Civil Service in Public Health*

CHARLES F. BLANKENSHPH, M.D.
Passed Assistant Surgeon, Domestic Quarantine Division, U. S. Public Health Service, San Francisco, Calif.

A person is most commonly asked to speak at a public meeting for the reason that he is an authority on some subject. I wish that I had the distinction of authority, but I have not. My appearance here is due to my having been actively exposed to the intricacies of merit systems of personnel administration. My special assignments as a professional health worker have happened to lead me into most of the formal and many of the informal discussions of the merit system for health workers in Washington.

The administrative aspects of personnel management should of course be discussed by those familiar with the technics involved and must, in all cases, be examined by the light of local laws, administrative practices, and concepts of government. These few remarks are not addressed to the administrators of the several departments as such but rather to the individual health worker. I shall try to shape my remarks around what the merit system will mean to him and what he should do about it.

For the purposes of this paper, the terms "civil service," "merit system," and "career service" will be used interchangeably. They will denote a system of personnel management in official health departments under which the selection of personnel and related matters are based on considerations of merit and are determined by objective procedures. While the terms are subject to technical differentiation, it will not be done at this time.

Last year an amendment made to certain titles of the Federal Social Security Act focused the interest of all workers in official health agencies upon merit systems of personnel administration. The amendment as applied to Title V provided that after January 1, 1940, state and local plans for maternal and child health and for crippled children services must include methods relating to the establishment and maintenance of merit systems of personnel administration.

Following a conference with the State and Territorial Health Officers, the U. S. Public Health Service broadened its Regulations Governing Allotments and Payments to States under Title VI of the Social Security Act so as to incorporate provisions with respect to a merit system. The regulations now provide that in order to be eligible to receive funds under Title VI of the Social Security Act, states must submit to the Surgeon General any merit system plan developed to cover any part of the health personnel. Any such plan for a merit system found acceptable shall apply to all personnel engaged in the federal state cooperative health program.

Inasmuch as many health departments receive some federal grants-in-aid

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funds, the provisions in respect to merit systems attached to these funds affect a high proportion of state and local health workers. Their interest in the whole scheme should therefore be assured.

Many persons think of civil service or a merit system as a procedure designed only to prevent the selection of personnel on the basis of political considerations. They think the only reason for the existence of civil service is to circumvent consequences implied by the expression "to the victor belong the spoils."

A merit system should accomplish this purpose; but to be successful, it must go still further. It must of course eliminate from the selection process all types of politics, whether partisan, personal, fraternal, racial, religious, professional, labor, or school. At the same time it must provide that qualified persons are selected for positions and that the eligibility lists are made up of the best qualified.

If it were necessary only to obtain qualified personnel, without regard to the degree of qualification, the most economical and impartial procedure could be a simple one based on the laws of probability; in other words, a random selection from those having the required minimum qualifications. A lottery might do, or a bingo game, or some modification of the numbers racket.

Some opposition has been expressed to the formalization of the selection process by the adoption of standards, rules, and regulations. Well intentioned critics say in effect that on the whole health personnel have been selected on the basis of merit for many years; that politics has not played a large part in the choice of health workers—at least for the more responsible, professional positions; and, because of this, that the adoption of standardized procedures is both unnecessary and uneconomical.

If all health departments were relatively free of partisan politics, and if merit systems had no purposes other than the selection of the best qualified, that objection might be valid. But those premises are not necessarily true. Unfortunately, some health personnel are still selected almost entirely on the basis of political connections, and, as a result, the quality of health work done is often poor. The adoption of a sound merit system will do much to obviate such conditions.

Also, the use of merit systems has several beneficial results other than the selection of the best qualified to serve in governmental agencies. One of the most important of these is that such a system will gain public recognition because of the high professional standards attained. Fortunately, we in health work have developed staffs better trained and qualified for their jobs than are the staffs of many other branches of government. Public acceptance of our leadership, and confidence in our work can still be greatly enhanced when these high professional standards are more widely recognized. This should result in salaries more in keeping with the requirements of the job than is the case at present. I am sure all of us favor such a result.

Still another circumstance which may be expected from the adoption and proper administration of a sound merit system is greater security and longer tenure of office than are offered at present to those individuals who are performing their work in a satisfactory manner. Such a result is important to all professional public health workers. It is unreasonable to expect even the most competent individual to perform satisfactorily when his likelihood of continued employment hangs by the thin thread of personal favor; this, as most of you know, may be severed at a moment's notice.

By no means do I intend to imply that a merit system should make a
sinecure of each position in the health department. Nothing could be worse than a system of personnel management which would prevent the dismissal of employees for misconduct or gross incompetence. But the merit systems now being developed can, and with your help will, prevent the dismissal of a competent employee solely because he has earned the personal animosity of someone in a supervisory capacity.

My last topic is the provision of opportunity for professional growth and for promotion or demotion, as the case may warrant, on the basis of performance. Herein lies the greatest opportunity for improving personnel relationships and the quality of work performed in public health departments.

Despite the fact that the performance of health departments in general is excellent with regard to selection of personnel, their records in assurance for professional growth and maintenance of status for competent workers have been rather poor. The opportunity now exists for developing a real career service for health workers. With proper administration of soundly conceived merit systems, it should no longer be necessary for the health worker to look forward to a life of insecure employment, and often without promotion.

Four general statements with regard to merit systems should be made in closing:

First, whether or not one favors the extension of civil service into all health departments, it is actually taking place and it is of personal consequence to each health worker.

Second, since every health worker practically is involved, it should follow that health workers will interest themselves in the plans for their jurisdictions—those now in effect or those being developed.

Third, the approval of a state merit system plan by a federal agency constitutes no continuing guarantee that it will be satisfactory in operation to either the state administrator or the individual worker covered by the plan.

Fourth, the success of a merit system will depend to a great extent on the recognition that personnel management is a specialty in public administration, and on the assignment of this duty to individuals properly qualified for it by experience or training.