Abstract

Employees are Hennepin County’s greatest asset. Not only are they the providers of county services, but they also drive innovation and continuous improvement of how those services are provided, helping to make the organization the best that it can be. To sustain that level of contribution employees must be engaged, feel welcome, valued, respected and included no matter their background, place of origin or identity.

The Hennepin County Employee Resource Group Program provides employees who share common backgrounds, belief systems, abilities, identities and those who consider themselves allies of affinity communities a structure that fosters belonging within the organization and that provides professional development and visibility for members. It also provides a means for the unique talents, perspectives and experiences of employees to inform employee benefits, facility design, and service design and delivery.

Hennepin County is at the forefront of utilizing the ERG model within public sector organizations. Nationally very few have implemented such programs; even fewer have enjoyed a success comparable to Hennepin’s in such short time, with eight groups launched and operating within two years and memberships totals of over 700 employees. Affinity groups represented in the program include people of color, women, veterans, gender non-conforming and millennials, among others. The ERG Program has garnered the attention of local media, and government jurisdictions across the state - and across state lines - reach out to Hennepin County to follow its lead.

The Problem or Need for the Program

Hennepin County is one of the largest employers in its region. Many of the cities within its jurisdiction are undergoing rapid shifts in the racial, ethnic, cultural and age demographics of their population. That means the labor pool is undergoing correlated change.

With labor force projections indicating a tight market, regionally, for finding skilled talent in the coming years and upwards of 1/3 of its employees eligible to retire in the next 10 years, county leadership knew that innovative approaches would be needed to continue to attract, retain and engage the best employees. The challenge would include maintaining operational efficiency and effectiveness with an increasingly diverse workforce and continuing to provide excellent, culturally appropriate services for residents within an ever-more varied cultural environment.

Description of the Program

In 2012, with a focus on diversity and inclusion (D&I) developing within Hennepin County’s strategic vision, the newly formed D&I Team was tasked with finding strategies for leveraging the diversity of the
county’s workforce and for stimulating inclusion in the workplace. The D&I Team identified employee resource groups (ERG) as a best practice for achieving those goals.

A cross-departmental workgroup of employees passionate about D&I and diverse in race, age, gender and job function, was assembled to research ERGs and develop a program proposal. In 2013 the group presented a proposal to the countywide D&I Council (a body of senior leaders from multiple lines of business) and County Administration. The proposal provided an organizational definition of employee resource groups:

An organizationally supported group of employees who share a diversity characteristic and who join together to support its members, the demographic they represent, and the organization.

- They operate across the organization.
- Their goals and activities are employee defined and driven.
- Their goals are aligned to those of the organization.
- They are attached to an Executive Sponsor.

It also included a framework for ERG support of organizational goals around talent development, business operations, and organizational development, as well as an outline for program implementation.

Over the next year the D&I Team and members of the D&I Council refined the program framework, developing operational guidelines and a detailed plan for implementation that included a staged communication rollout to ensure leaders at all levels of the organization would be advised of the program in a manner both timely and relevant to their function prior to the program’s launch. At the same time the D&I Team was building a resource infrastructure on the county’s intranet that would supply employees with the information and tools needed to submit a proposal to form a group and begin operating once approved. The Hennepin County ERG Program launched in December 2014, and within the first year six groups had formed.

Now in 2017 a total of eight ERGs are operating with over 700 employee members:

- Asian Connections
- Interfaith and Spirituality
- Lean In Hennepin
- Millennials
- People of Color
- Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming
- Veterans
- Women in STEM

Each ERG meets regularly, typically alternating monthly meetings of officers with those of general membership, often including general membership in long-term strategic planning. Quarterly meetings both with the group’s executive sponsor and with the D&I Division ensure group activities remain aligned with organizational goals and that groups receive organizational support to thrive. Each group has a small annual operating budget that they administer themselves with oversight by the Diversity and
Inclusion Division. For additional oversight, and for assessing their impact on members and on the workplace, each group submits an annual report of activities and measures to the D&I Division at the anniversary of its launch.

As designed, the goals and activities of each Hennepin County ERG are driven by its officers and membership. Group activities may be social, fostering peer cohesion and shared learning, such as book clubs and lunchtime get-togethers, including brown bag presentations, and community volunteering events. Others may be strategic, directly engaging in organizational business processes such as partnering with Human Resources recruiters to build bridges to communities, serving on focus group panels in the development of new employee resources, or making recommendations on the improvement of existing practices.

