



2026 NASPE Awards Program

Advancing the HR Profession Award

Submission Deadline: April 17, 2026

Submission Method: Submit via the 2026 NASPE Awards Nomination Form.

Upload this completed template within the form.

Nominations from dues-paying states are considered for eligibility. Nominated programs or efforts should demonstrate a positive impact on the administration of state human resource programs.

Programs and projects must have been operational for at least six months and must be transferable to other states. Selection criteria are based on the questions asked on the award application. Nominations are encouraged in all areas of human resource management administration.

NOMINATION INFORMATION

Title of Nomination: Employee Relations Coordinators (ERC) Community & Continuous Learning Program State: PA

Contact Person: Heather Spencer

Contact's Title: Employee Relations Staff Specialist

Agency: Office of Administration

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NOMINATOR INFORMATION

Nominator: Tracy Sullivan Title: Director of Employee Relations & Workforce Support

State: PA Agency: Office of Administration

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E-mail: trsullivan@pa.gov

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DETAILS

You may include links to websites as part of your nomination. Narrative responses should generally not exceed 4–6 pages (12-point font, double-spaced).

1. Please provide a brief description of this program.

The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's Community & Continuous Learning Program for Employee Relations Coordinators (ERC) represents a transformative, cross agency model for building statewide consistency and capability in employee relations (ER). ERCs receive real-time guidance, standardized tools, and mentorship through a sustained community of practice supported by quarterly sessions and a centralized digital collaboration hub. The program's innovative, performance-focused design incorporates scenario-based role playing, subject matter expert (SME) led coaching, and practical tools such as a standardized labor management meeting playbook, quick reference tip sheets, and a scenario deck to translate policy knowledge into practiced, repeatable behaviors. For example, ERCs rehearse complex real-world challenges such as de-escalating heated meetings and engaging with aggressive union leadership. This has resulted in stronger documentation, higher judgment, and more consistent outcomes statewide. Additionally, the ongoing education and accessibility of tools strengthens each agency's ER team as the ERCs have a better foundation and materials to train their staff and provide guidance. They also have an established community they can turn to when faced with a challenge or a unique situation. The program's >95 percent attendance, growing membership, and durable shared resource hub demonstrate its scalability and sustained impact.

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2. How long has this program or effort been operational?

The program began in February 2025 and is currently active.

3. Why was this program/effort created?

Commonwealth employees are represented by 20+ unions and numerous collective bargaining agreements and memorandums of understanding. Newly hired or promoted ERCs must quickly get up to speed to interpret complex provisions, apply them consistently across many agencies, and provide sound guidance to supervisors, managers, and their ER staff. The ERC Community & Continuous Learning Program teaches and standardizes best practices to ensure investigations, discipline, grievances, and meeting conduct look and feel the same statewide, reducing variability and error. The program also recognizes that new or newly promoted ERCs need more than written guidance; they need hands-on rehearsal of complex situations. A scenario deck and role play (e.g., engaging aggressive union leadership, enforcing sensitive work rules, de-escalating heated meetings, and managing time-and-attendance concerns) convert policy into practiced behaviors, accelerating judgment and documentation quality. Rather than relying solely on static guidance, the program is designed to be a living, cross-agency community of practice, essentially a place where ERCs can share questions, compare approaches, and converge on common standards in real time with their peers and ER experts.

4. What are the costs of this program/effort?

This program is delivered using existing staff and resources so there are no direct costs.

5. How is this program/effort funded?

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There is no special funding for this program.

6. How do you measure the success of this program/effort?

Overall attendance has had a sustained rate of >95 percent across all sessions. The number of attendees has grown by 36 percent. We have also seen a noticeable increase in confidence and a durable peer network that can lean on each other for real-world problem solving.

7. How has the program/effort changed since its inception?

In February 2025, the program opened with recurring group meetings and a dedicated Microsoft Teams channel, intentionally set up as the single “home base” for this newly created group of ERCs. The channel includes a curated library of reference materials, pinned conversations for important threads, and clear ground rules for open, professional dialogue to create psychological safety and a reliable source of truth for everyday work. Early sessions focused on the fundamentals of investigations and due process, e.g., preparing and collecting witness statements, working with reluctant witnesses, ensuring union notification, and drafting pre-disciplinary conference (PDC) notices with appropriate timing and charge framing (including handling prior discipline). The cohort also tackled grievance handling (first-step meetings, burden of proof, documentation), and time-and-attendance scenarios (emergency leave, absence without approval, tardy, civil leave, and administrative leave), alongside practical navigation of collective bargaining agreements. In the Spring and Fall 2025, recognizing that labor–management meetings are a pivotal venue for problem-solving, the program introduced a practical meeting playbook to standardize preparation, facilitation, and follow-through. Key

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elements include management preparation, agendas, constructive listening, strategic use of caucus to reset tone or gather facts, and thorough minute-taking with shared summaries that document decisions and notices. This guidance assists in productive outcomes and record integrity across agencies. In the Winter 2025–2026, the program moved from policy to performance as the group integrated scenario-based role-playing. Coordinators rehearsed high-stakes situations such as engaging an aggressive union president who signals non-cooperation, enforcing critical work rules in sensitive environments, intervening during heated labor–management meetings with multiple department heads, and managing time-and-attendance issues where personal emergencies collide with disciplinary histories. These simulations sharpen judgment, de-escalation, and documentation quality. Session outlines (Employee Relations Chats), tip sheets for labor–management meetings, and the scenario deck evolved into portable quick reference tools. The simplicity of these resources makes it easy to reinforce best practices and spread uniform approaches across cohorts and agencies. The original program continues while newly promoted ERCs join, ensuring institutional knowledge is shared forward. The community model keeps momentum high and helps consistency endure beyond individual training moments. Ongoing mentorship from four SMEs (Employee Relations Staff Specialists, Director of Employee Relations, and an ERC) provides real-time coaching and document review, closing the gap between “knowing the rule” and using it consistently in investigations, grievances, and meeting practice. As the

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Commonwealth prepares for contract negotiations in 2027, we will develop a mini-curriculum related to bargaining that builds upon existing meeting and documentation best practices.

8. Can this program or effort be adapted or replicated by other states? If so, how?

Yes. While each state's workforce is unique, the framework established by the ERC Community and Continuous Learning Program allows other states to readily replicate this program by adopting its core design of a community of practice supported through regular sessions and a centralized digital hub for resources, discussion, and standardization. States can tailor the curriculum and develop materials based on their individual Agreements, ER policies and ER workforce needs. Because the model is intentionally lightweight, scalable, and reusable, it can be implemented with minimal overhead while delivering measurable improvements in consistency, confidence, and ER capability statewide.

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