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County ponders new test for health

The new standards would test prospective applicants' physical capacity

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"Demonstrate a firm handshake grip," is standard advice for the job seeker heading to a job interview. For the future Reno County job applicant, grip strength not only could be important, it could be measured. County commissioners, seeking to reduce workers' compensation costs, have called for better pre-employment screening, beyond the existing drug screening requirement. On Tuesday, they expressed interest in a physical capacity test program, manufactured and supported by the Salina-based Occupational Performance Center, and administered by the Hutchinson Clinic, 2101 North Waldron.

A test would cost \$85 apiece. Based on hiring statistics, the program could cost the county about \$11,000 annually. That figure didn't make commissioners flinch. The county budgeted slightly more than \$600,000 for workers' compensation insurance this year, and Commissioner Francis "Shep" Schoepf warned this spring that the line item could surge past \$1 million in 2008.

Harris thinks the proposed testing "definitely" would lower insurance rates. The testing entails about 25 separate tasks and takes about 45 minutes to complete, Harris said. Results from the strength and ability tests would be delivered by e-mail in less than an hour, along with the applicant's medical history. The data would indicate presumptive impairments.

Instead of assuming that a prospective hire has 100-percent physical ability, Harris pointed out, this would reveal, for example, if the individual has a back impairment of 3 percent.

"Employers like it because it gives them objective hiring information, and it provides them baseline medical information," said Brian Richardson, director of business development for Occupational Performance Center.

"Employees like it," Richardson said, "because they know if they become injured, they're either going to get compensated or rehabilitated back to the level they started."

Among area employers that subscribe to this testing program through the Hutchinson Clinic, Richardson said, are Legacy Foods, Eaton Corp., Collins Bus Corp., and The Hutchinson News.

County Commissioner Larry Sharp asked if the commission could mandate that sheriff's department employee take the pre-hiring test, too, even though those employees have separate agility tests.

"Sure," said County Counselor Joe O'Sullivan.

Commissioners are expected to vote June 20 on the program, and decide whether to launch it this year or in 2008.

Schoepf missed Harris' report Tuesday, but should be back for the vote next week. He is attending the Public Risk Management Association's annual conference this week in Boston.

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