Hennepin County ERGs also provide a bench of contributors who can serve as a resource for the organization. Their officers and members have supported the D&I Division’s work in coordinating cultural awareness events and learning opportunities, in facilitating large scale employee conversations on D&I topics, and in addressing culturally specific workplace issues. Groups collaborate together and partner with departments to look at emerging workplace and service issues through diverse lenses, to explore possibilities and discover new solutions.

Use of Technology

Hennepin County’s internal SharePoint network has served, and continues to serve, a critical role in the success of the HC ERG Program. Information about the program, in both text and video formats, as well as resources and templates to help a group organize and launch, are all stored at one URL. Employees can be directed to the ERG site to learn what an ERG is, what they do within the context of Hennepin County, details about how they operate, and how to start a group (Attachments A,B). Templates for groups at the formation stage include a group charter (Attachment C) and a spreadsheet to assist with planning, tracking and measurement of goals, activities and impacts. From this page employees can link to the SharePoint page for any individual group.

Group sites are collaborative spaces, inviting visitors and members to take part in discussion boards or submit ideas for ERG events or activities. They also supply core information about a group, such as their mission, vision, strategic plan and other guiding documents, calendar of events, news items of interest, roster of officers, and meeting minutes. Employees are able to follow a site and receive updates announcing pending meetings and events or opportunities to get involved on projects; the ‘follow-site’ function also provides a group with a member-count.

HC ERGs are pushing the envelope on meeting technology, employing virtual attendance tools such as Adobe Connect to broaden participation across barriers of time and space so that any employee anywhere in the county can either participate virtually or view a recorded meeting at any time of day.

Cost of the Program

The development and implementation of the HC ERG Program incurred no additional costs beyond staff time.
Ongoing, each ERG administers an annual budget of $2,000 for their activities, including speaker fees, event and conference fees, and operating supplies such as recruitment or other materials intended to promote the group and its activities.

Results/Success of the Program

The HC ERG Program has enjoyed remarkable success under the management of Human Resources’ Diversity & Inclusion Division. The program is popular with employees who participate in it, and membership numbers represent approximately 8.5% of all Hennepin County employees. The program enjoys notable support and visibility among the organization’s leadership, and is emerging as a model for other regional and national organizations to replicate.

HC ERGs, given the space and support to innovate and act, have realized remarkable accomplishments. For example:

- The Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming ERG wanted to inform and improve Hennepin County’s health benefits policy. They worked together with HR Benefits management to enhance transition therapy benefits for trans-gender employees and their families.
- The Asian Connections ERG and Millennials ERG volunteered in local communities for the Jordan Week of Kindness and Hearts & Hammers programs. Their volunteering activities strengthened connection with residents and was highlighted in a major local newspaper (Attachment D).
- The Veterans’ ERG developed a mentoring program to assist the onboarding of employees hired through the Veterans Hiring Initiative, a collaboration between the organization and community-based Veterans service providers.

A survey of Lean In Hennepin ERG members collecting feedback and measures about the impact of their ERG participation showed that 86% of respondents felt participating in the ERG increased their sense of organizational belonging and increased their visibility in the organization. Respondents also answered favorably when asked if participation in the ERG helped them build a professional network, improve their leadership skills, and leverage their areas of personal expertise.

A more broadly administered, anecdotal survey of all ERG members resulted in overwhelmingly positive indicators. Members’ statements about HC ERGs say they:

- “...have the potential to grow and continue to make Hennepin County a top employer of choice!”
- “...have given me a better understanding of different employees’ personalities and how to work better with such.”
- “...contribute to the goal that Hennepin has for service integration.”
- “...have opened the doors for Hennepin County employees to explore.”
- “...are an energizing way to meet like-minded people who have enthusiasm for their careers and the county.”

Hennepin County ERGs have become so successful that other local government agencies (e.g., the City of Minneapolis, Ramsey County, Dakota County and the City of St. Paul) have sought the county’s advice, program implementation plan and materials for creating successful ERG programs of their own.
Worthiness of Award

We believe the Hennepin County Employee Resource Group Program meets the criteria for receiving a 2017 NACo achievement award.

The program grew from our desire to develop and retain our current employees and to attract diverse and talented employees to our workforce. We believe that our program meets the criteria of “upgrading the working conditions and providing professional development opportunities for our employees.” The organic grass roots nature of the growth of our ERG’s has been a wonderful strength and is empowering to our employees. Employees decide what the focus of their ERG will be and what kind of activities they will participate in. The groups are enthusiastic about their work and provide an excellent way for employees to engage in making a difference in our county and in the community. Through an annual review of the ERG’s work our county leadership is able to celebrate with the employees their accomplishments and challenges and offer support for future engagement.

