Reflections on a Long, Happy and Rewarding MMRMA Career

by Michael Ellis
Director of Claims

"Choose a job you love and you will never have to work a day in your life."

This quote, attributed to Confucius, nicely sums up my relationship with MMRMA. I have loved my role here, and the last 28 years did not feel like work—they felt like fun.

I want to thank the members, the Board of Directors, and my fellow employees. I'd particularly like to thank Executive Director Mike Rhyner for his contributions to the place I have been fortunate to call my home away from home.

The "place" I'm referring to isn't the office. Rather, the "place" is the people and the process and the problems.

Please do not misunderstand the word 'problems' as bad; solving other people's problems is the life's work of a claims professional. And over the last 28 years, I have seen some very interesting and challenging problems.

Fortunately, I have had a great team to work with as we found solutions to many such challenges. Like me, many of the players have been around for years.

Although there has been considerable stability at MMRMA, there has also been inevitable turnover, which allows me the joy of teaching newcomers about the history of this magnificent organization.

Pools a Proven Success
At a time when many bemoan the administrative bureaucracy of government, it is worthwhile to note that this same group created public entity pooling. MMRMA and other pools have flourished in a market niche abandoned by the supposedly efficient insurance industry, the near collapse of which almost brought down the U.S. economy.

Relationships Matter
Over the years, I have made many lasting friendships and I will always cherish them. No one has been closer than my trusty right hand, Pam Garton. Pam was at her desk when I arrived on the job, and

An Insider's Look at MMRMA's Claims Process

As I depart my position as Director of Claims, I would like to leave members with a few thoughts on three important components of MMRMA's claims process.

1. Prompt Reporting
MMRMA documents require members to promptly report all events that may lead to claims. Many insurance companies force compliance with this requirement by denying coverage if it is not met. MMRMA's focus has always been on finding ways to grant coverage. In fact, I have personally signed all denial letters as a final safeguard that the denial is truly necessary.

It is critical to the process that members report events to MMRMA as expeditiously as possible.

Within this niche, Mike Rhyner and the MMRMA Board of Directors—with the support of the entire membership—have built a strong and vibrant organization. MMRMA epitomizes what can be achieved by governmental entities working together for the common good.

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Key Retirement for MMRMA
As most of you know, Director of Claims Michael Ellis will retire this year after a 28-year career with MMRMA. During his tenure, our organization enjoyed incredible growth and excellent performance results.

Michael has a remarkable ability to address complex, high-profile litigated claims and develop effective strategies to reach favorable outcomes. He accomplishes this while maintaining positive communication between members, attorneys, and reinsurers.

It will be difficult to replace talent at that level. This is an even bigger challenge when we consider the relationships Michael has cultivated with the membership, the MMRMA Board of Directors, and staff.

With Michael’s departure and other recent employee retirements, we have lost over 100 years of institutional memory.

A National Trend
MMRMA is certainly not alone in experiencing a series of retirements. This is a trend in the public entity pooling community and the larger commercial insurance industry. Other public entity pools were created in the same time period as MMRMA and are losing their long-term staff members to retirement.

Nationally, four million baby boomers retire each year, creating a gap in leadership and institutional knowledge.

Job openings in the insurance industry have doubled since 2009 and are projected to reach 400,000 by 2020. Competition for top talent is intense.

Smart Succession
Our succession efforts have been effective thus far. During the last two years, we added six new staff members in response to recent retirements and other departures.

MMRMA has an unparalleled reputation in the pooling industry, and I believe we will continue to attract high-quality talent.

Lost institutional memory cannot be easily replaced. However, succession should not be seen solely as a loss of talent. It can also become an opportunity for organizational evolution and make for an orderly transition to the next generation of excellence.

Moving ahead, we will continue to celebrate the history and accomplishments that built our program. This legacy serves as the launching point for the next generation—who will bring new perspectives, experiences, and expertise while maintaining the spirit and culture that distinguish MMRMA.
Excellent Performance Begins with Highly Specialized Training

by Al Smolen
Risk Control Consultant

MMRMA recognizes the importance of training for member elected officials and employees. In that light, we have a long, rich history of providing important training opportunities for those in public service.

MMRMA training sessions, held at many locations throughout Michigan, are designed and presented in a manner conducive to the wide variety of services expected (often demanded) by our members’ citizens.

