

\$100,000 county payout for vacation, sick days raises eyebrows

Commissioners question policy as former head of troubled agency collects for vacation, sick days.

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Crockett

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The former head of Mecklenburg County's troubled mental health department has received final pay of nearly \$100,000 for unused vacation and sick time - a development that has commissioners from both parties promising to re-examine sick-leave payouts.

The county payment to Grayce Crockett is sparking a debate about Mecklenburg's policy, which sets no limits on the amount of money that departing employees can collect for accrued sick time.

Some have argued the practice discourages absenteeism and helps attract top-notch employees. But after learning from the Observer about the county policy and Crockett's pay, several county commissioners said Thursday it's time to examine whether the policy makes sense.

Commissioner Harold Cogdell called the payments to Crockett "absolutely mind-boggling." He and fellow Democrat Jennifer Roberts, the commissioners chairman, said the county should study how Mecklenburg's policy compares with those of other local governments.

"We've got to balance being fiscally prudent with the need to offer competitive compensation packages," Cogdell said. "... I'll be talking to the county manager about this."

Republican Commissioner Bill James said the county should act more like private companies, which rarely allow employees to collect large sums for unused sick time.

"It's a golden parachute for government employees," James said. "Grayce is following the rules. ... The bigger problem is that our policy is out of step with business best practices."

But Commissioner George Dunlap said he believes the policy encourages employees to show up for work.

"When you consider that we have fewer employees than we did in 1998, it's certainly important that our staff be at work every day," said Dunlap, a Democrat.

Contracting with Open Door

The county's final payments to Crockett totaled \$99,329.18, Deputy County Attorney Tyrone Wade said in response to questions from the Observer. County staff declined to provide information about how many days of vacation and sick time Crockett accrued, saying the information can't be released under state law.

Crockett, 57, led the mental health department from 2001 until late last year. She earned about \$159,000 annually.

She announced her resignation in the wake of a scandal involving Mecklenburg Open Door, a major contractor her department was supposed to oversee.

The department contracted with Open Door to run a federally funded housing program for people with mental illness. But a recent audit by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development found that the mental health department mismanaged that program, failing to keep adequate records and to ensure that residents were housed in safe and sanitary conditions.

The county will probably be forced to reimburse the federal government more than \$465,000 for undocumented or ineligible expenses.

Crockett, who had been on paid leave since September, resigned in December when the county was presented with the results of the HUD audit.

Open Door's former executive director, meanwhile, has been accused of embezzling more than \$145,000. A federal grand jury indicted Ed Payton in November.

While some have faulted Crockett for poor oversight, others have commended her for leading the mental health department through a difficult period of change.

Crockett could not be reached for comment. "I doubt if she wants to speak to you," a man who answered the phone at her home said Wednesday.

No limit to accrued sick time

County policy allows employees to accrue up to 240 hours of vacation time, according to Chris Peek, the human resources director. If employees accumulate more unused vacation time, they can convert it to sick time, Peek said. There's no limit to how much sick time an employee can accrue, Peek said.

It's not clear how much money Mecklenburg has paid out in recent years for unused vacation and sick time. County officials had not provided that information to the Observer by Thursday night.

As the recession reduced revenues in recent years, the county government has laid off hundreds of workers and made deep cuts to services. Mecklenburg workers haven't received merit pay raises since the 2007-08 budget. Now county leaders are concerned about the effect of the state's multi-billion-dollar shortfall.

Diane Juffras, an associate professor at the N.C. School of Government, said she believes most local governments in North Carolina pay departing employees for unused vacation and sick time - but to varying degrees. While some towns and counties allow employees to collect money for an unlimited number of days, others limit the amount that can be cashed out, she said.

The city of Charlotte does limit how much employees can receive for unused sick time. Those who retire can be paid for up to one-fifth of their accumulated sick leave, provided it doesn't amount to more than two months of pay. Those who are fired or leave before retiring can't receive such payments.

The city does not limit how much departing employees can be paid for unused vacation time.

Gaston County's policy is similar to Mecklenburg's.

Former Gastonia City Manager Ed Munn was paid more than \$200,000 for unused sick leave and vacation time in 2006, when he ended his 31-year career with the city.

In the private sector, companies have increasingly limited how much departing employees can collect from sick leave and vacation time, employee benefits consultants say.

Historically, public sector jobs haven't paid as well as private sector positions but have offered richer benefits. Today, however, many government employees make as much as their counterparts in the private sector, even as they continue to enjoy better benefits, said Mark Johnson, a Texas-based employee benefits expert. Johnson said he sees public sector benefits receiving more scrutiny as local governments across the nation struggle to balance their budgets.

"There's a day of reckoning coming," he said. Staff writer April Bethea and researcher Marion Paynter contributed.

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