

March 22, 2021

San Francisco Board of Supervisors, Rules Committee — Confirmation Hearing

Carol Isen, Opening Testimony, Human Resources Director Nominee

Chair Peskin and members of the Rules Committee, thank you for allowing me to speak with you today.

I am honored by Mayor's Breed's confidence in me to serve the City and its officials and employees as Human Resources Director.

The nomination, and I hope support and confirmation by this Board, to serve as the City's Human Resources Director is the culmination of a long career in public service, as a union representative, and as a public servant. I am a career-long advocate for public service and effective and equitable government operations and services.

I would like to describe the qualities and strengths I bring to the position and my thoughts and plans if the Board confirms my appointment.

I will Set the Tone from the Top. I am ethical, respectful, direct, and compassionate. I bring deep knowledge of the merit system and labor relations, and the ways in which they are intertwined.

I have extensive experience and respect for the Civil Service Commission and the important role it plays in protecting and regulating the merit system.

I believe that fair, non-biased, non-political, ethical civil service employment is essential to the delivery of high-quality public services. The City's employees are its greatest asset, as has been so clearly demonstrated over the past year during the local emergency brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. I will always be their champion, will honor their great work, and take steps for compassionate but firm course correction when needed.

As you know I would be the first openly LGBTQ employee, which, at key junctures in my career, I would not have felt comfortable or safe to state this in such a public manner.

From this, my life experiences, and as a worker advocate, I bring a deep and abiding commitment to the rights of all workers to work free of physical and psychological harm in the workplace.

Trauma at work, from being left out, or ridiculed, bullied, harassed, suppressed, not appreciated or encouraged, or unfairly disciplined are intolerable. All of us need to earn a living

and should have a right to do so with respect and dignity, without suffering harassment or discrimination.

Our African American colleagues are making this point forcefully, and poignantly. I am committed to doing everything in my power as Human Resources Director to listen, and to address head on the demand for racial justice and equity in our workplaces. We owe this to our employees.

I commit to being a full partner and champion as the Human Rights Commission, the Office of Racial Equity, the Office of Transgender Initiatives and all of our City agencies, including the Department of Human Resources, pursue the critical task of advancing racial and social justice in San Francisco City employment.

I believe that organized labor should and must be our active partners in these efforts. The right of all workers to be treated fairly and with dignity and respect is at the core of the labor movement's mission, which are the principles I have advanced throughout my career as a union representative and as a City employee.

I'd like to pause here to acknowledge recent violence against our Asian American and Pacific Islander community. Our AAPI colleagues are so woven into the fabric of our work, at DHR we will do everything we can to make sure the xenophobia and prejudice have no place in City employment.

As I mentioned in my all-employee message last week, the Employee Assistance Program is available to any employee, it is private and confidential, and I urge any employee who needs additional support to contact EAP.

If confirmed, I will pursue the following objectives:

Protect Integrity & Fairness in Civil Service.

One part of the oath for this position is this: "I am opposed to appointments to the public service as a reward for political activity and will execute the office of Human Resources Director in the spirit of this declaration."

The Human Resources Director is the only City employee who must make that oath. I will uphold this oath to my fullest capacity.

This is a significant challenge. DHR processes on average 125,000 applications and 11,000 appointments each year, and we have multiple points of entry, through the permanent civil service, and through various appointment types permitted by Charter but exempted from the civil service system.

At present, DHR conducts audits only in response to allegations or complaints. I would seek to establish an auditing function within DHR, which could conduct routine and random audits, and coordinate its activities with the Whistleblower function in the Controller's office, the Public Integrity Unit of the City Attorney's office, and the Civil Service Commission's Inspection Service.

I think it is important to get the word out that DHR is stepping up its oversight, and that this effort is supported by the executive and legislative branches of the City.

As you know, with the support of the Mayor, I have launched an independent review of our Equal Employment Opportunities policies and practices.

We are looking forward to the report and its findings and recommendations, and will work with all interested parties, including this Board, once the report is issued.

In addition, we have recently initiated a collaborative effort, through Civic Bridge, with U.S. Digital Response to evaluate and amend the EEO Division's work processes.

I would like to restructure that process, to make sure that Departments are at the forefront of addressing misconduct, promptly and effectively.

In a well-publicized incident last year, a now former employee of our EEO Division entered into an unauthorized settlement agreement with a complainant, hiding her actions and deceiving supervisors and coworkers in the EEO Division.

We are working with Civic Bridge to identify steps we can take to tighten our internal controls, so systems are in place to prevent such misconduct in the future.

Promote and Enforce Healthy Workplaces.

I will promote health and well-being at work. This includes everything from fairness, to dignity and respect at work, to robust health and safety programs.

I intend to promulgate and enforce a robust **respect in the workplace and anti-bullying policy**, with increased and swift consequences for misconduct, and special focus on misconduct that is discriminatory, defamatory or demeaning.

Through our Workers' Compensation Division, which has led the way in fair and speedy processing of claims,

we will take steps to fulfill our full Charter responsibility for accident, injury and illness prevention through expanded health and safety coordination with our City Departments.

DHR has taken a leadership role throughout the local emergency, in many practice areas, including launching a City-wide Health and Safety coordinating committee, and we brought in medical experts to support this work.

I will work to promote career employment, for all our employees, not just some, and encourage training, education and skills development.

DHR will strengthen its partnerships with our City agencies and community and educational partners to advance job opportunities and pathways to them.

I am committed to pursuing these activities through a highly focused equity lens. We'll do this through the support of our newly created Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.

DHR will immediately begin work to establish citywide and department-level strategic goals and objectives for Diversity Equity and Inclusion, examine the existing barriers to entry and advancement in City employment, and promote practices that support an inclusive and belonging environment in which all of our employees are treated fairly.

Modernize and Improve Merit-Based Hiring and Promotions.

Our civil service system is rule and process bound. I am aware of the range of complaints, not new, that the time and complexity involved in hiring is excessive and overly burdensome, and further, complaints that certain employment practices adversely affect applicants of color.

In the last four months since I was appointed Acting Director we have initiated a review of several aspects of City employment to understand how they are working our employees and our City agencies, and where they may be falling short, including:

Testing protocols,

Minimum Qualifications,

Temporary and Permanent Exempt Appointments,

Outreach and Recruiting, and

De-identification of applicants in the selection process.

We are also looking forward to completing the first major milestone of our Hiring Modernization Program, with the planned summer launch of the Applicant Tracking System.

I hope this is only the first of many major investments in systems supporting personnel activities. A lot is expected of DHR; however, the department is badly in need of greater investment and resources.

Conclusion

With that, I would like to acknowledge the professionalism and dedication of the employees who comprise the Department of Human Resources. I have heard, from many corners, the perception that DHR is broken. While not without major challenges, as I have stated here, I think DHR is not at all broken.

With the same energy that we have poured into the COVID response, we will focus on critical evaluations, process reforms and course correction, as needed, of our core work.

I intend to reform and revitalize DHR, take a thorough and thoughtful look at its operations and services, and focus on the priorities I have outlined today.

Thank you, Chair Peskin and members of the Rules Committee, for considering my nomination and I ask that you recommend me to the full Board of Supervisors as the City and County of San Francisco's Human Resources Director.