

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Volunteering for Pay

Paid volunteer. Those two words just don't go together. You are paid for work or you volunteer your time. You volunteer in the community to help others, to support charitable organizations, to gain the intrinsic rewards that come from those activities. Volunteering is an integral part of American society. You do it in your free time.

Or that is the way it used to be. It's now a new day for state employees. Governor Patrick just issued an executive order that allows and encourages you to take a day off with pay to volunteer your time.

If your job is one of 50,000 in the governor's executive office, you can now have a day off each month with pay to work for an approved non-profit organization. I have so many questions about the program that I hardly know where to begin.

One day a month, 12 days a year, amounts to 5% of an employee's work time, assuming that there are 240 days as an average work year. What is the cost of lost productivity? If an office can truly spare that many work hours, isn't it overstaffed to start with? If assigned overtime or a substitute worker must replace an absent worker, what dollar cost is added to the agency's budget?

The governor is actively soliciting employee participation in the program, so managers may actively encourage participation by their staff. Will a manager penalize a conscientious employee who spends full time at her job for failure to volunteer? Conversely, might a results-oriented manager downgrade the worker who takes advantage of the full 12 days because of her lack of commitment to the job?

How many state work hours will be required to monitor the program? State workers have been and will continue to be assigned to approve nonprofit organizations as proper recipients of state workers' services and to monitor compliance. And what is the cost of those services in production hours?

If you suffer an injury while working in your paid volunteer capacity, will you be covered by worker's compensation? If you cause harm while volunteering, is the state liable for resulting damages? If your supervisor considers that she cannot spare you for a day, does that become a grievance to pursue through your union?

Many state offices request additional funds at budget time because they need to hire more people to fulfill their mission. Social service workers, for example, are always struggling to meet their job demands. From the calls for assistance that come to my office, I can deduce that many offices do not even have staff to handle the volume of phone calls they receive.

The bottom line is this: Governor Patrick has created a massive new entitlement for state workers, and taxpayers are holding the bag to pay for it. If only 10% of eligible employees use only half of their authorized 12 days, the cost of lost hours (assuming they are not back-filled) would exceed \$10 million.

It's a bad way to spend state dollars.