

+ + + Community Policy Forums

Highlights from Rochester and Winona, Minnesota

The Policy Forums:

Workplace Flexibility 2010 — a policy initiative based at Georgetown Law — is working to spur meaningful dialogue toward the creation of workplace flexibility policies that meet both employee and employer needs. As part of that process, Workplace Flexibility 2010 is hosting a series of six policy forums across the country to hear directly from local community and business leaders about the changing needs of their workforce — and to bring their perspectives and insights back to the national policy debate on workplace flexibility.

Rochester/Winona, Minnesota:

The second of these forums was held in March 2008 in Rochester, Minnesota — in partnership with the Rochester Area Chamber of Commerce and the Winona Area Chamber of Commerce.

Facing the reality of a rapidly aging workforce, the communities of Rochester and Winona are exploring innovative strategies to strengthen and expand their workforce and create sustainable economic growth. Both Chambers of Commerce are committed to working with local businesses to promote workplace flexibility as a means for improving employee satisfaction and retention — and attracting new, highly qualified workers to the region.

Many Rochester and Winona employers believe that workplace flexibility has become an essential tool for remaining competitive in an increasingly complex, global economy. At the forum, over 30 local business owners and managers, human resource representatives, and nonprofit agency directors came together to discuss how flexibility has benefited their workplaces — as well as how it has challenged them. Participants represented a diverse group of companies and organizations ranging in size and industry. They included a human resources manager for a growing manufacturing company, the president of a regional community college, the director of a local United Way, and the administrator of a regional medical center. The region's largest employers — IBM and the Mayo Clinic — were also represented.

Agenda and Activities:

Rochester Mayor Ardeell Brede opened the forum and thanked participants for engaging in a conversation with important implications for the region's workforce and economy. Chai Feldblum, Workplace Flexibility 2010's Co-Director, then presented an overview of current research on the changing demographics of the nation's workforce — and how those shifting demographics have intensified the need for workplace flexibility among employees of all ages, professions and income levels. She also provided an introduction to some of the existing and proposed laws and regulations that impact organizations' and businesses' efforts to implement workplace flexibility solutions.

Strategies, Successes and Challenges:

For 90 minutes, the forum's participants engaged in small group discussions focused on a series of questions posed by Workplace Flexibility 2010 addressing:

- How participants perceive the local/regional need for workplace flexibility;
- What successes and challenges participants have experienced in implementing workplace flexibility policies; and
- Whether public policy could support businesses implementing workplace flexibility solutions.

In response to these questions, participants reflected on their approach to flexibility within their own organizations and workplaces. The following themes emerged from these small group conversations.

1. **A majority of participants agreed that flexibility has become a crucial tool for doing business effectively in Minnesota and beyond — and many businesses are already using flexibility to retain qualified employees and attract new talent.**

Participants pointed out that:

- Flexibility is an important factor in extending "employee tenure"
- Businesses that offer flexibility are often recognized as a "best place to work" both regionally and nationally
- Flexibility is a crucial tool for "embracing the retiring workforce" and encouraging older workers with needed experience to remain on the job
- Businesses in Rochester and Winona are using a variety of flexibility strategies, including job sharing programs, telecommuting, compressed schedules, and phased retirement, among others

2. **Many participants stressed that using flexibility effectively can be extremely challenging for both managers and employees — and that, in some industries, extending flexibility to all employees may not be possible.** Participants noted that:

- While many managers are open to offering employees flexible work arrangements, they are concerned that increasing access to short, episodic or extended time off will ultimately decrease productivity and profit margins
- In an increasingly "24/7" marketplace, having multiple employees absent through time off and reduced hours can prevent essential work from getting done on time
- Determining which and how many employees can use flexible work arrangements is extremely complicated — and managers are concerned about creating confusion around scheduling and resentment among employees who cannot have flexible work arrangements
- Employees also struggle to communicate with supervisors about their need for flexibility, and fear retaliation from management if they ask to reduce their hours or take time off

3. **Many participants felt strongly that flexibility mandates would be too costly and burdensome for employers — but that there may be other ways that public policy could support businesses who were trying to make flexibility a standard of their workplace.** Participants shared suggestions for ways government could partner with or support business, including:

- Government could serve as a central resource or clearinghouse for flexibility "best practices"
- Government could serve as a model employer — and test new flexibility pilot programs
- Government could offer awards and recognition for organizations implementing flexibility
- Government could work to clarify current regulations and laws that impact businesses' ability to implement flexibility solutions
- Government could provide financial incentives and tax credits for implementing flexibility