

Suggestions and Feedback Gladly Accepted

County of Humboldt Citizen Feedback Procedure

SUMMARY

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury (Civil Grand Jury) often receives complaints from members of the community regarding various public entities. The grievances range from hand scrawled grumbling about the county government to thoroughly documented typed appeals specifically targeting a particular department. In some cases, the complaints are about concerns the Civil Grand Jury cannot investigate. In others an investigation is launched. Not all investigations yield enough information to write and publish a report. In all cases, the process of vetting, investigating, reporting, and publishing takes a long time. A response to a complaint received by the Civil Grand Jury may take a year, or more.

A typical standard for any complaint process is that the complaint should be addressed at the lowest level possible. Many issues can be resolved by a phone call, an email, or with a simple feedback procedure with the specific public agency involved. Launching an official Civil Grand Jury investigation is similar to calling your member of congress to complain about a malfunctioning traffic light.

Every organization should be constantly striving for continued improvement. If an organization does not receive, process, and track their clients' concerns, grievances, and feedback, the organization will miss key opportunities for improvement. Another method of self-improvement is to have a satisfaction survey process. Phone calls from the public can indeed solve some problems, but do not provide a formal data set that can be reviewed and analyzed to inform improvements in service. At the very least, every public agency in the Humboldt County government should have a written and published policy statement that provides a platform for receiving and processing citizen concerns about their service, complaints, and grievances, as well as providing opportunities for compliments of the service. Additionally, an ongoing and analyzable method for receiving customer satisfaction surveys is suggested.

BACKGROUND

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury (Civil Grand Jury) receives complaints from members of the community regarding various public entities. The grievances range from hand-

scrawled grumbling about the county government to thoroughly documented typed appeals specifically targeting a particular department. In some cases, the complaints are about concerns the Civil Grand Jury cannot investigate. In others, an investigation is launched. Not all investigations yield enough information to write and publish a report. In all cases, the process of vetting, investigating, reporting, and publishing takes a long time. A response to a complaint received by the Civil Grand Jury may take a year, or more.

One purpose of Civil Grand Jury reports is to suggest improvement of service provided by local government agencies. We noticed complaints being misdirected and the process for airing issues about local government to be misunderstood. When citizens do not know how to complain to a specific department, they may bypass that department and go to the Board of Supervisors, the Chief Administrative Officer or the Civil Grand Jury. It seemed appropriate to suggest guidelines to help people to express their thoughts on the service they had received (positive or negative) when interfacing with local government offices.

It is the Civil Grand Jury's intent to make suggestions for the County to develop such procedures. The end result should be each department's ability to learn where they are performing well and where they can improve performance.

METHODOLOGY

In this investigation, the Civil Grand Jury surveyed each County department that interfaces with the public to ask about their current complaint/comment policy. Responses were evaluated and rated based on guidelines established for the survey.

The Civil Grand Jury interviewed executive level personnel in Humboldt County Government and consulted policies and publicly available sources.

DISCUSSION

A commonsense approach for any complaint process is that the complaint should be addressed at the lowest level possible. Who can solve this problem the quickest and most effectively? The absence of such a commonsense approach has created a situation in which a civil grand jury is the *de facto* first option of those seeking to make a complaint. Sending a complaint to a civil grand jury without giving the specified public agency an opportunity to address the issues raised is inefficient. If an organization does not receive, process, and track

their clients' concerns, grievances, and feedback, the organization will miss key opportunities for improvement.

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury (Civil Grand Jury) receives complaints from members of the community regarding various public entities. Occasionally, those complaints received have not been seen or heard by the subject of the complaint and, as a result, these types of complaints to the Civil Grand Jury are often rejected.

The Civil Grand Jury surveyed each County department that interfaces with the public to ask about their current complaint policy. A few of the departments contacted had a clear process for handling complaints from the public. One even had an online customer survey form. However, the majority of departments handled citizen concerns informally, routing the phone call to a person in an office, without any accountability. Such casual methods will not give the organization a clear picture of the organization's strengths or areas needing improvement.

A citizen can appeal to the Board of Supervisors. But for a complainant to place an issue directly to the Board of Supervisors without giving the specified public agency an opportunity to resolve the issue is an "end run." Given the time and cost a Supervisor would take to respond, this is certainly not the lowest level of county government. As an example, when a civil suit is filed in a court of law, the court will immediately ask the parties involved if all other administrative remedies have been exhausted. If not, the court will reject the suit and insist those administrative remedies be exhausted first.

