

Sexual Harassment Policy

Sexual harassment is a form of sex discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title VII applies to employers with 15 or more employees, including state and local governments. It also applies to employment agencies and to labor organizations, as well as to the federal government.

Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment.

Sexual harassment can occur in a variety of circumstances, including but not limited to the following:

- The victim as well as the harasser may be a woman or a man. The victim does not have to be of the opposite sex.
- The harasser can be the victim's supervisor, an agent of the employer, a supervisor in another area, a co-worker, or a non-employee.
- The victim does not have to be the person harassed but could be anyone affected by the offensive conduct.
- Unlawful sexual harassment may occur without economic injury to or discharge of the victim.
- The harasser's conduct must be unwelcome.

It is helpful for the victim to inform the harasser directly that the conduct is unwelcome and must stop. The victim should use any employer complaint mechanism or grievance system available.

When investigating allegations of sexual harassment, EEOC looks at the whole record: the circumstances, such as the nature of the sexual advances, and the context in which the alleged incidents occurred. A determination on the allegations is made from the facts on a case-by-case basis.

Prevention is the best tool to eliminate sexual harassment in the workplace. Employers are encouraged to take steps necessary to prevent sexual harassment from occurring.

They should clearly communicate to employees that sexual harassment will not be tolerated. They can do so by providing sexual harassment training to their employees and by establishing an effective complaint or grievance process and taking immediate and appropriate action when an employee complains.

It is also unlawful to retaliate against an individual for opposing employment practices that discriminate based on sex or for filing a discrimination charge, testifying, or participating in any way in an investigation, proceeding, or litigation under Title VII.

See the accompanying sample policy. It can be adapted to list your local EEOC office, and any state-level offices dealing with civil or human rights issues.

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SAMPLE SEXUAL HARASSMENT POLICY

DEFINITION OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

According to the Illinois Human Rights Act, sexual harassment is defined as any unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors or any conduct of a sexual nature when:

1. Submission to such conduct is made, either explicitly or implicitly, a term or condition of an individual's employment;
2. Submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individual; or
3. Such conduct has the purpose or effect of substantially interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment.

The courts have determined that sexual harassment is a form of discrimination under Title VII of the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended in 1991.

One example of sexual harassment is a case where a qualified individual is denied employment opportunities and benefits after rejecting the supervisor's sexual advances or request(s) for sexual favors or the individual is terminated. Another example is when an individual is subjected to unwelcome sexual conduct by co-workers because of his or her gender which makes it difficult for the employee to perform his or her job. Other conduct, which may constitute sexual harassment, includes:

- **Verbal:** Sexual innuendos, suggestive comments, insults, humor, and jokes about sex, anatomy or gender-specific traits, sexual propositions, threats, repeated requests for dates, or statements about other employees, even outside of their presence, of a sexual nature.
- **Non-Verbal:** Suggestive or insulting sounds (whistling), leering, obscene gestures, sexually suggestive bodily gestures, "catcalls", "smacking" or "kissing" noises.
- **Visual:** Posters, signs, pin-ups or slogans of a sexual nature, viewing pornographic material or websites.
- **Physical:** Touching, unwelcome hugging or kissing, pinching, brushing the body, any coerced sexual act, or actual assault.
- **Textual/Electronic:** "Sexting" (electronically sending messages with sexual content including pictures and video), the use of sexually explicit language, harassment, cyber stalking and threats via all forms of electronic communication (e-mail, text/picture/video messages, intranet/on-line postings, blogs, instant messages and social network websites such as Facebook and Twitter).

While the most commonly recognized forms of sexual harassment involve the types of conduct described above, non-sexual conduct can also constitute a violation of the applicable laws when that conduct is directed at the victim because of his or her gender (for example, a female employee who reports to work every day and finds her tools stolen, her work station filled with trash and her equipment disabled by her male co-workers because they resent having to work with a woman).