County Leadership has reached out to the ERG’s and asked for their participation in a variety of initiatives like our total rewards strategy, our core values, and our work on disparities. ERG’s will continue to be leveraged to gather the voice of the employee and create leadership development opportunities for their members. The data we have collected confirms that the ERG’s have been a success and have improved the engagement of employees across the organization. We believe this is a unique and innovative approach in the public sector based on the reaction of our colleagues across the country who ask us for materials and consultation. We have shared our approach to ERG’s as we have attended national conferences for public sector as well as locally within our state.

Supplemental Materials

The following supplemental documents are attached:

Attachment A: HC ERG FAQs
Attachment B: How to Start
Attachment C: Template for ERG charter
Attachment D: Star Tribune article
Attachment E: Lean In Hennepin ERG survey response chart
Attachment A: HC ERG FAQs
Why would I want to start or join an ERG?

There are a number of benefits you can garner from participating in an ERG including, but not limited to, the following:

- **Increased exposure** – Since every ERG is paired to an executive sponsor from senior leadership you’ll have the opportunity to work directly with a Hennepin County Director or Area Manager equivalent. Also, as ERGs are not limited to working within one department you’ll have access to collaborating with employees and leadership across the organization. Participating in an ERG – and especially leading an ERG – boosts your visibility, expands your connections, and promotes the building of relationships.

- **Professional development** – Leading or actively participating in an ERG provides an opportunity to kick-start your leadership experience and grow your skills in communication, strategic planning, project implementation, and measuring outcomes. The possibilities for professional growth within an ERG are directly proportional to the level at which you choose to participate.

- **Represent your affinity employees** – ERG participation gives you the chance to represent and support employees with whom you relate and with whom you identify while at the same time supporting the goals of the organization as a whole.

- **Develop the organization** – By joining or forming an ERG you’re helping Hennepin County constructively leverage the diversity of its workforce and are contributing to the building of an inclusive workplace that appreciates and more fully utilizes the varieties of employee backgrounds and perspectives.

Who or what is an ally?

An ally is an employee who may not share the common diversity characteristic of the ERG but who supports the group charter and goals. For example, if there were a Women Professionals ERG you wouldn’t have to be a woman to join; if you support that ERG’s charter and goals you are an ally of that affinity group (women professionals) and can join the ERG as long as you meet the basic eligibility criteria outlined in the ERG Guidelines.

Who can join an ERG?

Anyone can, as long as they support the charter and goals of the ERG and meet the criteria for participation, namely:

- Having successfully completed initial probation and being an employee in good standing, and;
- Having obtained written supervisor approval to participate in an ERG.

An ERG must be open to admitting allies as members.

Can I join more than one ERG?

That will depend on whether or not such participation might have an adverse effect on your job performance. Before joining a second ERG have a conversation with your supervisor to learn if they support that choice. Ultimately it will be up to their discretion whether you may participate in multiple groups.
**Can an Executive Sponsor sponsor multiple ERGs?**

A director or area manager must use their own discretion in deciding whether they can effectively sponsor multiple groups.

**Do I get “credit” for being in an ERG?**

Every employee is strongly encouraged to have an Individual Development Plan (IDP) and to include professional development activities in their IDP. Active participation in an ERG definitely qualifies as a professional development activity and should go on your IDP, and as such should also be a point of discussion in your annual performance review with your supervisor.

**Will I use work time or my own time for ERG involvement and activities?**

As stated in the ERG Guidelines, ERG members will be allowed to take reasonable time from their normal work duties to participate in HC ERG activities so long as their department’s work needs and their own work performance are not impacted negatively. Before forming or joining an ERG, have a conversation with your supervisor to find agreement about what how much time is “reasonable time.” 5% of your work time, or 2 hours per week, can be a good baseline or starting point for that conversation. Ultimately, the amount of time spent on ERG activities will be influenced by your level of participation.

**I'd like to see the organization become more diverse. Can I do that in an ERG?**

ERGs may work with departments, divisions, or across the organization to assist in building a more diverse workplace. Such activities cannot exclusively target a protected-class population. To find out more about what is a protected class, as defined by Federal law, [click here](#).

**Is there a deadline for submitting proposals to form an ERG?**

No. Proposals will be accepted for review on an ongoing basis.
Attachment B: ERG - How to Get Started

Hennepin County Human Resources
Diversity and Inclusion Division (DID)
Employee Resource Group Program (ERG)

**ERG - How to Get Started**

- **Get Inspired**
  - Explore the resources available on the DID's ERG intranet page. Research what other organizations are doing with their ERGs and what the ERGs are doing with their organizations.

