

## Management & Supervisory Notes

### January 2014 Diversity: Beyond Race, Religion & Gender

"If we cannot end our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity"

-John F. Kennedy

Diversity is no longer something we can hope for in our organization, it is something we need. To be a high-performing organization we cannot have a homogeneous workforce. The challenges we face now and in the future require a diversity of thought and experiences. We need to hire and retain a diverse workforce that can solve complex problems, communicate on a global scale and respond to a constantly changing environment.

Traditionally we have thought about diversity in very limited terms. Diversity initiatives and training have focused mainly on race, religion, gender, national origin, age and disability. However, diversity is far more than that. Diversity is everything that makes us different from one another, including: educational level, work background, income, marital status, sexual orientation, military, weight and geographical location. The image of an iceberg is often helpful in helping to understand this idea of diversity.

Diversity is like an iceberg. We often experience the part of the diversity that is above the water line, those things that we can see when we meet someone. However, most of what makes someone unique are all those things that lie below the water, what is not immediately visible to us. We need to expand our understanding of what we mean by diversity, so that we do not unintentionally offend someone.

Friendly fire is the unintentional discrimination that occurs because of habit, unconscious behavior, or just plain insensitivity. This type of discrimination often happens not out of malice, but because we are unaware of the affect that our language or non-verbal communication has on others. We make an off-handed comment about the intelligence of those in Mississippi, refer to an administrative assistant as 'my girl' or not respect somebody's personal space. Friendly fire can have a negative effect and convey an unintended message. In a world that is constantly changing it is important to be aware of what messages we are sending.

Pinellas County is rapidly changing; the citizens we serve are becoming more diverse. For instance, from 2000 to 2010 the County experienced a 71% increase in the Hispanic population and 41% increase in the Asian population. Additionally, the right of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered individuals to be respected for their 'below the line' diversity are also being increasingly emphasized. These are just a few of the areas in which our need to recognize diversity is important.

Recognizing diversity should not be solely based on a list of extrinsic factors, such as lawsuits, federal and state laws or our need to conform to our internal policies. Rather, we should be embracing diversity because of our commitment to institutional values, our desire to create a superior working environment and the belief that all people have inherent dignity.