The most severe and overt forms of sexual harassment are easier to determine. On the other end of the spectrum, some sexual harassment is more subtle and depends, to some extent, on individual perception and interpretation. The courts will assess sexual harassment by a standard of what would offend a "reasonable person."

For this reason, every manager, supervisor and employee must remember that seemingly "harmless" and subtle actions may lead to sexual harassment complaints. The use of terms such as "honey", "darling" and "sweetheart" is objectionable to many women who believe that these terms undermine their authority and their ability to deal with men on an equal and professional level. And while use of these terms by an individual with authority over a female employee will rarely constitute an adverse employment action, it may lead to the creation of a hostile work environment.

Another example is the use of a compliment that could potentially be interpreted as sexual in nature. Below are three statements that might be made about the appearance of a woman in the workplace:

"That's an attractive dress you have on."

"That's an attractive dress. It really looks good on you."

"That's an attractive dress. You really fill it out well."

The first statement appears to be simply a compliment. The last is the most likely to be perceived as sexual harassment, depending on individual perceptions and values. To avoid the possibility of offending an employee, it is best to follow a course of conduct above reproach or to err on the side of caution.

Sexual harassment is unacceptable misconduct, which affects both genders. Sexual harassment will often involve a man's conduct directed at a woman. However, it can also involve a woman harassing a man or harassment between members of the same gender.

RESPONSIBILITY OF INDIVIDUAL EMPLOYEES

Each individual employee has the responsibility to refrain from sexual harassment in the workplace. An individual employee who sexually harasses a fellow worker is, of course, liable for his or her individual conduct. The harassing employee will be subject to disciplinary action up to and including discharge in accordance with company policy or any applicable collective bargaining agreement, as appropriate.

RESPONSIBILITY OF SUPERVISORY PERSONNEL

Each supervisor is responsible for maintaining the workplace free of sexual harassment. This is accomplished by promoting a professional environment and by dealing with sexual harassment as with all other forms of employee misconduct. It must be remembered that supervisors are the first line of defense against sexual harassment. By setting the right example, a supervisor may discourage his or her employees from acting inappropriately. In addition, supervisors will often be the first to spot objectionable conduct or the first to receive a complaint about conduct which he or she did not observe.

The courts and the Illinois Human Rights Commission have found that organizations as well as supervisors can be held liable for damages related to sexual harassment by a manager, supervisor, employee, or third party (an individual who is not an employee but does business with an organization, such as a contractor, customer, sales, representative, or repair person).

Liability is either based on an organization's responsibility to maintain a certain level of order and discipline among employees, or on the supervisor, acting as an agent of the organization. It should be noted that recent United States Supreme Court cases involving sexual harassment claims against supervisors have made the employer's liability for supervisors' actions even stricter. Therefore, supervisors must understand that their adherence to this policy is vitally important; both with regard to their responsibility to maintain a work environment free of harassment and, even more importantly, with regard to their own individual conduct.

The law continues to require employers to remain vigilant and effectively remedy sexually harassing conduct perpetrated by individual(s) on their coworkers. Supervisors must act quickly and responsibly not only to minimize their own liability but also that of the company.

Specifically, a supervisor must address an observed incident of sexual harassment or a complaint, with equal seriousness, report it, take prompt action to investigate it, implement appropriate disciplinary action, take all necessary steps to eliminate the harassment and observe strict confidentiality. This also applies to cases where an employee tells the supervisor about behavior considered sexual harassment but does not want to make a formal complaint.

Also, supervisors must ensure that no retaliation will result against an employee making a sexual harassment complaint. Furthermore, managers/supervisors should remind employees, on a regular basis, that their incoming and outgoing electronic messages on employer owned/issued equipment are subject to monitoring and that employees have no expectation of privacy on employer owned/issued electronic equipment. Inform employees that if they are subjected to inappropriate electronic communications while at work or on employer-owned equipment, or even on their personal cell phones and computers, that they should contact their supervisor or Human Resources immediately.

