



April 26, 2021

Press Release:

Oklahoma Public Employees Association

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Public Employee Association Looks Toward Future State Employment Advancements

With today's signing of House Bill 1146, Oklahoma has the opportunity to improve how it manages its state agency workforce, according to the Oklahoma Public Employees Association (OPEA).

"The time was right to modernize Oklahoma's merit system while maintaining core principles like due process for state employees and improving the way state agencies select and hire their employees," said OPEA Executive Director Sterling Zearley. "We believe this bill provides Oklahoma with an opportunity to benefit employees and agencies and Oklahoma's veterans."

"In looking to improve our merit system, the goal was to create a more efficient system that is easier to navigate for job applicants, employees and state agencies while ensuring employees who are working daily to serve our citizens, visitors and industries have tools they need to provide high-quality services," Zearley said.

Zearley said the association would have resisted changes to the system that did not include due process for state employee in discipline matters saying due process protections were necessary to protect employees as they apply policy and regulations in their work.

"State employees have policy they are required to follow and due process offers protections against outside influence on the employee," Zearley said. "Some decisions state employees make are unpopular even though they are made in accordance with their policy, merit system due-process means they can make those decisions without fear of reprisal. But that process needs to be efficient and streamlined so cases don't take months to finish."

OPEA believes today is the beginning of changes necessary to make Oklahoma a top-ten employer by setting the stage for market based salary improvements and a performance based reward system. According to OPEA, state employee compensation still lags behind the market by nearly 20 percent.

"As we implement these changes, we must build on this momentum by improving state employee compensation including a way to reward state employees for high quality service," he said.

OPEA claims the state's progressive discipline process was often cumbersome and lengthy, with some cases taking nine months to a year to complete.

A component of this bill revamps how Oklahoma's state agencies hire and place veterans in state agency positions.

"Instead of only giving veterans a preference in hiring, we can now look towards a veterans' placement office within OMES that will work to see that veterans seeking state employment are provided with opportunities to work in positions that match their skills and experience," Zearley said.

"We appreciate the hard work of Rep. Mike Osborne and Sen. Greg Treat and Governor Stitt and his staff as we discussed the current system and how it could be improved. We look forward to being at the table as policy is developed and implemented to improve state employment," Zearley said. "We must continue improving state employment to make the State of Oklahoma competitive in recruiting and retaining the best and brightest citizens to serve our state."