Customer Complaint/Comment Policies

Any government agency that interacts with the public should have a written policy that delineates how a member of the public can file a concern, grievance, complaint, or compliment about the quality of service the agency provides. This provides a tool to address deficiencies, errors, and omissions. Such a policy should be easily found on the agency website and be easy to file. An official complaint/comment policy should include:

- How to present a concern, complaint, grievance, or compliment
- How the investigative procedure will progress
- The tracking of the complaint/comment
- Timelines
- Notification process
- Actions that may be taken
- Appeals process

Each such form submitted should be logged and the processing of the complaint/comment documented. The results of the investigation into the concerns raised should be reported back to the reporting party. If the reporting party is not satisfied with the agency's reply, they can then move their grievance to a higher level. Top management should have a process to review accumulated data from complaints and seek opportunities for improvement from this source of information. Accumulated data of the complaints/compliments filed should be made public at least annually.

Such a policy assures taxpayers that the department welcomes feedback, provides ever-improving service to the community, and will better inform a more cost-effective government. The policy should define what a "complaint/comment" is and who has the authority to resolve the issues raised. The policy can describe how the reporting party's feedback is recorded and define a timeline for addressing it. The policy can explain how the complaint/comment can be resolved and what will happen if the concerns cannot be resolved. If a reporting party is not happy with the results of the process, the policy can refer them in a direction for further assistance.

A complaint/comment policy should be clearly explained to staff as being intended to improve the organization. Development of a citizens' feedback process should start with suggestions from departmental staff. The department's policy statement will define a recurring cycle for review and update of the policy.

All county governments are multi-discipline organizations. One feedback process for all departments would be awkward and may miss the ability to provide key facts. Creating standards for a feedback process (such as tracking, timelines, notifications, etc.) is appropriate. The Board of Supervisors should establish standards for good feedback policy and then direct each department to submit a department-specific policy to the Board for their approval.

Customer Satisfaction Surveys

Customer satisfaction surveys differ from complaints. A customer satisfaction survey is less formal and provides only one-way communication.

Every organization should be constantly striving for continued improvement. A method for self-improvement is to have a customer satisfaction survey process. A customer satisfaction survey is a voluntary method for customers to provide feedback to an organization. By tracking the input from these surveys, an organization can find areas of weakness as well as areas of

strength, which can lead to improved service. Each public agency should have a written policy that provides an ongoing method of surveying customer satisfaction.

A customer satisfaction survey does not replace a complaint/comment process but is an additional tool. It helps an organization keep abreast of clients' expectations and whether an organization is meeting those expectations. Organizations that seek continued improvement are always interested in customer feedback. An ongoing survey process is a standardized method of acquiring that input. Use of rating scales, charts, tables, and data sets which can be analyzed, can be used to measure quality of service over time. Staff can then work to develop methods to reflect improvements suggested by the survey.

Having a generic customer satisfaction survey for all departments would be awkward and may miss the ability to provide key facts. Creating standards for a customer satisfaction survey process would be appropriate. The Board of Supervisors should establish standards for good customer satisfaction survey policy and then request each department submit department-specific policy to the Board for their approval.

FINDINGS

F-1. The mission of the County government is to serve the public; however, few departments surveyed by the Civil Grand Jury have a written policy for receiving and processing citizen input relative to service provided. (R-1, R-2, R-3, R-4, R-5)

F-2. Customer satisfaction surveys are useful for monitoring an organization's effectiveness; however, only one of the County departments surveyed by the Civil Grand Jury has a customer satisfaction survey in place. (R-1, R-2, R-3, R-4, R-5)

F-3. When citizens do not know how to complain to a specific department, they may bypass that department and go to the Board of Supervisors, the Chief Administrative Officer, or the Civil Grand Jury. This denies an opportunity for the department to become aware of and address potential problems. (R-1, R-2, R-3, R-4, R-5)

RECOMMENDATIONS

R-1. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors establish standards for a citizen complaint/comment process (positive and negative)

and then direct each department within the County to develop a written policy and publish a citizen complaint/comment process to be approved by the Board. This should be completed by February 1, 2021. (F-1, F-3)

R-2. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors direct each department within the County to develop and utilize a customer satisfaction survey with the intent that each department work towards continued improvement. This should be completed by February 1, 2021. (F-2)

R-3. The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors require citizen complaint/comment forms and customer satisfaction survey forms to be easily accessible in electronic and paper formats, as part of County standards. This should be completed by February 1, 2021. (F-1, F-2, F-3)

R-4 The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors require citizen complaint/comment policy to include a process acknowledging receipt, as part of County standards. This should be completed by February 1, 2021. (F-1, F-2, F-3)

R-5 The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury recommends the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors require each department that has a complaint/comment policy or a customer satisfaction survey to report the findings to the Board of Supervisors at least annually. This should be completed by February 1, 2021. (F-1, F-2, F-3)

Required Responses

Humboldt County Board of Supervisors (F-1, F-2, F-3, R-1, R-2, R-3, R-4, R-5)