

Wednesday's Service Champion is the Georgia Department of Natural Resources

With a staff of over 2000 full and part-time employees, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR) protects and manages natural and cultural treasures throughout the state. DNR ensures its diversified facilities accommodate all Georgians and visitors, including those with disabilities. The agency does the same for its employees with disabilities through providing effective, reasonable work accommodations, if needed, as required by the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), as amended.

Larry Blankenship, Human Resources Director, says that the reasonable accommodation process is typically triggered when an employee with a disability requests some assistance in performing a job function. Other times, an employee may be released to work on a part-time or limited basis or need some type of accommodation upon return to work from leave. Uncomplicated reasonable accommodations can be easily completed on site by the local DNR offices without any formal process; however, such actions are still documented.

Supervisors receive training in handling requests and implementing reasonable accommodations from central office management at regional meetings. They also receive additional guidance in monthly newsletters on HR matters including reasonable accommodation. When more complicated cases arise, HR staff may first consult with internal legal counsel and then with outside sources such as the State of Georgia ADA Coordinator's Office, <https://ada.georgia.gov> for assistance. For suggestions on reasonable accommodations for a specific health issue, process, or procedure, DNR recommends the Job Accommodation Network, www.AskJan.org.

Mr. Blankenship describes DNR as a "friendly, family-type agency" that shows concern for those needing reasonable accommodation. With employees spread out across the state, many in rural areas, he takes the process directly to the employee with personal, hands-on dedication if the accommodation cannot be informally processed. For more complicated accommodation requests, Mr. Blankenship or Mike Long, Classification & Performance Management Manager, will meet face to face at the employee's work location to review the employee's needs. What the agency can do to provide a workable reasonable accommodation is determined through this interactive process. This simply means that the agency and employee with a disability who requests accommodation work together.

Obtaining good information from the employee's healthcare provider is another critical step in the reasonable accommodation process according to Mr. Blankenship. This process typically starts with providing to the healthcare provider details of the essential functions of the employee's job. DNR supervisors utilize the Georgia Activity Analysis form <http://ssl.doas.state.ga.us/html/rtw/forms/gainstr.pdf>, to provide a detailed job description. The healthcare provider can use this form to identify the job functions the employee is and is not capable of performing. To protect the confidentiality of acquired medical records, Central HR maintains all ADA documents "under lock and key" and separate from personnel records.

Using the discussions with the employee, medical documentation, and research, Mr. Blankenship determines if an accommodation is appropriate and agreeable with the employee. He explains that as HR Director, he is directly involved in the interactive process and makes the final decision on the accommodation.

Implementing an accommodation does not, however, conclude the process. Managers maintain contact with employees to ensure the accommodation is effective. When accommodations are intended to address

temporary needs, this ongoing communication allows DNR to know when to update and/or end an accommodation.

Some examples of reasonable accommodations DNR has offered include:

- Temporarily reduced work hours
- Reassigning non-essential duties
- Acquiring or modifying equipment, devices
- Modifying lighting
- Technology or supplies
- Job restructuring
- Leave (FMLA or other paid or unpaid leave)
- Teleworking

Mr. Blankenship asserts that DNR is able to maintain low staff turnover which “lends to long-term careers,” in part by providing personal service to its employees. The reasonable accommodation process is an example of this personal service. He also attributes the agency’s successful reasonable accommodation practices to the backing of DNR leadership and a staff as dedicated to internal customer service as it is to external service.