



WHAT EMPLOYERS NEED TO KNOW

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Acknowledgements: Lucia Cucu would like to acknowledge Merle Edwards-Orr and Mollie Murphy for their valuable contribution to this document. The detailed review and insightful comments they provided strengthened this resource.

*Special thanks to the Veterans Health Administration (Award #: VA244-P-1554) and Boston College for their generous sponsorship of this work.

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How to Protect Yourself and Your Worker: A Guide for Employers

Being an employer brings not only rights but also responsibilities. This guide describes a few important issues that every employer should know about.

Maintaining a Safe Workplace

It is important to keep your home safe for your employee. Slips and falls are a common cause of injuries, so you should clean up or warn your employee of spills and wet surfaces, and keep stairs and flooring in good repair. If you have pets in your home, make sure they cannot bite or scratch your employee.

Making Hiring and Firing Decisions

Terminating Employees

Do not hesitate to terminate an employee who does not meet your needs. Most employment relationships are considered employment “at will,” which means you can terminate an employee for any reason or no reason at all, so long as your reason is not discriminatory, retaliatory (see discussion below) or otherwise unlawful.

Avoiding Promises about the Length of Employment

To avoid a claim for breach of contract, do not make any promises to your employee that you will keep him employed for a certain period of time or that you would only fire him for a specific reason. Remember that a contract does not always have to be in writing to be legally binding. Spoken statements and promises can sometimes create legal obligations.

Avoiding Illegal Discrimination and Retaliation

In many states it is illegal to discriminate against employees based on certain factors, which can include race, color, religion, sex, national origin, marital status, sexual orientation. This means that you must not hire, fire, or harass employees based on such factors. While your employee is with you, be careful not to express any personal opinions that could be interpreted as discriminatory. Even if you are in your own home, the home is considered a workplace while your employee is there, and workplace discrimination and harassment are prohibited by law.

Do not allow friends or family to behave in ways that could be considered discriminatory or harassing towards your employee. As the employer, you could be held responsible for their behavior if you allow it to continue.

Sexual harassment is also illegal. It includes unwelcome sexual advances that can be physical or verbal, such as offensive comments or gestures that create a hostile environment. Remember that the harasser can be someone other than the employer, such as a guest visiting your home or someone who lives with you.

It is also illegal to fire employees in retaliation for reporting a crime or irregularity. For example, if an employee believes that an employer is misusing Medicaid funds and reports it to the authorities, it would be illegal to fire the employee in retaliation.

Providing References for Former Employees

Be careful when talking about your reasons for terminating employees, because you could risk a claim of discrimination or defamation (saying things about the employee who harms them). If you are asked for a reference about a former employee and cannot provide a positive one, it is safest not to provide a reference at all.

What Family Members and Authorized Representatives Need to Know

Your Duty as Representative

In participant-directed programs, usually the participant (the person receiving services) is the employer. It is not unusual, however, for the participant to be unable or unwilling to serve as the employer. In those cases, the participant will designate a “representative” to serve as the employer. If you are designated as an authorized representative, you have a *fiduciary* duty to the participant. “Fiduciary” means you must always act in the best interest of the participant and not in your own interest. Program funds must always be spent for the participant’s benefit, not your own benefit.

Hiring and Training Employees

If the participant is likely to injure himself or others, you have a duty to warn employees of the risk and instruct them how to best handle it. Make sure to hire only employees who can deal with situations that arise. Ask them to confirm that they understand the risks and are willing and able to handle them.

If you are a parent, you must exercise reasonable care to control your minor child as best as you can, even if you are not listed as an authorized representative for the child. It is important to hire employees who are able to deal with any risks they may encounter when caring for your child. You should warn employees ahead of time of risks, and explain how to best handle situations that may come up.

Mandatory Reporter Duty

As an authorized representative, you may have a legal duty to report to the authorities if you suspect or notice that the participant is being abused by a family member, an employee, or some other person. Many states have “mandatory reporter” laws that could require you to report abuse of a child, an elderly adult or a person with a disability. You may have a duty to report the abuse even if the abuser is a member of your own family or the participant’s family.

Worker's Compensation Insurance

It is important to maintain a worker's compensation insurance policy, because such insurance will pay for claims if an employee is injured on the job.

If an employee is injured while at work, the employer is liable even if the injury is not the employer's fault. For example, if your employee drives to the grocery store on your behalf and is injured when a careless driver hits her car, the employee could ask you for compensation even though you could not have prevented the accident. This is because employers have to compensate employees for injuries sustained on the job. A worker's compensation insurance policy will pay for such claims.

Liability Insurance

Worker's compensation will pay when your employee is injured, but what happens when someone else is injured? As an employer you may be liable when your employee injures someone else, even if the injury is not your fault. For example, if your employee causes a car accident while driving you to an appointment and injures a third party, the third party could sue you because your employee caused the accident while on the job.

Employment-related claims like wrongful termination, discrimination, or defamation are another source of liability that is not covered by worker's compensation insurance.

Some homeowner's, renter's, or liability insurance policies will cover such claims. However the terms of insurance policies vary, so you should read the terms and consult with an insurance agent before you start your participant direction program. You may consider an addition to your homeowner's or renter's policy, or a separate liability insurance policy, to be covered for liability risks related to domestic employees.