WHERE WOULD WE BE WITHOUT SEANC?

By Martha Fowler

We must not stop now. This has been a challenging and exciting year for State employees. SEANC played a vital role in securing a better pay raise for State employees. The number one priority adopted during the 1999 SEANC convention was to seek full funding of the Comprehensive Compensation System. In May 2000 we had a very successful legislative rally in Raleigh with over 5,800 State employees in attendance. This sent a strong message to our legislators. The House had proposed a 5 percent pay raise, plus a 1 percent contribution to the retirement plan, while the Senate and the Governor had recommended only a 3 percent raise. The SEANC Executive Director, officers and members actively lobbied for the higher of the two proposals. In the final budget approved effective July 1, 2000, active State employees received a 4.2 percent pay raise. A $500 bonus will be given in October 2000. Retirees received a 4.2 percent raise and an increase in the retirement formula from 1.80 percent to 1.81 percent.

Even though we received full funding of the State employee pay plan for the first time since it was adopted in 1993, we must not stop working hard to continue pursuing better pay raises, benefits and working conditions for all State employees. SEANC also accomplished its goal of reducing the amount of taxes being withheld from supplemental income payments for State employees. Longevity pay will no longer be taxed at a rate of 48 percent, but will be taxed at the employee’s regular rate. For other supplemental income payments such as the flat $500 bonus, the effective date for the reduced tax amount is October 2000. We must not stop now. Tell a friend what SEANC has done for you lately. Each of us should write our legislators and thank them for approving a budget which included pay raises for State employees and retirees. We should not stop there. Many legislative candidates will be seeking office this fall. As a State employee and a citizen of North Carolina, you should be a registered voter. Please inform yourself about the issues and vote. Together we can continue to “keep watch and take action” at the polls in November.
Governor Hunt issued Executive Order #155 on July 20, 1999 to establish a pilot teleworking (or telecommuting) program for State government agencies. The Governor did this for two reasons, according to the Executive Order:

“to reduce ground-level ozone and motor vehicles emissions through its own policies and the actions of its agencies and employees and the actions of its agencies and employees” and

“to increase employee productivity and morale due to an improved work environment.”

Senate Bill 953 was also passed by the legislature in 1999 with the goals of

“reducing emissions of nitrogen oxides (NOx) from all sources by 25 %” and

“reducing the growth of vehicle miles traveled by 25%.”

The target date for these goals is July 1, 2009. One of the ways this could be accomplished would be to direct the Office of State Personnel to

“promote telecommuting by State employees with the goal of replacing State employee vehicle miles traveled in commuting by 20% without reducing hours worked or productivity. The Office of State Personnel shall report on progress in implementing this policy.”

Telecommuting and teleworking are really the same thing. The official definition of teleworking is “a work arrangement in which employees work at any time or place that allows them to accomplish their work in an effective and efficient manner.”

Now, the Office of State Personnel has just finished evaluating the pilot program, and will be establishing new policies for all State agencies in the next few months. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill will be regulated by these policies, for better or for worse.

Does this sound too good to be true? Let’s take a look at some of the terms of teleworking, assuming the new regulations go into effect as proposed. I received a copy of the proposed regulations from Judith Bell, the State teleworking coordinator. The list below is my reading of the regulations.

1. Telecommuting is a management decision. While UNC-CH supports telecommuting, according to Laurie Charest, Associate Vice Chancellor for Human Resources, each departmental director or chair may set a policy which either supports or rejects telecommuting for that department. If the department chooses to make telecommuting available for its employees, it must do so in very specific ways.

2. At the same time, any teleworking agreement is voluntary for the employee, so no one will be forced into telecommuting. Employees who enter into such an arrangement will be able to terminate the arrangement, as can management. If the latter happens, the employee cannot file a grievance.

3. Each agency will have to specify which positions, and which employees, are good candidates for teleworking. Documentation will have to support each decision, so this process may be lengthy. Both the teleworker and the supervisor/manager must sign documents that define the teleworking arrangement.