New in 2015

MMRMA has developed dozens of training courses to date, and introduced three new courses in 2015:

Career Survival provides information and support to facilitate emotional stability in first responders. The seminar uses years of front-line personal experiences to identify the pitfalls and challenges from exposure to trauma, stress, and grief.

Beach Safety for West Michigan covers beach monitoring and rip currents, a smartphone application with forecasts and hazard alerts, the beach flag warning system, safety and liability issues related to lifeguards and lifesaving stations, and the process for reporting a beach-related claim.

MMRMA’s new beach safety training seeks to reduce the incidence of drownings in the Great Lakes. Last year, 50 people drowned in Lake Michigan alone.

Fire Chief 101 shares skills and procedures for managing modern fire and EMS services (see sidebar).

Rapid Deployment to an Active Shooter teaches law enforcement responders safe, proper handling of these dangerous encounters.

Telecommunications Supervisor educates on the effective management of 911 call centers.

Other recent training offerings include:

Effective Discipline and Grievance Procedures enhances management skills.

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) highlights recent changes in FOIA laws.

Autism Awareness illuminates the behavioral differences and effective approaches to interacting with persons with autism.

A Free Resource

Most training sessions are offered free to members, while a few require a nominal fee for professional services.

MMRMA courses are consistently well attended and receive highly positive reviews from participants. The need for modernized services, and the value these opportunities bring to members, keep MMRMA in the forefront as an essential training partner.

Fire Chief 101: The Strategy and Tactics of Administration

Fire Chief 101 equips fire chiefs and EMS administrators with the knowledge and skills needed to manage today’s modern fire service. Endorsed by the Michigan Fire Chiefs Association, the program is recommended for new chiefs, progressive chiefs, staff officers, “fast track” firefighters, elected officials, and fire advisory board members.

Through interactive modules, attendees learn from, and share in the experiences of, successful fire chiefs. Topics indicate the broad scope of the administrative skills that fire chiefs are expected to master: purchasing, budgeting, insurance/ISO ratings, mutual aid agreements, standard operating procedures, organizational structure, legal and liability issues, MIOSHA, and effective hiring and training. To learn more about Fire Chief 101 training, call 800 243-1324.

A complete course catalog is online at mmrma.org/training/catalog.php
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and she will still be here after my last day. I want to thank Pam for helping me keep the papers flowing smoothly in and out of my office.

Having staff members like Pam and many others provides the continuity and stability to help the next generation find its way through the maze of paperwork, logistics, and institutional memory. Such in-depth knowledge keeps an office running smoothly and creates a solid foundation for the future. Speaking of logistics, Mike Rhyner has helped continuously improve MMRMA by keeping the paperwork simple and the technology current. More than that, for 15 years he has set a tone for the organization that is both progressive and professional.

A Lasting Impression
If I have any regrets, it is that I did not take more photos. As I look back now, my memories fade; the sharpest are those supported by a picture.

While I complain about not having a camera when I need one as the employees around me whip out their phones and start snapping selfies, I begin to believe that it is truly time for me to retire.

In closing, let me point out that, unfortunately, space does not permit naming and thanking everyone who matters to me. If you and I have enjoyed conversations together during my time at MMRMA, rest assured that you have enriched my life and my work.

Michael Ellis

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The longer it takes to establish a reserve, the more uncertainty is injected into the math of pricing our ultimate cost. To keep rates low, reserves must be established promptly and accurately.

While MMRMA does defend lawsuits, our goal is not to win suits but to settle cases.

3. Settling Cases
Our focus is on having the money to settle each case for a reasonable (e.g., smallest possible) amount, rather than trying every case in order to vindicate the actions of the member involved. While individuals may occasionally disagree with this focus, we must act in the interests of the collective membership. Our goal is to smooth out costs over the long run and keep insurance available during the toughest of times.

The MMRMA Board ensures that there is enough money available to handle all types of member claims. The attorneys we use, who are experts in the area of governmental immunity, have closed over two-thirds of all suits filed against members in the last 35 years with no payment to the plaintiff.

MMRMA is not “soft” on lawsuits, nor do we settle every case. But we do consider settling most cases as an expedient way to get our members back to doing what they do best: serving the public.