

Extension Employment: *FIRST STEP for Success*

PURPOSE:

Currently, new externally hired agents are placed in county Extension roles without any prior Extension training or experience. Many times this results in dissatisfaction at the county level from clientele groups and stakeholders, frustration of the new employee, and lack of patience and confidence from co-workers.

The purpose of *FIRST STEP* is to provide new employees with an immediate opportunity to take the first step towards developing a basic understanding of key Extension concepts, principles, and practices. Under this system, the responsibility of the new employee would be to observe and experience the day-to-day operations of a typical county Extension office and to gain a general understanding of the expectations that they will face in their county. The Texas AgriLife Extension Service should gain an employee that is better prepared to face the demands of a normal county Extension position and one that has greater satisfaction for their job. Additional benefits to Extension may include identification of misplaced employees or employees who have low probability for success with Extension.

FIRST STEP PRINCIPLES:

- ❖ Provide new agents with a consistent introduction to Extension principles, practices, and procedures to complement the mentor program and enhance the training process of new agents.
- ❖ Provide new agents with the opportunity to observe and experience effective Extension programming and day-to-day management of the Extension office.

GUIDELINES:

- ❖ *FIRST STEP* is for new externally hired agents with no previous county Extension experience. The DEA/CED will have the discretion of making a *FIRST STEP* assignment depending on the individual's job roles/responsibilities.
- ❖ New agents will be assigned to a county instead of one specific agent. This will provide an opportunity for the new agent to learn about and appreciate a total Extension program.
- ❖ Expectations for the host county(ies) will include:
 - All Extension faculty in the First Step county would commit to providing opportunities for interaction and observation regarding selected Extension activities
 - Help new Extension agent to see the total Extension program through observation and involvement in program development, planning, program implementation, interpretation, marketing, and basic county management
 - Help arrange for the new agent to observe select programs in other counties if applicable and needed
 - Provide the new agent with an opportunity to observe teamwork in action

- Provide a positive environment for the new agent to learn how Extension works
- Participate in an exit conference between new agent and DEA
- Provide input to DEA on progress of new agent and additional training that may be needed
- ❖ DEA will make the decision regarding the appointment of the new CEA to the appropriate **FIRST STEP** county
- ❖ New agents will be placed in a host county for the first month of their employment
- ❖ A county may host more than one new agent at the same time
- ❖ New agents will have the opportunity to meet with the appropriate RPDs and with the DEA in the district Extension office. The DEA and RPD may choose to conduct their first orientation with the new agent at this time. It would also be an appropriate time for the new agent to be introduced to specialists and support staff housed at the District Center and/or in College Station and to become familiar with resources available at the district level
- ❖ A debriefing conference will be conducted at the end of the first month with the host county agents, DEA, and the new agent
- ❖ First Step will enhance, not replace, the current mentor program. A mentor will be assigned to the new agent at employment and will make contact with the new agent during the first month of employment. The actual mentoring period will begin after the first month of employment. The mentor will be provided with feedback regarding the new employee from the **FIRST STEP** county
- ❖ The Texas AgriLife Extension Service will provide full salary and travel support for the new agent's first month. (No expense to the new agent's county or the host county)
- ❖ **FIRST STEP** training will be provided for all new incoming Extension agents.

CHARACTERISTICS OF *FIRST STEP* COUNTIES:

- ❖ Agents in **FIRST STEP** should have sufficient county experience. In most instances this will be at least one year of county experience
- ❖ The **FIRST STEP** county should model or reflect the county where the new agent will be permanently placed
- ❖ All positions in the county are filled and agents have participated in **FIRST STEP** training
- ❖ All agents in the county are meeting or exceeding performance expectations in all performance domains
- ❖ Extension agents utilize a variety of methods to interpret program efforts to key stakeholder groups including the Commissioners' Court
- ❖ All agents embrace team-work and work to promote a total Extension program versus separate program areas
- ❖ Program efforts combine a number of different methods and include a variety of individual and multi-county efforts
- ❖ All agents should be familiar with the total Extension program
- ❖ All agents follow prescribed program development procedures and utilize program area committees, task force groups, or other planning groups to plan, implement, evaluate and interpret Extension program efforts.
- ❖ Evaluations (both customer satisfaction and outcome) are used to define Extension program

- ❖ impact
- ❖ Volunteers are effectively used to extend program efforts. Master volunteer groups are encouraged but are not required.

