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General Inquiry into County Operations

In the interest of inquiring into a wide breadth of topics regarding County government operations, the MCCGJ held many interviews with County employees and elected officials and asked an extensive range of questions. The MCCGJ discovered many repetitive themes and resultant findings, which are discussed further below. A Civil Grand Jury is authorized to initiate an independent inquiry even in the absence of a citizen complaint, per Sections 925-933 of the California Penal Code that delineates the powers and responsibilities of a Civil Grand Jury. To initiate an inquiry without relying on a citizen complaint, a Civil Grand Jury may select a topic of interest or concern based on their own research and observations. As a result, the MCCGJ was able to explore topics such as government efficiency, general process and procedure, fiscal accountability, transparency, and other matters within their jurisdiction (see “Methodology” section above).

Workplace Culture, Training, and Organization

There is no doubt that Mariposa County employs hard working and dedicated individuals. However, many County Departments experience high turnover rates, limited access to resources, and small, uncomfortable office spaces. Employees tend to endure heavy and broad workloads with minimal training. County positions can go unfilled for long periods of time, which puts additional pressure on current employees. MCCGJ found that County employees are discouraged from directly contacting County Supervisors and Administration (Human Resources is housed in the Administration Department), further isolating the employee in their experience, and thereby increasing workplace dissatisfaction. Department heads undergo a “sink or swim” culture and struggle to find time and resources for sufficient training and management guidance. Further, the Board of Supervisors does not require department heads to provide regular presentations or formal updates on their work, limiting accountability and regular progress reviews. All of this creates a negative feedback loop that makes it challenging for Mariposa County to hire and retain qualified employees, and causes a loss of institutional knowledge which leads to government dysfunction.

Part of the problem can be attributed to the historical rural inequity that is caused by an unbalanced supply of public services, which is not within the control of County leadership. Population distribution and mobility trends, as well as State-level decisions, are complicated sociological issues.¹ It can be difficult for leadership to adequately allocate funds, provide sufficient training opportunities, and build capacity for change when there is little support and external forces exacerbate the problem. However, there are structures and procedures that can be modified to ensure that County staff are able to be as successful as possible in their positions.

For example, there is a general lack of written policies and procedures for County operations across County departments. Procedures that are written, tend to be outdated. There has been recent

¹ Pan et. al

progress in this regard, like the adoption of a Code of Conduct and Ethics policy for the Board of Supervisors. However, crucial policies to guide County staff, such as a centralized purchasing policy and complaint management procedures (see “Complaints and Code Compliance” section below), are highly needed for effective government functionality. When a lack of written policies and procedures is combined with minimal training opportunities and high turnover rates, there are frequent errors and unstructured decision-making in County services. This leads to the public receiving inconsistent quality in County services and a general lack of transparency in government functions. For instance, the Building and Planning Departments have historically received public feedback regarding their ambiguous requirements and inconsistent standards. Additionally, high value is placed on legacy or institutional knowledge and when individuals leave their job at the County, for retirement, another job, or otherwise; the remaining or new employee(s) are left to surmise how to proceed, essentially “starting over” in learning the position’s challenges.

Workplace culture varies highly from department to department, each with their own strengths and opportunities for improvement. In terms of general Mariposa County government, the MCCGJ consistently heard that staff felt “accountable but not responsible” when it came to errors in government functions, particularly for operations between departments. While it is possible that responsibility is observed, treated, or taken differently in each situation, nobody has the luxury of being “hands free” from activities and outcomes that are within the scope of one’s duty. A general “your problem, not mine” rhetoric pervades Mariposa County government workplace culture, and therefore its processes. This unhealthy philosophy perpetuates government dysfunction and discourages the integration of County services between departments. Government processes inherently require collaboration and continuity to ensure transparency and the delivery of high-quality services for the public. The strength of internal communication translates to the strength of the communication to the public.

There is a need for greater internal collaboration and communication between County departments, especially for processes that transcend department lines, such as the determination and collection of property taxes. Although a unified system exists through the Megabyte software, staff between departments have restricted access to information. Similarly, while each department is responsible for applying their own requirements during building permit review, sometimes there is inconsistency in communication with applicants and contradictory application requirements, often leading to confusion and frustration among the public. Lastly, the determination, allocation, and accounting of the County budget is a process that needs constant communication and an understanding among County staff of each department’s contribution to the workflow. Organizational agility, the ability to work between different county positions and departments as needed, is an important factor in the delivery and quality of County services. Fostering partnerships between departments with intentional internal communication will empower staff to serve the public in an efficient manner. Though progress in changing the workplace culture is seen, MCCGJ reminds staff that all individuals must take ownership of their role in making the necessary changes to keep Mariposa County government viable, thriving, and evolving as one unit.

Another opportunity for improvement relates to how historical precedents in Mariposa County government have led to an illogical allocation of County functions between departments. Some examples include, the County Auditor is responsible for the distribution of staff benefits and management of payroll, when this is traditionally a function of Human Resources; the County Treasurer, Tax Collector, and Clerk are all responsibilities of one position; and the head of Human Resources is

also the Deputy County Administrative Officer. The MCCGJ found that County functions that seem to not belong in the designated department or position, have been the responsibility of that department or position for 20 years or more, therefore changing the organization is likely unfamiliar territory. Changes to existing systems can seem daunting but can help improve the efficiency of County services in the long-term. County staff would be better equipped to handle focused responsibilities of their department, rather than being burdened with learning broad and unrelated functions. Pairing the transfer of responsibilities with increased inter-departmental cooperation in County processes, will assist County staff in delivering the most efficient County services.

