



# STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

## INTIMATE AND PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

### I. BACKGROUND

Employees are encouraged to develop professional relationships in the workplace and appropriate social relationships provided these relationships do not interfere with the work performance of either individual or with the functioning and morale of the workplace. Given the power disparity related to work, Intimate and Personal Relationships between a Supervisor and a Supervisee are at high risk of being or becoming unwelcomed and perceived or experienced by the Supervisee and other subordinate employees as harassment, bullying, favoritism, or unfavorable actions. Supervisors are, therefore, responsible for understanding how their statements and conduct, both in and out of the workplace, may be interpreted by persons who do not share their same position or level of power in the workplace.

If there is any doubt whether a relationship is covered by this policy, the Supervisor must disclose the facts and seek guidance from Human Resources.

### II. DEFINITIONS

#### A. SUPERVISOR

“Supervisor” is any County official or employee who hires, fires, oversees, directs, or evaluates the work of a Supervisee, directly, indirectly, functionally, or by perception, including, but not limited to, Elected Officials, Appointed Officials, Senior Directors, division directors, managers, administrators, investigators, physicians, board or committee members, or any other similar position regardless of title with functional supervision. The term “Supervisor” also includes those who have authority to influence or participate in decisions affecting the terms of employment of the Supervisee or other County staff members.

#### B. SUPERVISEE

“Supervisee” is anyone employed by the County, including full-time, part-time, and seasonal staff or individuals who perform services for the County under the oversight, direction, or evaluation of a Supervisor, as defined above.

#### C. INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP

“Intimate Relationship” includes any relationship that may reasonably be described as sexual, romantic, amorous, and/or dating. Physical contact is not a required element of such relationships. An Intimate Relationship may exist because of a single interaction.

#### **D. PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP**

“Personal Relationship” encompasses any relationship outside of the workplace/scope of job duties that is not an Intimate Relationship.

### **III. POLICY**

This policy applies to all officials and employees regarding Intimate and Personal Relationships between Supervisors and Supervisees.

Williamson County is a large and complex governmental body with 31 Elected Officials and numerous Appointed Officials, Senior Directors, Division Directors, and other leadership positions. Personal Relationships may exist between some employees, either prior to the commencement of the employment relationship, or may develop after employment begins. In relation to work, Personal Relationships may become complicated when one of the individuals involved is in a Supervisor position (see definition in Section III). Personal Relationships involving Supervisors can sometimes result in concerns about favoritism, conflicts of interest, morale problems, adverse reputational and credibility impacts, and even harassment. In addressing Personal Relationships within the workplace, Williamson County will maintain a workplace that is inclusive and free from abuse of power, coercion, sexually harassing conduct, and favoritism. Such conduct will not be tolerated. With these principles in mind, the following standards of conduct apply to all employees:

- A. A Supervisor may not, implicitly, or explicitly, initiate or attempt to initiate an Intimate Relationship with a Supervisee over whom they exercise supervisory authority. Supervisors may not date or otherwise become romantically/sexually involved with any Supervisee.
- B. Recognizing that Intimate Relationships exist or may develop between a Supervisor and another County employee who is not a Supervisee, immediate disclosure of the relationship by the Supervisor to Human Resources is required. Failure of the Supervisor to disclose an Intimate Relationship is a serious offense and cause for discipline, up to and including termination.
- C. A Supervisor is a leadership role in Williamson County, who must always act in a professional manner when interacting with other Williamson County employees. This includes non-work-related events, whether public (e.g., entertainment events, religious services, etc.) or private (e.g., birthday parties, weddings, dinners, vacations, etc...). The Supervisor should not include and exclude Supervisees from non-work-related events in a manner that creates discord within the department or has the potential to subject the County to risk. A non-exhaustive list of examples of prohibited conduct include:

- 1. Inviting selected Supervisees to a private non-work-related event;

2. Inviting selected Supervisees to a public non-work-related event when the manner to which staff are excluded is not fair and/or justified by work related reasons;
3. Providing alcohol to Supervisees at either work-related or non-work-related events (this excludes approval of conferences or other work-related events where the event host may include “drink tickets” or other access to alcohol as part of the event outside of the Supervisor’s control);
4. Inviting Supervisees to an event that could be deemed inappropriate for the workplace or business purposes and/or is sexual in nature.

D. Any County employees in an Intimate or Personal Relationship that comes to an end should note that both negative attention (such as hang up phone calls, hateful emails, or verbally abusive confrontations, etc...), as well as unwelcomed post-break up pursuits (such as sending flowers, giving gifts, repeated requests for continuation of the relationship, etc...) is prohibited and may result in disciplinary action under this policy, even if the conduct occurs off County premises and during non-working hours. Regardless of the emotions involved, employees will be expected to conduct themselves professionally and appropriately and treat one another with courtesy.

#### **IV. MANDATORY DISCLOSURE**

For any Intimate Relationship between a Supervisor and any Supervisee of the Supervisor:

- A. Supervisors must immediately report the Intimate Relationship to Human Resources, who will inform the appropriate parties (e.g., Elected Official, Appointed Official, Senior Department Head, Governing Board or Body), and when needed, HR may remain involved in the oversight of the relationship or other corresponding measures.
- B. Although encouraged, Supervisees are not required to disclose any relationship with a Supervisor, unless there are concerns of harassment or retaliation, which must be reported as required by those policies.

#### **V. EXCEPTIONS**

Any exception must be documented, submitted to, and approved by the Williamson County Senior Director of Human Resources prior to the exception needed. For staff who report to an Elected Official or Governing Board, Human Resources will partner with that office for approval of any exceptions.

#### **VI. VIOLATIONS**

A Supervisor's failure to immediately report an Intimate Relationship or otherwise comply with this policy will be subject to corrective action, up to and including termination.

## **VII. REPORTING AND PROTECTION FROM RETALIATION**

Any person who reasonably believes a Supervisor is in violation of this policy is encouraged to promptly report the concern to Human Resources.

Retaliation against a person who reports a potential violation under this policy, assists someone with reporting a violation, or participates in any manner in a report, an investigation, or in the resolution of a report made under this policy is strictly prohibited. Retaliation includes, but is not limited to, threats, intimidation, reprisals and/or adverse action related to an individual's employment or education. Adverse action may include inappropriately unfavorable treatment of others as the result of the Intimate Relationship. The County will take appropriate steps to ensure a person who in good faith reports or participates in an investigation pursuant to this policy will not be subject to retaliation. Individuals who believe they are experiencing retaliation are strongly encouraged to file a complaint with Human Resources.

## **VIII. APPLICATION TO ELECTED OFFICIALS AND CERTAIN APPOINTED OFFICIALS**

This policy applies to the Commissioners Court and the departments that directly report to them. However, other Elected Officials and Appointed Officials who directly report to other groups or Boards with County employees are strongly encouraged to apply this policy as the minimum standard for their office operations. Failure to follow this policy may subject individual Supervisors to personal liability.

## **IX. RELATED POLICIES**

Nothing in this policy shall be deemed as supplanting or otherwise affecting what is outlined or required in the Williamson County Employee Policy Manual.