

Volunteer Time-off Program: A Conversation with John Erwin

By **TIFFANY HEARN**

John Erwin, UMass Chan Medical School's vice chancellor for government relations, recently spoke with *The Scoop* about the university's Volunteer Time-off Program, and why employees should participate in it and give back to the local community.

THE SCOOP: What was the initial reasoning behind the volunteer hours initiative?



JOHN ERWIN (JE): We have always looked for ways to build on our partnership with the Worcester schools and local nonprofit organizations and saw providing paid time-off to volunteer to do that. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw how so many organizations

depended on volunteers to provide service to the community, combined with a real desire among members of the UMass Chan community to help in any way they could. So, we took that time during the pandemic to see how we could enhance our community engagement efforts and saw UMass Chan employees as a key resource in that effort.

By providing paid time-off to volunteer, we could build on our existing relationships and develop new ones while providing employees with a way to give back to causes and organizations that are important to them.

THE SCOOP: Who was the biggest advocate?

JE: We had many real champions for this initiative led by Chancellor Michael Collins, Provost Terence Flotte, and Executive Vice Chancellor John Lindstedt. Each saw it as truly connected to our mission of public service and a key way to advance our strategic plan, Impact 2025.

THE SCOOP: When is the test/pilot of the program complete?

JE: We launched the policy in February 2022 and will in February 2023 review the policy and consider changes based on a review of usage of hours and what employees have been suggesting.

THE SCOOP: What changes will be made based on the pilot? From the employee perspective and the department/manager?

JE: We have had so many positive comments from employees who have used their volunteer time, had many suggestions to add to the list of eligible nonprofits, and have been able to add them to our list of eligible organizations.

The most common suggestion for consideration has been to reduce the required four-hour minimum for use of the volunteer time. The current policy requires each use of volunteer time to be at least four hours long. We have heard from many employees and even a few nonprofits that a two-hour minimum may allow for greater use of time, and we will be considering that change as we review the first full year of the program.

From a department manager perspective, we have had many requests to assist in organizing group volunteer projects for departments. As many employees work remotely, volunteer projects are increasingly seen as a way to bring people together and build team camaraderie while doing good. So, we will be looking for ways in which our office can play more of a “matchmaker” role and assist in linking departments with volunteer projects.

THE SCOOP: How many employees have taken advantage of this benefit.

JE: As of Nov. 1, 2022, more than 170 employees have participated, volunteering more than 900 hours.

THE SCOOP: What is the best way to describe the program regarding Impact 2025 and beyond future planning?

JE: A key pillar of the Impact 2025 strategic plan is “community and global” impact and paid time-off to volunteer clearly enhances the work in that area.

In addition, within the Operational Excellence pillar is for UMass Chan to become an employer of choice. A paid time-off benefit is a benefit that make us a more attractive place to work and connects us all to our mission of public service.

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