surveyed counties. While this compensation level falls significantly below that of Bay Area-adjacent counties, it remains competitive with similarly sized inland counties. The

data reveals a clear urban-rural divide in compensation structures. Urban and Bay Area-adjacent counties typically offer compensation packages exceeding \$300,000, while rural counties generally range from \$150,000 to \$250,000. Humboldt County positions itself in the upper tier of rural county compensation.

#### North State County Data Limitations:

Several limitations in the data should be noted. Five counties (Del Norte, Mendocino, Modoc, Lassen, and Butte) did not provide reporting structure information through the personnel office outreach. Modoc County's reported salary range (\$6,596 - \$142,912) appears unusual and may require verification. Plumas County reported total wages rather than a salary range. Additionally, the analysis does not account for varying budget sizes and population differences among the counties.

While the salary data from the State Controller's Office provides a standardized source of compensation information, the reporting structure data relies on individual responses from county personnel offices. The complexity of county organizational structures and the potential for varying interpretations of reporting relationships suggests that future research might benefit from more detailed organizational analysis. As it may be difficult to identify good comparator counties for the purpose of this study, it may be beneficial to focus on counties using models identified as successful by Humboldt's BOS.

In conclusion, while Humboldt County's CAO compensation appears appropriately positioned within the market, its unique reporting structure represents a significant departure from regional norms. This structural difference may warrant ongoing evaluation to ensure optimal administrative efficiency and effectiveness. Regular assessment of both compensation and organizational structure will help ensure the county maintains its competitive position while maximizing operational effectiveness.

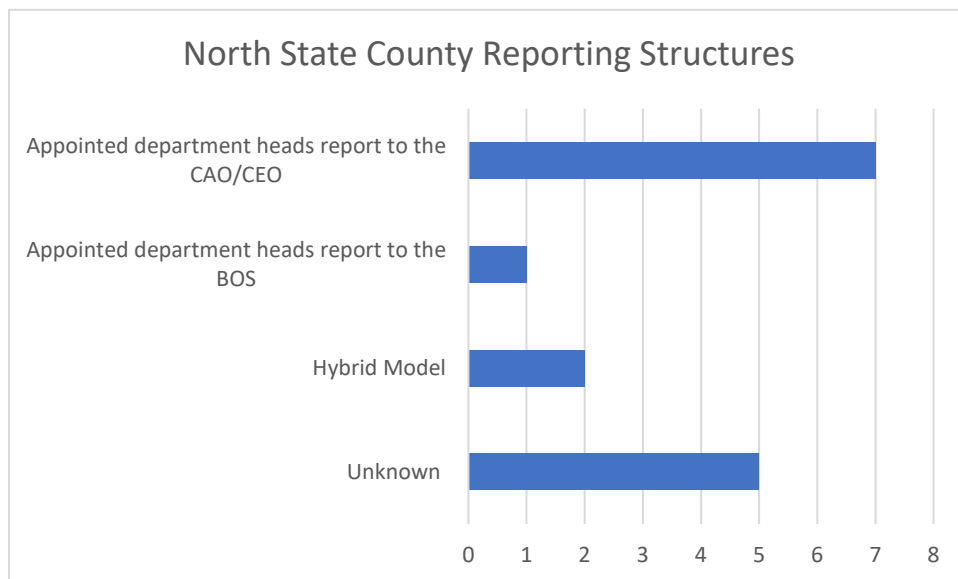


Figure 4

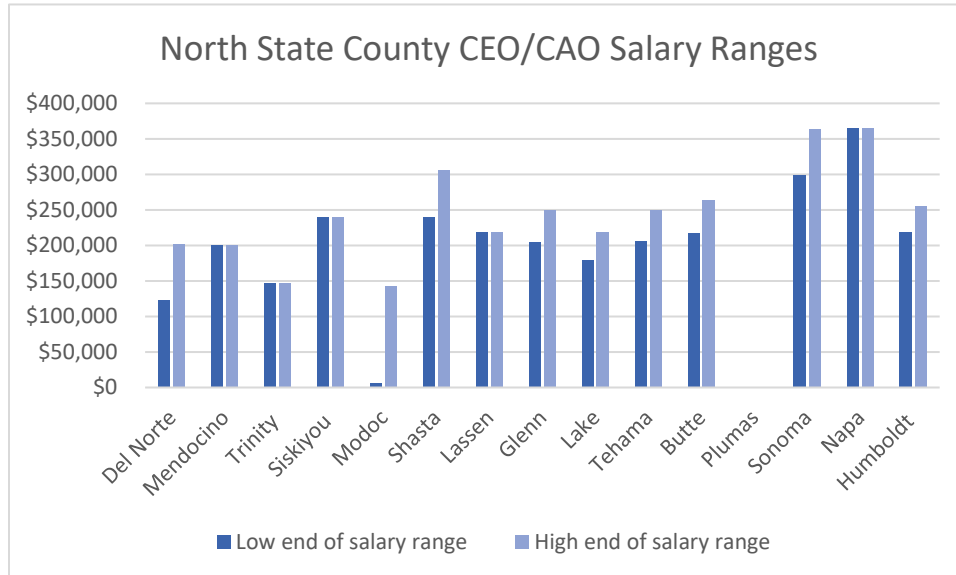


Figure 5

## VII. Next Phases for Consideration

### a. Conduct a comparative analysis:

- Research reporting structures in similar counties, focusing on those mentioned as successful by Board members.
- Analyze how these structures address concerns raised by Board members.
- Consider requesting an outside study on the county's current model.

### b. Stakeholder engagement:

- Board may consider requiring participation in a survey for appointed department heads to understand their perspectives on the current and potential new structures. The survey of departments heads in this study resulted in 11 responses between both elected and appointed department heads which resulted in data that is not representative of all department heads.
- This could help anticipate and address potential resistance or concerns and also consider representative feedback when making a decision.

### c. Develop potential reporting structures for further evaluation:

- Create 2-3 specific structural models based on the Board's feedback and comparative analysis.

- Include clear delineation of roles, responsibilities, and communication channels in each model.

**d. Impact assessment:**

- For each proposed model, conduct an analysis of potential impacts on efficiency, accountability, and constituent service.
- Consider legal implications, particularly regarding elected department heads.

**e. Phased approach consideration:**

- Develop a potential phased implementation pilot plan, allowing for adjustments based on early outcomes.
- This could help address concerns about dramatic changes and allow for fine-tuning.

**f. Facilitated Board discussion:**

- Organize a workshop or retreat for Board members to discuss the findings and potential models.
- This could help build consensus and identify key priorities for any structural changes.

**g. Make no changes with an option to revisit this topic at a later date.**

**Potential hybrid models:**

**a. Tiered reporting structure:**

- Larger, more complex departments continue reporting to the Board.
- Smaller departments with appointed department heads report to the CAO.
- This addresses concerns about the CAO's workload while streamlining some processes.

**b. Policy-focused Board with administrative exceptions:**

- Appointed department heads generally report to the CAO.
- Board retains direct involvement in hiring/firing decisions and major policy initiatives for appointed department heads.
- Regular (e.g., quarterly) check-ins between Board and all department heads for alignment.

**c. CAO as facilitator model:**

- CAO manages day-to-day operations and performance evaluations.
- Board maintains final authority on all major decisions.
- CAO facilitates more frequent, structured communication between Board and department heads.

Respectfully Submitted,

Beth Rogers