



Handling Complaints Against Funded Programs

As an administrator, there will be instances when a complaint against a funded agency comes to your attention. One of roles of the administrator is to ensure that funded agencies are complying with state standards as well as federal and state laws. Your agency should also have policies and procedures in place on how to handle complaints against funded programs. You will want to follow your agency's policy.

You may receive a call from the survivor who believes she/he has been wronged by the staff and/or domestic violence program. Whatever the circumstance it is important to listen to them and take the appropriate steps to assist based upon your agency policy. You may also receive complaints from other funders, partner or community agencies, community members, or employees. In the majority of cases you will want to refer the complainant back to the local program or to the coalition. Depending on the situation the coalition can provide technical assistance, resources and/or training to the local program if necessary. If the complainant is a survivor or employee the coalition may also be able to provide safety planning, if needed.

Types of Complaints

Inquiries or complaints generally fall into 4 types.

- 1) Complaint by an employee of an agency about **employment issues**.
- 2) Complaint of **misunderstanding**, where it is clear that a person has misinterpreted a procedure, such as the common misunderstanding that you must be living in a shelter to get services.
- 3) General complaints about **random procedures or opinions** at a local program, these have also typically been referred back to local programs for intervention. An example is a court system telling coalition staff they think there are not enough services or that the services are not far reaching enough.
- 4) The last type of complaint is more significant. These complaints involve **actual violations** of State Standards, State Law or Federal Law or Regulations. These include, persons denied services due to gender, age or other status issues, persons who feel forced to attend religious services, persons who had immigration status checked, persons subject to search or who have their confidentiality breached, non-payment of owed salary, and non-payment of payroll taxes.

Although there is no prescribed method for handling these issues each state should create a procedure, in partnership with the coalition. Generally, employment complaints are best referred back to the



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employer unless they involve major violations of state or federal law. Here are some suggested steps you may want to consider:

- There should be multiple locations where people can seek assistance in voicing complaints, such as the FVPSA Administrator and/or the Coalition; contact information for those options should be easily accessible.
- A simple complaint form should be available through State Administrators, State coalitions and local programs. A summary of how the process works and what the complainant can expect should be included.
- Allegations of serious violations of state or federal law or regulation should be filed in writing. Complaints may be taken verbally to accommodate persons with disabilities, limited literacy or English proficiency, but the person taking the complaint should document it.
 - Anonymous complaints are discouraged; a problem cannot usually be brought to full resolution unless there is some ability to respond to the complaining party.
 - Additionally, you may need follow-up information or the person may need to be willing to share their story with other people involved in resolving the situation.
 - Taking a person's name and contact information does not mean the information will necessarily be disclosed to the local agency. Before sharing any identifying details, it is optimal to get the complaining party's permission.
- Complaints related to 'personality issues' should be referred back to the local agency. This means a 'my advocate doesn't like me' or 'the staff are not fair' type complaint. However, complaints such as 'we are not getting paid' or 'I was denied services because of my immigration status' should warrant more inquiry.
- The complaining person should not have to know which individual law; regulation or standard is being violated. It is incumbent upon the staff to have enough conversation with the caller to determine if the complaint is related to an actual violation of law, standard or regulation.
- You should consider reviewing serious complaints with your coalition. You may both have information about other calls or instances that shed light on the current situation.
- Set times frame for reviewing the complaint, sharing it with the coalition and responding to the complaining party.
- Determine a range of options for intervention such as; verbal notification to the agency, written notification to the agency, immediate site visit to the agency, coalition providing the agency additional training or technical assistance.
- If an agency is found to be in serious violation of law, regulations or standards, sanctions can be implemented, up to and including corrective action plans, freezing of grant funds, and revocation of funding contracts.

For more information or assistance, please contact NNEDV's Capacity TA Team at capacity_ta@nnev.org.



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