- **Get Informed**
  - Read the DID's ERG Guidelines and the ERG Frequently Asked Questions. They'll provide you with essential information about the ERG program: What it is; Why it is; How it works. Use them for reference as you proceed.

- **Get Organized**
  - Start seeking out others who may want to form or join the ERG you have in mind and have conversations about an ERG vision. This would also be a good time to have a conversation with your supervisor, if you haven’t done so already, to discuss your desire to form or participate in an ERG.

- **Get Planning**
  - Start drafting your ERG charter and start shaping your ERG goals. The draft charter will be the ERG proposal you’ll submit to the DID for review and approval. If you have a potential executive sponsor in mind, ask them if they would like to sponsor your ERG.

- **Get It In**
  - Review your draft charter for completeness and submit it to the DID either electronically to brent.holt@hennepin.us, or by inter-office mail to Brent Holt, MC 040.
Attachment C: Template for ERG charter

[Insert ERG name] Hennepin County ERG

Charter

Drafted: [insert charter draft date here]
Adopted: [insert charter finalization date here]

Mission

Why the group exists. The mission statement should be brief, with an emphasis on actions (verbs). The mission should be inclusive of allies.

Vision

What are the group’s long-term desired outcomes; what will be different as a result of the group’s activities. The vision may reflect or be identical with that of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion.

Scope

What are the group’s overarching strategies – not specific tactics - for advancing the vision; what kinds of activities (in general terms) will the group engage in. Strategies must be relevant to at least one of the three target outcomes described in the ERG guidelines.

Officers

Describe the group’s officers, specific responsibilities, terms of office, and how they are appointed or elected.

Chair:

Co-Chair:

Secretary:

Other [specify as needed]

Chair

Executive Sponsor

Once the chair is selected, enter their name here.

Once the sponsor is obtained, enter their name here.

Name

Name

Co-Chair

Secretary

Once the co-chair is selected, enter their name here.

Once the secretary is selected, enter their name here.

Name

Name
Hennepin County employee groups help workers love their jobs

It's the state's first public-sector entity to use employee resource groups.

By Kelly Smith Star Tribune
JULY 22, 2016 — 11:01PM

To keep employees, Hennepin County is taking a cue from the corporate sector’s playbook.

For a second year, the county is sponsoring employee groups — ranging from veterans to millennials — that do everything from professional development to volunteering, social activities and advocating for county changes.

While the corporate sector long has cultivated internal groups as a way to engage employees and improve workplace culture, Hennepin County is the first public jurisdiction in Minnesota to start the groups, county leaders said.

It’s a way, they said, for employees to have a say and feel like they belong in the large county organization.

“Once you’re here, how are we going to hook you?” said Michael Rossman, the county’s chief human resources officer. “If the culture inside isn’t where they want to stay, that isn’t good.”

With Hennepin County anticipating a loss of 32 percent of the workforce by 2020 through retirements, the county is looking for new ways to attract and retain new employees.

When county leaders heard about employee resource groups in 2013, they decided to try it the following year to better engage employees.

The groups since have grown from two to seven with about 650 employees, or nearly 8 percent of the county’s 8,400 employees.

They meet at least once a month over social and volunteer activities, and they host speakers, book clubs or other events. Veterans started a mentoring program, while a group of women in science, technology, engineering and math areas talk to high school girls about STEM careers.

The groups also help craft policy and spur bigger changes in the county. A transgender and gender nonconforming group met with county leaders to change how prescriptions were covered and to push to...
train security guards in transgender issues. Other groups have advocated for the hiring of more women and people of color.

Millennials, the biggest group, have pushed the county to offer more learning opportunities and to outline ways they can move up the ladder.

“Being in a large organization, it’s so easy to get stuck in your own world or your own work,” said Amanda Koonjbeharry, who helped start a people of color group that now has 150 workers from departments as varied as Corrections and the library.

The groups, she added, help connect people of different backgrounds.

“You’d never cross paths with them otherwise,” she said. “This is an opportunity to have different eyes, different voices at the table.”

kelly.smith@startribune.com 612-673-4141 kellystrib
Attachment E: Lean In Hennepin ERG survey response chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Rating Average</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participating in this ERG allowed me to leverage my personal expertise.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in the ERG helped me improve my leadership skills.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.86</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in this ERG helped me to build my professional network.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in this ERG increased my visibility in the organization.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in this ERG increased my sense of belonging in the organization.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those who responded "unable to participate" in Q3 (page 3) and "do not identify as a member" in Q1 (page 1) were not routed to this question. Therefore the response rate to this question is 88%. 

![Graph showing response chart](image-url)