Advise managers, supervisors, and employees not to "friend" each other on social networks and to limit their electronic messages to relevant business matters. Investigate complaints on a case-by-case basis and remind employees of the company's code of conduct and ethics rules if applicable.

PROCEDURES FOR FILING A COMPLAINT

An employee who either observes or believes herself/himself to be the object of sexual harassment should deal with the incident(s) as directly and firmly as possible by clearly communicating her/his position to the offending employee, her/his supervisor and company contact. It is not necessary for sexual harassment to be directed at the person making a complaint.

The following steps may also be taken: document or record each incident (what was said or done, the date, the time, and the place). Documentation can be strengthened by written records such as letters, notes, memos, and telephone messages.

All charges, including anonymous complaints, will be accepted and investigated regardless of how the matter comes to the attention of the company. However, because of the serious implications of sexual harassment charges and the difficulties associated with their investigation and the questions of

credibility involved, the claimant's willing cooperation is a vital component of an effective inquiry and an appropriate outcome.

No one making a complaint will be retaliated against even if a complaint made in good faith is not substantiated. In addition, any witness will be protected from retaliation.

Proper responses to conduct that is believed to be sexual harassment may include the following:

Electronic/Direct Communication. If there is sexual harassing behavior in the workplace, the harassed employee should directly and clearly express her/his objection that the conduct is unwelcome and request that the offending behavior stop. The initial message may be verbal. If subsequent messages are needed, they should be put in writing in a note or a memo.

Contact with Supervisory Personnel. At the same time direct communication is undertaken, or in the event the employee feels threatened or intimidated by the situation, the problem must be promptly reported to the immediate supervisor or if the harasser is the immediate supervisor; the problem should be reported to the next level of supervision or,

Formal Written Complaint. An employee may also report incidents of sexual harassment directly to (Name of CEO, General Manager, etc _____), who will counsel the reporting employee and be available to assist with filing a formal complaint. The company will fully investigate the complaint and advise the complainant and the alleged harasser of the results of the investigation.

Resolution Outside the Company

The purpose of this policy is to establish prompt, thorough and effective procedures for responding to every complaint and incident so that problems can be identified and remedied internally. However, an employee has the right to contact the Illinois Department of Human Rights (IDHR) or the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) about filing a formal complaint.

An IDHR complaint must be filed within 180 days of the alleged incident(s) unless it is a continuing offense. A complaint with the EEOC must be filed within 300 days. In addition, an appeal process is available through the Illinois Human Rights Commission, (IHRC) after IDHR has completed its investigation of the complaint. Where the employing entity has an effective sexual harassment policy in place and the complaining employee fails to take advantage of that policy and allow the employer an opportunity to address the problem, such an employee may, in certain cases, lose the right to further pursue the claim against the employer.

ADMINISTRATIVE CONTACTS

Illinois Department of Human Rights (IDHR)

Chicago: 312-814-6200 or 800-662-3942

Chicago TTY: 866-740-3953

Springfield: 217-785-5100

Springfield TTY: 866-740-3953

Marion: 618-993-7463

Marion TTY: 866-740-3953

Illinois Human Rights Commission (IHRC)

Chicago: 312-814-6269

Chicago TTY: 312-814-4760

Springfield: 217-785-4350

Springfield TTY: 217-557-1500

United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)

Chicago: 800-669-4000

Chicago TTY: 800-869-8001

An employee, who is suddenly transferred to a lower paying job or passed over for promotion after filing a complaint with IDHR or EEOC, may file a retaliation charge, also due within 180 days (IDHR) or 300 days (EEOC) of the alleged retaliation. An employee who has been physically harassed or threatened while on the job may also have grounds for criminal charges, such as assault or battery.

FALSE AND FRIVOLOUS COMPLAINTS

False and frivolous charges refer to cases where the accuser is using a sexual harassment complaint to accomplish some end other than stopping sexual harassment. It does not refer to charges made in good faith that cannot be proven. Given the seriousness of the consequences for the accused, a false and frivolous charge is a severe offense that can itself result in disciplinary action.