4. The work environment at home will have to meet safety standards. The new regulations state, “The agency should be satisfied that the employee’s home work site conforms to its safety standards. This may include inspections by the agency of the employee’s home work site as necessary.” The regulations also state that the agency will not provide office furniture. That leaves the employee to cover the cost.

5. “Teleworking is not a substitute for dependent care,” the proposed regulations state. Work expectations must be spelled out clearly for time to be worked at home. The good news is that the regulations allow the agency to determine these expectations. Having a child, or parent, needing care at home does not qualify an employee for telecommuting. The requirements of your job and your own suitability for teleworking are what make you eligible.

If you would like to know more about the proposed regulations, you may contact Ms. Judith Bell at (919) 733-8332 or email her at jbell@ospadmin.osp.state.nc.us. The new regulations have not been published on the web, but the regulations for the pilot program are on the web, and are very similar. See http://teleworking.osp.state.nc.us/ for the details.

As for me, I have no authority whatsoever to implement teleworking at UNC-CH. I only have an interest in it, and have taken some time to look at the regulations. Laurie Charest is the appropriate person to contact regarding how UNC will respond to these new regulations.

PAY RALLY ON MAY 17

DRAWS RECORD 5,800

A record 5,800 State employees marched on the State Government complex in Raleigh May 17, making an unprecedented statement about pay and the strong interest State employees have in receiving fair treatment from the General Assembly.

The rally had been planned for a year. Twenty-seven buses from Asheville to Wilmington, plus vans and cars, brought State employees to Raleigh. Thousands walked from the SEANC Central Office, staging point of the rally, to the Bicentennial Mall that links the Legislative Building and the State Capitol. They made the four-block walk in groups of 50 to 100, forming impressive links in a chain of solidarity. There seemed no end to the clusters of highway and correctional employees, health care technicians, processing assistants, university employees and others determined to take their message to the legislature.

The rally received wide media attention. Reporters from the Raleigh News & Observer, the Associated Press, all major Triangle-area television stations and the North Carolina radio news network covered the event. SEANC Executive Director Dana Cope told the massive gathering, “What a powerful
testimony we have here today ... the money is there (for a substantial salary increase), ... It's not only the right thing (for the Legislature to do), but it's the moral thing for State employees and their families.'

THE TEN MOST COMMON MISTAKES CONSUMERS MAKE WHEN CONSIDERING GOOD MAJOR MEDICAL BENEFITS

By Andy Landes

Here are the ten most common health benefits mistakes made by individuals and small businesses, with some suggestions on how to prevent them or reduce their impact.

1. Few people give much consideration to the qualifications and compatibility of their insurance agent or broker. Major medical benefits are very complex and volatile, so people should try to find the most knowledgeable, experienced, and truly customer-oriented one. Sometimes it is also best to enlist the support of an outside, completely independent expert.

2. Most people just look at price and coverage. First and foremost, one should learn about the carrier's financials, cost containment ability, claims paying history, management, actions against, commitment to quality, and service capabilities.

3. Don’t automatically purchase the plan with the lowest initial premium. If there is a chance the policy may be kept more than several years, choose a plan from a carrier whose average renewal rate increases over the last five years or more have been comparatively low. Be careful to compare renewal rates of in-force business, not new business rates.

4. Group major medical plans (HMO or other) are not typically less expensive than individual plans, except sometimes in the 50 plus age categories. It is true that group plans usually have better coverage than non-group, although the differences are not often great.

5. The most important coverage considerations are not the low end numericals involving deductibles, co-pays, etc. What expenses are eligible or not, and what treatment is determined to be usual, customary, and reasonable have more relevance. For example, why have a major medical plan without medium and long-term physical, speech and occupational therapy in case of a serious accident with severe joint dysfunction? Most managed care plans contain only short-term therapy benefits.

6. Many different health plans appear to have almost identical benefits. What they actually pay is sometimes quite different. That is partly because there are more than 2,500 different health interventions and 10,000 kinds of hardware, devices and materials for which less than one percent is specifically accounted for in any policy verbiage. Insist on a written prospective payment forecast from all providers before any important and/or expensive intervention(s).

