# Addressing Harassment from Non-Employees

# Tip Sheet

**League of Minnesota Cities**

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The City of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ believes employees, members of boards and commissions, elected officials and “third parties” (i.e., job applicants, volunteers, contractors/vendors, members of the public, and other persons visiting the workplace and public service environment) should be treated with dignity and respect. Simply put, respect in the workplace is a fundamental value of the city. This includes preventing harassment from employees as well as non-employees. This can include customers, contractors/vendors, consultants, visitors, volunteers or members of boards and commissions, and elected officials. Maintaining a respectful, positive workplace and public service work environment is a shared responsibility.

When harassment occurs between city employees, the steps toward resolution can be clearer to navigate, but harassment involving customers or other non-employees can present some unique challenges. For example, it may not be possible to bar a harassing individual from a public building or facility.

While the city has a strong commitment to customer service, employees, applicants, volunteers, contractors/vendors, members of boards and commissions, and elected officials are not expected to accept harassing comments or behaviors from the public. This tips sheet provides opportunities to explore for employees, supervisors, and bystanders when dealing with harassment from non-employees.

## **Employee Tips**

If an individual believes disrespectful behavior is occurring in the workplace, follow the city’s policies and, above all, report the offending behavior to your supervisor, your supervisor’s supervisor, the city administrator, human resources, or the city attorney. If disrespectful behavior is occurring in the workplace from a non-employee, here are some options to address the situation temporarily, if you feel safe and comfortable doing so, until you can report it to your supervisor, the city administrator, or HR:

* Avoid one-on-one situations with the alleged violator...
* Walk away from the situation.
* If practical, an employee can bring a witness along for a discussion to firmly tell whom ever is engaging in the disrespectful behavior how you feel about their actions because you feel intimidated, offended, or uncomfortable.
* Contact a supervisor, the city administrator, or HR and ask for assistance.

If a situation involves violent or potentially violent or other criminal behavior, employees should contact law enforcement and/or take any other immediate steps if they fear violence and/or otherwise feel unsafe. Employees must notify their supervisor the city administrator, human resources or the city attorney about the incident as soon as possible.

## **Supervisor Tips**

Supervisors are an essential part of cultivating and maintaining a workplace free of harassment. A higher standard of conduct applies to a supervisor. Supervisors are expected to know, teach, and enforce the rules, as well as set a good example. Often courts will expect supervisors to exercise a higher standard of care than non-supervisory employees when handling complaints of harassment in the workplace.

To create a harassment-free workplace, supervisors must do the following:

* Supervisors help shape the culture of a city by proactively promoting a harassment-free work environment. Always be mindful of your behavior as it serves as a model to others. And remember, what you permit, you promote.
* Be open to listening to situations from your employees; respectfully listen to the employee’s situation and take the complaint seriously. Complaints are an opportunity to take action and correct a situation before it escalates. Ask the reporting employee what they want to see happen next.
* Avoid promising confidentiality. When an employee comes forward with a disrespectful workplace complaint, the city cannot promise confidentiality, due to the need to investigate the issue. However, any investigation process will be handled as discreetly as practical, and related information will only be shared on a need-to-know basis and in accordance with the Minnesota Data Practices Act and/or any other applicable laws.
* Supervisors are obligated to report illegal harassment to a higher authority promptly, and that includes incidents involving a non-employee. Thus, if you see or hear about disrespectful workplace behavior—report it promptly!

## **Bystander Tips**

Anyone can make a choice to actively and visibly take a stand against harassment. As a bystander, you can support someone who’s being harassed, emphasize that harassment is not OK, and demonstrate to people in your life that they, too, have the power to make the community safer.

* If you are the bystander of a harassment situation, distracting the parties involved may be a straightforward way to derail a disrespectful discussion.
* If it is necessary to engage with the alleged violator, keep it succinct and don’t engage in an argument. Reach out to a supervisor for help.
* Check in with the targeted employee. Ask them if they are OK and if there is any way you can support them. Offer to help bring the situation to a supervisor’s attention and do so.