ACTIONS/OBJECTIVES:

The new agent will gain an awareness of or experience:

- ❖ **Core principles of working with Extension clientele**
 - Office visits
 - Phone calls
 - answering phone calls
 - returning calls
 - Site visits
 - scheduling site visits
 - preparing for effective site visits
 - Handling the upset or irate client
- ❖ **Roles and responsibilities of County Extension Agents**
 - Job description
 - job roles and responsibilities worksheet
 - county coordinator
 - Ag/NR, FCS, and 4-H coordinator
 - county Extension agent titles
- ❖ **Developing programs and resources**
 - Have the opportunity to make a formal educational presentation
 - Observe Extension programs in action and a variety of program delivery methods
 - Become more familiar with Extension-related organizations (4-H, TEEA, Master Volunteers, etc.)
 - Curriculums and program materials
 - which ones to use
 - what is still valid
 - where to go to get replacement resources if they are gone
 - Developing program plans and components of a plan (TExAS)
 - understanding how Banner Programs fit into meeting county needs
 - outcome plans
 - output plans
 - organizational support plan
 - individual development plan
- ❖ **Professional Development**
 - graduate school
 - self assessments on YES
 - Subject Matter Expertise Competency
 - Organizational Effectiveness
 - Develop and Involve Others

- Communication Competency
- Action Oriented Competency
- Personal Effectiveness Competency
- professionalism as an agent
 - dress
 - promptness
 - office hours
- ❖ **Planning and conducting a program/result demonstration**
 - planning group involvement
 - steps for planning
 - educational methods
 - program presentation tips
 - evaluation efforts
 - individual activity evaluation (customer satisfaction survey)
 - outcome program evaluation
 - » clientele change
 - » program impact
 - » evaluation methods
 - Materials needed to conduct a program
- ❖ **Reporting process (TEXAS)**
 - what to report
 - what forms are used
 - how to complete specific reports
 - when reports are due
 - what information is captured
 - Ag. Reports (Ag. Increment Report) and how information is gathered
 - Web-based resources
 - 4-H enrollment processes and procedures
- ❖ **Marketing and interpreting Extension programs**
 - working with the media (print and broadcast)
 - Commissioners' Court interpretation
 - Targeted audience interpretation
 - identifying and involving stakeholders
 - developing effective partnerships with other groups
 - involvement in community and county activities
- ❖ **Internal and external relationships**
 - Teamwork
 - Conducting office conferences
 - Administrator relationships
 - Regional Program Director relationships
 - Co-worker relationships
 - Commissioner's Court
 - working with district and county support staff
 - specialists

- ❖ **Extension Terminology**
 - Acronyms and the “Extension” alphabet
 - internal acronyms (BLT, TCFF, FRED, etc.)
 - external acronyms (NRCS, FSA, etc.)
- ❖ **Time management strategies**
 - effective time management
 - developing a daily schedule
 - managing your calendar
 - observe the daily activities in the county office
 - scheduling time for family and personal needs
- ❖ **Volunteer development and management**
 - volunteer recruitment
 - volunteer training
 - involving volunteers in program efforts
 - recognition of volunteers
 - Observe the program development process in action (who, what, when, where, why, and how)
 - Basics of INVEST
 - Leadership Advisory Boards
 - Program Area Committees
 - Task Forces/Coalitions
 - Youth Board
 - Associations and Chapter
 - Extension support groups/organizations (4-H, TEEA, Master Volunteers)
 - Cash management practices with support groups
- ❖ **County budgeting process and developing program support funds**
 - County budget development process
 - working with support groups and support group funds
 - cash management procedures
 - developing grants and associated procedures
 - managing donations
 - developing sponsorships
 - inventory procedures
- ❖ **Civil Right/Affirmative Action Guidelines**
 - 4-H Expansion and Review
 - Planning Groups
 - Program participation
 - documentation
- ❖ **Result Demonstration/Applied Research**
 - Demonstration/Research Plans
 - Submitting Proposals
 - Results
- ❖ **Provide feedback to the DEA regarding learning experiences in the *FIRST STEP* county**
- ❖ **Develop an individual development plan during the *FIRST STEP* month**

COSTS TO TEXAS AGRILIFE EXTENSION SERVICE:

- ❖ Total salary and travel costs will be paid by the Texas AgriLife Extension Service during the first month of employment

BENEFITS of *FIRST STEP*:

- ❖ Costs of the *FIRST STEP* program should be offset by improved retention of new employees and an increase in performance. While retention benefits will be easy to measure, “quality performance” benefits will be difficult to define.
- ❖ Assigned to a county and not one agent
- ❖ Learn disciplines of all agents
- ❖ Observe day-to-day operations of office
- ❖ Opportunity to interact with RPDs and specialists
- ❖ Learn about available resources
- ❖ No real responsibilities the first month except to learn and observe.
- ❖ Opportunity to job shadow
- ❖ Learn about program development process
- ❖ Observe programs in action
- ❖ Learn about Extension organizations
- ❖ Learn about county politics and how they impact Extension
- ❖ Gain appreciation of teamwork
- ❖ Learn about Extension while not on the county clock
- ❖ Learn importance of being involved in county and community
- ❖ Learn importance of marketing and interpretation
- ❖ Opportunity to build rapport with other Extension employees
- ❖ More people evaluating a new agent’s potential and performance
- ❖ Learn core principles of working with people as a professional

POTENTIAL *FIRST STEP* TRAINING TOPICS:

Orientation and training for all CEAs will include these discussion topics:

- ❖ Intent and purpose of *FIRST STEP*
- ❖ Characteristics of *FIRST STEP* counties
- ❖ Expectations of *FIRST STEP* counties
- ❖ Generational differences and needs of employees
- ❖ Coaching and mentoring new employees

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