MCCGJ found that while there are standardized trainings during onboarding of new staff through Human Resources, there is a general lack of training for advancing staff professional skills. The training that does exist is informal, inconsistent, and tends to be “on the job,” leaving little capacity for improving County functions. An additional consequence of a lack of training is a high frequency of consultant use, which presents a greater cost to the County. It was also found that training opportunities are not balanced between staff positions, whether for time or cost reasons. All positions require reliable training for effective and up-to-date County service, and should therefore improve workplace morale. Therefore, establishing consistent processes for training should be a high priority for County departments. “High quality practitioners” are the key to improving the quality of public services, especially in rural communities with minimal access to monetary resources.¹ Staff training can also build capacity for comprehensive change to existing systems so that County services become more efficient based on current industry best practices.

Budget cuts and high turnover rates are a few of the causes of staffing shortages in many County departments, which can have profound negative consequences on the citizens they serve by hindering the effectiveness and efficiency of essential services. Reduced staff availability leads to decreased service quality, and increased stress and burnout among employees. This can create a vicious cycle where overworked employees leave, further exacerbating the staff shortage problem. In critical areas such as public safety, health, and emergency services, slower response times due to staffing shortages can have serious consequences. Additionally, the economic impact can be significant, as delays in business permits and inspections deter new businesses and hinder economic growth. Higher caseloads in social services reduce the effectiveness of case management, leaving vulnerable populations without the support they need. Staffing shortages in County departments diminish the quality and availability of services, affect employee well-being, and jeopardize the community's health and prosperity.

FINDINGS		RESPONSES
F1	Lack of written policies and procedures across multiple Mariposa County departments make it difficult for staff to perform duties efficiently and for new department managers to lead effectively.	
F2	Inconsistent communication between Mariposa County departments has led to a lack of continuity and transparency in County services.	

F3	Loss of and anticipated loss of institutional knowledge across multiple Mariposa County departments has created and is expected to continue to create large gaps in County operations and efficiency.	
F4	Lack of training opportunities across multiple Mariposa County departments and for all level of job classifications leads to work errors, department inefficiencies and missed opportunities to learn best practices.	
RECOMMENDATIONS		RESPONSE
R1	Board of Supervisors should direct all department directors and managers to provide a review of essential policies and procedures within six (6) months.	
R2	Board of Supervisors should identify a central point of contact for review of necessary written policies and procedures within six (6) months. This should include review of policies and procedures to guarantee compatibility and consistency across departments.	
R3	Working with the Chief Administrative Officer, the Board of Supervisors should develop procedures that establish regular communication between departments within six (6) months.	
R4	Board of Supervisors, working with Human Resources, should make efforts to minimize the loss of institutional knowledge by facilitating a transition period where outgoing staff overlap with their successors.	
R5	Board of Supervisors, working with Human Resources, should review and develop standardized training opportunities for all County employees within six (6) months.	

The following governing boards are required to respond within 90 days pursuant to Penal Code sections §933 and §933.05:

Board of Supervisors: F1, F2, F3, F4, R1, R2, R3, R4, R5

The following appointed officials are invited to respond within 60 days:

Chief Administrative Officer: F1, F2, R1, R2, R3

Assistant CAO/Human Resources: F3, F4, R4, R5

Per Penal Code §933.05(a)(1) and (2), responses must include acceptance, refutation, and/or clarification of the findings, and a commitment to implementing the recommendations, as appropriate, per Penal Code §933.5(b)(1)(2)(3) and (4).

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Perception of County Government and Importance of Transparency

How the community views County government is crucial for maintaining public trust and ensuring effective governance. Transparency is key to shaping this perception, as it creates an environment of openness and accountability. When County operations are transparent, citizens are better informed about how decisions are made, how resources are allocated, and how their local government functions overall.

Transparency means making information readily available to the public – like financial reports, meeting minutes, and policy decisions. This openness allows residents to engage in the governance process, provide feedback, and hold officials accountable. By promoting transparency, the County government shows its commitment to ethical practices and responsible management of public resources.

Transparency helps prevent corruption, reduces misunderstandings, and builds a stronger community. It enables citizens to see how their tax dollars are spent and ensures that government actions align with the community's needs and values. This fosters greater public confidence in county government, leading to increased civic participation and collaboration. How people perceive County government is greatly influenced by its transparency. By prioritizing openness and accountability, the County can enhance public trust, promote good governance, and build a more engaged and informed community.

One area that requires greater transparency is the roles, scope, and work of various County departments. Misunderstanding of identified departmental scope leads to confusion and a gap in communication between the government and the community. County departments are responsible for a wide range of services that impact daily life, from public health and safety to infrastructure and social services. However, many citizens are unaware of the specific functions and responsibilities of these departments, which can lead to unrealistic expectations and misconceptions about what the County can and cannot do. For example, residents might not fully understand the specialized nature of certain