

California Legislature

Joint Committee on Rules

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Policy on Appropriate Workplace Conduct: Creating a Culture of Respect, Civility and Diversity

The Legislature is responsible for debating and enacting California law and policy, on behalf of all Californians. Members and staff engage the public, advocates, and each other in vigorous discussion of what is best for California. The Legislature's success depends on creating a culture of respect, civility and diversity.

In creating that culture, the Legislature faces unique challenges. Members are elected by the people, not employed by the Legislature. Legislative staff includes some just entering the workforce and others with decades of experience. Legislation often addresses sensitive issues. The legislative calendar includes times of long hours, fast action, and stress, as well as times of more deliberate analysis and review. These challenges have led to incidents that counter efforts to promote respect, civility and diversity.

The California Legislature therefore adopts this Policy on Appropriate Workplace Conduct (Policy) to build a workplace culture based upon the values of respect, civility and diversity. All Members and legislative staff are required to conduct themselves in accordance with the Policy as well as all applicable local, state, and federal laws. They are encouraged to judge their own actions through the prism of these core values for a professional workplace. The Legislature seeks to build a workplace where all community members are respected, interaction and engagement is civil, and diversity is valued. Building that workplace will require time and the Legislature will need to invest the resources necessary to support that effort.

The purpose of this Policy is to preserve the dignity, respect, and professionalism of the legislative workplace as well as to protect the right of employees to be free from unlawful discrimination, sexual harassment and all other forms of unlawful harassment, retaliation and inappropriate conduct toward others based on a protected status. Retaliation, as well as discrimination, sexual harassment, other forms of harassment, and inappropriate conduct toward others based on a protected status, is contrary to the values of the Legislature. For the protections of individuals under this Policy, the term "employee" shall include unpaid interns, fellows, volunteers, applicants, and persons providing services pursuant to a contract. In addition, Members are both protected by this policy and required to abide by its terms.

As a preventive measure, the Legislature will not tolerate inappropriate conduct toward others, even if the conduct does not meet the legal definition of unlawful discrimination, harassment, or

retaliation. The Legislative Counsel's Legislative Workplace Conduct Unit ("Workplace Conduct Unit") accepts all reports of inappropriate conduct, but will focus its investigations on conduct related to a protected class. Each house's human resources unit will address other reports of inappropriate conduct. All legislative employees are responsible for conducting themselves in accordance with this Policy and its associated procedures. Violation of the Policy and/or procedures will lead to prompt and appropriate remedial action. Appropriate action includes a broad range of actions to promote a culture of respect, civility, and diversity, and may not always be disciplinary in nature.

Inappropriate conduct toward others is any physical, verbal, or visual conduct based on or because of sex, gender, gender identity or expression, race, color, ancestry, religious creed, national origin, age (40 and over), physical or mental disability, sexual orientation, reproductive health decisionmaking¹, marital status, military or veteran status, medical condition, genetic information or any other characteristic protected by state or federal employment law when such conduct reasonably would be considered inappropriate for the workplace. This Policy prohibits inappropriate conduct by coworkers and third parties, as well as supervisors and managers, with whom the employee comes into contact.

This provision is intended to prevent inappropriate conduct based on a protected status before it becomes unlawful discrimination or harassment. As such, the conduct need not meet legally actionable state and/or federal standards of severe or pervasive conduct to violate this Policy. An isolated derogatory comment, joke, racial slur, sexual innuendo, etc., may constitute conduct that violates this Policy and provide grounds for response. Similarly, the conduct need not be unwelcome to the party against whom it is directed; if the conduct reasonably would be considered inappropriate for the workplace, it may violate this Policy. Depending on the facts, the relevant house's response may include counseling, training or other corrective action up to and including termination of employment of staff or suspension or expulsion of a Member.

Conduct which violates this Policy may take many forms and includes, but is not limited to, slurs, jokes, statements, gestures, pictures, or cartoons that relate to a protected class, such as those that have a racial, sexual, disability-related, religious, age or national origin connotation, or derogatory comments about religious differences and practices. Specific examples of conduct which may be found to violate this Policy are:

- 1) Offering employment benefits in exchange for sexual favors.
- 2) Making or threatening reprisals after a negative response to sexual advances.
- 3) Verbal sexual advances or propositions; or pressuring or repeatedly asking an employee for dates.
- 4) Visual conduct: leering, sexual gestures, or a display of offensive images, objects, pictures, cartoons, calendars or posters that has a derogatory connotation to any protected class.
- 5) Verbal conduct: degrading or derogatory comments, epithets, slurs or jokes that have a derogatory connotation to any protected class; frequently questioning someone about his or her personal life or speculating about his or her sex life.
- 6) Written conduct: suggestive or obscene letters, notes, electronic mail messages, or invitations, or similar written conduct that has a derogatory connotation to any protected class.

¹ "Reproductive health decisionmaking" became a protected characteristic as a result of SB 523 (Leyva), Chapter 630, Statutes of 2022.

- 7) Physical conduct: unwelcome touching, assault, or impeding or blocking normal movement.
- 8) Other unwelcome conduct based upon any protected class which is unbecoming of Members and staff and that creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.

The procedures associated with this Policy support the Legislature's movement toward a workplace culture of respect, civility and diversity. Each complaint will receive a timely response and will be investigated timely and impartially by qualified personnel. The Workplace Conduct Unit will receive, document, and investigate complaints, and track them for reasonable progress.

Employees do not have to complain to their direct supervisor, but may go directly to the Workplace Conduct Unit. Employees may also go to Human Resources or any supervisor in their house. Supervisors (including Members) must report any complaints of misconduct to the Workplace Conduct Unit immediately so that the complaint can be resolved. All employees are strongly encouraged to report any violation of this Policy to the Workplace Conduct Unit. All legislative employees and Members are responsible to fully and honestly cooperate in any investigation by either house's Human Resources Department or the Workplace Conduct Unit.

No one may retaliate against an employee for complaining about a violation of this Policy or for participating in an investigation.

The procedures for investigation by the Workplace Conduct Unit provide details for independent assessment and investigation of complaints, and an independent panel to make findings related to alleged violations of the Policy. The Workplace Conduct Unit and the independent panel will conduct a fair, timely, and thorough investigation that reaches reasonable conclusions based on the evidence collected. The Workplace Conduct Unit and the independent panel will close investigations in a timely manner. Each house will have responsibility for considering the panel's findings and recommendations, and determining whether the Policy has been violated and the appropriate response that will promote a workplace culture of respect, civility and diversity.

Confidentiality of the process encourages reporting, and the Legislature will work to maintain the confidentiality of the investigation and determination process to the extent possible and consistent with this Policy. The Legislature, however, is a public body. In balancing the interests in confidentiality and transparency, the Legislature will maintain the confidentiality of these personnel matters, except as follows: Certain documents will be released in cases where the panel determines that facts related to sexual harassment claims have been substantiated against a member or a high-level legislative employee, and the house has imposed discipline or has determined that the allegations are well-founded based on the independent panel's findings. The documents to be released will be the claim filed and the letter provided to the subject of the investigation, which will include a summary of the panel's factual findings. All documents will redact the personally identifying information of the accuser and witnesses, for privacy reasons.

Employees also may direct complaints to the Civil Rights Department (CRD)² at 1-800-884-1684 or <https://www.cacivilrights.ca.gov>.

² DFEH became CRD as a result of SB 189 (Budget), Chapter 48, Statutes of 2022.