

RISK COMMUNIQUÉ

Grievance Procedures—

Risk Management for Management Liability & Employment Practices

Ambulance services are challenged to demonstrate strict adherence to their personnel grievance procedures. Litigation often focuses on whether the employer mishandled the grievance in cases such as wrongful termination or discipline, harassment, or discrimination.

Before costly and time-consuming litigation arises, employers are encouraged to become intimately familiar with their grievance procedures. Many leaders have not been required to administer a grievance, nor have they been trained on how to administer their current written grievance policy and procedure. Ambulance service leaders who have been required to process grievances on a more frequent basis would agree that following an unfamiliar or cumbersome grievance policy and procedure is challenging.

This Communiqué provides risk management guidance on examining the scope and functionality of their personnel grievance procedures.

Formal Grievances Procedure versus Internal Reporting Process

Often ambulance services are unable to explain the differences between their formal written grievance procedures and the separate and distinct internal reporting procedures that typically accompany personnel policies prohibiting workplace wrongdoing such as harassment or discrimination. Generally, a stand-alone grievance procedure is more complicated and demanding for the employer and member complaining about a personnel problem. An internal reporting process is considered more straightforward, while allowing for multiple avenues of complaint, prompt investigation and follow-up designed to stop workplace wrongs and prevent future occurrences.

Formal, multi-step grievance procedures are commonly part of a work environment that includes a union, collective bargaining agreement, or employee association. However, ambulance services without unions or employee associations may publish grievance procedures in their personnel manuals or employee handbooks. If a written grievance procedure exists within your personnel manual or handbook, determine whether the grievance steps are perceived as cumbersome, both for the complaining employee and for the ambulance service. Unless there is a requirement from a collective bargaining agreement, for example, implementing a straightforward internal reporting procedure may be easier for employees and the employer.

Determine the Origins of the Grievance Procedure

Employers are encouraged to analyze the origins of their written grievance procedure. They should determine whether legal counsel (familiar with labor and employment issues), together with leaders, have developed a grievance process separate from reporting procedures that accompany workplace wrongdoing policies such as harassment.

When an employer first develops its personnel policy manual, it is not uncommon to “cut and paste” a grievance procedure from another organization’s manual without understanding its ramifications. Without a union or employee association presence, an employer should assess whether the existence of a formal grievance process was intended and necessary, as opposed to more straightforward internal reporting procedures.

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Grievance Procedure Steps

A formal written grievance procedure may require that:

1. The employee put the grievance or complaint in writing.
2. The ambulance service's responses to a grievance or complaint be in writing.
3. Grievance procedure steps be time-sensitive. For instance, a grievance may need to be filed within 10 working days of the incident that generated the complaint, or the employee forfeits his or her right to complain. Similarly, the designated ambulance service representative must respond in writing within 10 working days of receipt of the initial grievance.
4. The complainant's immediate supervisor, supervisor's supervisor, top administrator, personnel committee be responsible for handling different steps in the process.
5. Grievance steps serve as an appeal process within the ambulance service's chain of command.
6. The acting human resources representative help guide the complaining employee through the various steps of the grievance process.
7. A personnel grievance committee serve as the final group to hear an employee's appeal.
8. Employees be afforded a hearing during the final appellate step, which would include a review of all facts, documents, and call for testimony from the grievant, parties directly named, and other witnesses.
9. The employee filing the grievance seek legal representation or a union representative throughout the course of the grievance.

Ambulance services must ensure that grievance procedures found in a collective bargaining agreement remain consistent with grievance procedures found in other ambulance service documents, such as a personnel policy manual or employee handbook. Contrasting grievance procedures often lead to misapplication and confusion for those asked to utilize the process. To eliminate this problem, the ambulance service's legal counsel and a union representative should compare the documents to bring them into agreement.

Internal Reporting Procedures

Providing multiple avenues of internal complaint may help assure that employees' concerns can be promptly investigated and resolved. Below is a sample internal reporting process:

If you are aware of workplace conflict or wrongdoing taking place, you must immediately report this to your direct supervisor. If you feel uncomfortable doing so, or if your direct supervisor is the source of the problem, condones the problem, or ignores the problem, immediately report the situation to your supervisor's supervisor, any other supervisor or manager, human resources manager, or lead/top administrator. If these alternatives are not satisfactory to you, then you can immediately direct your report, complaint, or questions to any member of the personnel committee. You are not required to directly confront the person who is the source of your report or complaint before notifying any of the individuals listed.

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Training On Formal Grievance Procedures

Familiarity with and confidence in an ambulance service's procedures is important when accessing or effectively addressing a grievance or complaint. The ambulance service should periodically educate and train designated representatives regarding their responsibilities as spelled out in the formal grievance procedures. In addition to what is specified, to ensure equitable and consistent facilitation of grievances, the ambulance service should train those persons tasked with preparing written responses, meeting time deadlines, assessing the credibility of the grievance, facilitating hearings, and generally resolving personnel conflicts. Employees will only be confident enough to utilize the formal grievance procedures if they know the employer is intimately familiar with how to manage the process.