Testing may be mandated for county employees

YORK NEWS-TIMES

By Melanie Wilkinson
STAFF WRITER

YORK, NEBRASKA -- Physical testing may be mandated for all individuals who work for the county, with the exception of those who are elected.

This past week, the county commissioners looked at a practice that's being done by a number of companies and government entities as a way to decrease workman's compensation claims and overall insurance costs.

As explained by Lee Pfeiffer, who operates such a program at York General Health Care Services, they began the process for their own organization several years ago. Now, they are providing the service for interested entities.

The county is looking at establishing levels of physical requirements for new employees, as well as physical capacity baselines for all employees, existing and future.

"The (level) testing helps you determine if you are hiring the person who fits the job," Pfeiffer explained. "If a job classification is set, we can decide if they can physically meet the demands (of that particular job)."

He told the commissioners that the testing was developed by a Kansas doctor to define (according to Department of Labor standards) the different levels of work and the physical requirements that must be fulfilled.

Pfeiffer said the testing process is actually a compilation of 28 different tests that a potential employee must take -- and that failure to pass one or several of those tests will not necessarily result in job rejection.

Director of Physical Therapy Lee Pfeiffer, PT and Kathryn Hoffman demonstrate the Physical Capacity Profile® Testing System.

"An individual can fail several of the tests and still pass," Pfeiffer said. "That is because people learn to compensate for their weaknesses. So they may not be able to physically do one part of the test, but they excel in another area."

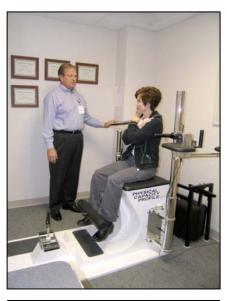The sheriff's and roads departments currently have entry testing for new employees.

Different levels of physical ability would pertain to different jobs. For example, someone doing secretarial work in the clerk's office would be expected to physically perform at a much different level (because the job doesn't require lifting) than someone who works at the roads department (who may have to be able to lift 50 pounds or more to adequately do their job).

The establishment of baselines is quite different.

"By creating baselines for all employees, (other organizations) have decreased their costs and been able to reduce premiums with their insurance carriers," Pfeiffer said.

This would be done by determining and recording employees' existing abilities and physical status. It wouldn't affect any current employees' job status.

How does it work? If an employee is injured, for example, and is unable to work for a certain amount of time, comparisons would be made with his or her baseline to determine if the person is physically ready to come back to work.

1

"It protects the county and the employees," Pfeiffer said. "It makes sure they are at the same level they were before."

A return-to-work policy is already in place for the county, according to Commissioner Ken Stuhr. Employees who are absent from work for a certain amount of time must present a clearance note from their physician, before returning to work.

"Also, you may have someone who says, 'I'm 64, I can't do what I did when I was 34.' You can't discriminate, but there are job requirements. You want them to be capable of performing their jobs. Also, the new return policy would be for all types of situations, not just injuries. It could also include pregnancy, illness, whatever," Pfeiffer explained.

Some county officials questioned how the practices fall within federal medical privacy law. Pfeiffer explained that all the information would be protected, confidential and filed with the clerk's office.

The cost would be $88 a test.

"By putting people in jobs in which they can't meet the qualifications, you're putting the person at risk," Pfeiffer said, "as well as the people who are working with them."

A committee will take a look at the baseline and entry testing, as well as the "return-to-work" policies.