7. Collectively HMOs are not much, if any, better than Preferred Provider Organizations (PPO) and other health plan types at controlling costs. If they have been lower priced, it has been more that they have recruited and appealed to younger and healthier customers. Judge any health carrier and its plans on merit, not according to type.

8. Health plans with the widest choice of medical providers are not necessarily the best. While it is important to find a network that contains as many of one's existing providers as possible, in general one should seek a plan that best manages and retains the highest percentage of accessible and quality providers. Find out about the quality and accessibility of the available providers before enrolling in a health plan.

9. If a person incurs an accident or illness, presumably the insurance carrier, hospital, and doctor's office will see to it that everything turns out OK. Not always true! First and foremost, immediately upon issue and receipt read the complete insurance policy and review the application to be sure everything is understood and nothing of importance has been omitted or incorrectly stated on the application.

10. In the event of an illness or accident that would require inpatient or outpatient hospitalization, surgery, and more, be sure to enlist the support of a capable advocate/ombudsperson who will be present during future treatment and oversee the important financial reimbursement aspects.

For further information, call Andy Landes at 848-2051 in Raleigh and leave your name and phone number(s) for him to call you back. Andy has been an independent health benefits consultant and broker in the Triangle for the last 20 years.

ANNUAL MEETING WAS FUN AND FULL OF WONDERFUL SURPRISES

District 19 held its annual meeting on June 20, 2000 in the Community Room of the OWASA Building in Carrboro. Special guests Paula Schubert, SEANC President, spoke, as did SEANC staff representative Lynn Cote. Joe Totten informed the district about Policy Platform objectives and Hazel Lunsford gave the Bylaws report.

SEANC scholarship winners Yolonda Patrice Harrison and Bryan Rashad Bunn accepted their scholarships. Emily Elizabeth White’s mother Vickie Overman accepted the scholarship in Emily’s absence.

Marie Tate made the following awards presentations:

SEANC Distinguished Service Award — Pamela Siler
District Member of the Year — Mariah McPherson
SEANC District People’s Award — Ruth Lewter
SEANC Member of the Year — Anthony Weaver

The election for officers and delegates for District 19 for 2000-2001 was held. Martha Fowler was re-elected Chair. Anthony Weaver will be our 1st Vice Chair and Marie Tate our 2nd Vice Chair. Mariah McPherson continues as EMPAC Chair. Patricia Harris is our Auditing Chair and Beverly Leake Nominating Chair. Hazel Lunsford continues as Bylaws Chair and Joe Totten Policy Platform Chair.

Congratulations, officers, award winners, and scholarship winners!

DISTRICT 19 MEMBER COMPLETES INTERNSHIP

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has begun career-track development programs. Deann Marsh completed the Basic Clerical Skills Program, then held a clerical internship at the Lineberger Comprehensive Cancer Center for six months. Later she was promoted to an Office Assistant III position in the Facilities Services Training Office. Well done, Deann.
CLIFF STONE … A VERY ACTIVE RETIREE

Although Cliff Stone retired from the UNC School of Pharmacy in November 1997 after 43 years as a State employee, he returned to work there in December 1998 on a year-to-year basis. His current appointment ends in December 2000. North Carolina needs and is fortunate to have indispensable employees like Cliff. Cliff remains an active member of District 19, having become a SEANC member in April 1982. He has served as a delegate on the Executive Committee, attended conventions, and been especially active on the Constitution, Policy Platform and Scholarship committees. We wouldn’t know what to do without him.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS

District 19 meets the third Tuesday of each month at 5:30 p.m., at the Orange Water and Sewer Authority (OWASA), 400 Jones Ferry Road, Carrboro. There is plenty of free parking and refreshments are served. All State employees are welcome.

- August 15, 2000 Monthly Meeting
- September 7-9, 2000 Annual Convention, Greensboro
- September 19, 2000 Monthly Meeting

The Retirees’ Chapter meets on the fourth Tuesday morning of each month for breakfast. For information, call John Boone at 919-942-1526.