



# **HARASSMENT AND COMPLAINT POLICIES AND PROCEDURES EVALUATION FINAL REPORT**

*September 16, 2025*

**WHATCOM COUNTY, WA**

**MATRIX**  
CONSULTING GROUP

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This final report presents the results of the evaluation of Whatcom County's harassment and complaint policies and procedures. The assessment was informed by a series of employee and leadership interviews, a review of existing policies and procedures, best practices assessments, employee input and an examination of relevant organizational materials. Together, these provide a thorough description of both the written framework and the practical application of policies. The recommendations included in this report are designed to strengthen policy clarity, improve procedural consistency, and support the County in effective and equitable human resource policy management and implementation.

## 1.1 OVERVIEW OF PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The Matrix Consulting Group's project team utilized a wide variety of data collection and analytical techniques for this Human Resources policies and procedures study, including the following:

- **Current State Assessment.** The project team developed a current state assessment that captured current staffing levels, roles and responsibilities and workload. This document was utilized as a base point of comparison for future analysis to demonstrate how the changes recommended differ from existing practice.
- **Best Management Practices.** This analysis was conducted, which compared current practices in the County to industry best practices. The project team focused on best management practices for management and administration, review processes, technology utilization, and customer service. This assessment was used to identify current strengths and opportunities for improvement.
- **Employee Survey.** All employees and elected officials of Whatcom were sent an online survey to collect feedback on their experiences with personnel policies and the Human Resources Department. This was not designed as a statistically valid survey but rather as a way for all employees to have direct input to the project team if they chose to participate. Surveys were also able to be submitted in hard copy format for those staff that routinely do not use emails; these were submitted directly to the Council Office and were scanned and distributed to Matrix upon receipt.
- **Analysis and Recommendations.** Based on the project team's activities and initial findings, the team analyzed issues and developed recommendations for more effective organization and operation. These recommendations address ways to align policies, procedures and training with industry standards, address issues identified during the employee survey and best practices assessment and generally enhance the level of service provided by the County to employees relative to the HR policies and procedures.

This final report presents a comprehensive evaluation of the County's harassment and complaint policies and procedures related to workplace harassment, training, and investigations.

## 1.2 KEY STRENGTHS OF THE ORGANIZATION

Personnel matters are complex and require specialized expertise. Human Resources professionals are best positioned to manage these processes, ensuring consistent application of policies, compliance with legal requirements, and fair treatment of employees. Human Resources has demonstrated a willingness to adapt and refine its practices. This openness to change provides a strong foundation for implementing new policies, enhancing compliance, and aligning organizational processes with best management practices.

- Over the past six months, the County has invested considerable effort into expanding employee training opportunities and improving personnel policies. These actions signal a forward-looking approach that emphasizes workforce development, continuous learning, and clearer organizational expectations.
- Organizationally, there has been an expressed willingness to adhere to harassment and discrimination policies. This commitment extends to elected leadership and reinforces accountability at the highest levels and sets a positive example for the rest of the organization.
- The combination of leadership support, staff adaptability, and a proactive Human Resources function suggests a readiness to embrace best practices and foster a healthier, more resilient workplace.

## 1.3 KEY FINDINGS AND OPPORTUNITIES

There are organizational challenges related to trust, particularly in sharing sensitive or confidential information. This has the effect of limiting open dialogue and may create barriers to early reporting or resolution of issues. Building stronger confidence in internal processes is essential for fostering a culture of transparency and accountability.

- The absence of clearly defined standard operating procedures for evaluating harassment and discrimination claims creates uncertainty for both employees and supervisors.
- Current policies addressing harassment and discrimination require consistent application across all departments, including elected officials. Uniform enforcement ensures parity, demonstrates leadership accountability, and reinforces that all employees and officials are held to the same professional standards.
- Personnel policies need to provide more detailed guidance on processes, expectations, and employee rights. Clear definitions and practical explanations strengthen understanding and compliance, while reducing inconsistencies in how policies are interpreted and applied across the organization.
- Beyond initial onboarding, employees and officials require regular training, dialogue, and communication on harassment, discrimination, and workplace conduct. Ongoing engagement reinforces organizational values, keeps expectations current, and supports a safe and respectful work environment. This is not in place.

Each of these issues, among others, are addressed in the narrative of the report.

## 1.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following chart presents a comprehensive summary of the recommendations outlined in this report. Each recommendation has been assigned a priority ranking of High, Medium, or Low. In addition, an implementation timeline is provided to support strategic planning, resource allocation, and the sequencing of initiatives. Together, these priorities and timelines offer a practical roadmap for advancing improvements in a structured and effective manner, ensuring that both immediate concerns and long-term organizational goals are addressed in a balanced way.

| Recommendation   | Priority | Timeline |
|--|----------|----------|
| EVALUATION OF HUMAN RESOURCES DEPARTMENT OPERATIONS  |          |          |
| 1. Centralize complaint processing and investigations under the HR department.   | High     | Q3 2025  |
| 2. Implement a standardized investigative methodology.   | High     | Q1 2026  |
| 3. Implement clear timeliness associated with the complaint handling process and enhance communication as part of the process. | High     | Q1 2026  |
| 4. Provide additional training to HR staff on utilizing trauma-informed approaches.  | Medium   | Q4 2025  |
| 5. Utilize a digital case management system for processing all complaints.   | Medium   | Q2 2026  |
| 6. Implement key performance metrics (KPIs) related to the handling of complaints.   | Medium   | Q1 2026  |
| 7. Develop quarterly and annual reports on performance metrics related to the complaints process.                              | Low      | Q1 2026  |
| 8. Develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) surrounding all aspects of the complaint handling process.                     | High     | Q4 2025  |

| Recommendation   | Priority | Timeline            |
|--|----------|---------------------|
| 9. Maintain current staffing levels allocated to processing complaints and performing investigations. Continue to provide cross training on this subject to ensure that at least two HR FTEs are equipped to handle investigations.  | High     | Ongoing             |
| 10. Continue to house investigations into workplace issues under the HR department.  | Medium   | Ongoing             |
| POLICIES & PROCEDURES  |          |                     |
| 11. Each elected office formally adopting and applying county-wide harassment and discrimination policies to ensure consistency across all departments, employees, and officials. If voluntary adoption is not achieved, the County should consider pursuing charter and code modifications to provide for application of uniform standards. | High     | ASAP                |
| 12. Integrate harassment and discrimination policies into broader administrative initiatives with clearly assigned responsibilities for training, resource management, and incident handling.  | Medium   | Ongoing             |
| 13. Clearly define prohibited behaviors including harassment, discrimination, bullying, retaliation, and bias within the policy to eliminate ambiguity.  | High     | Q4 2025             |
| 14. Ensure policies are widely accessible by posting them on the intranet, in employee handbooks, newsletters, in physical spaces, onboarding packets, and public-facing websites.   | High     | Q4 2025             |
| 15. Establish consistent reporting channels and ensure all staff who can receive complaints are fully trained to process a complaint.  | High     | Q4 2025 and ongoing |
| 16. Provide regular reminders to employees and elected officials about the policy, reporting procedures, and available resources.  | High     | Q4 2025 and ongoing |

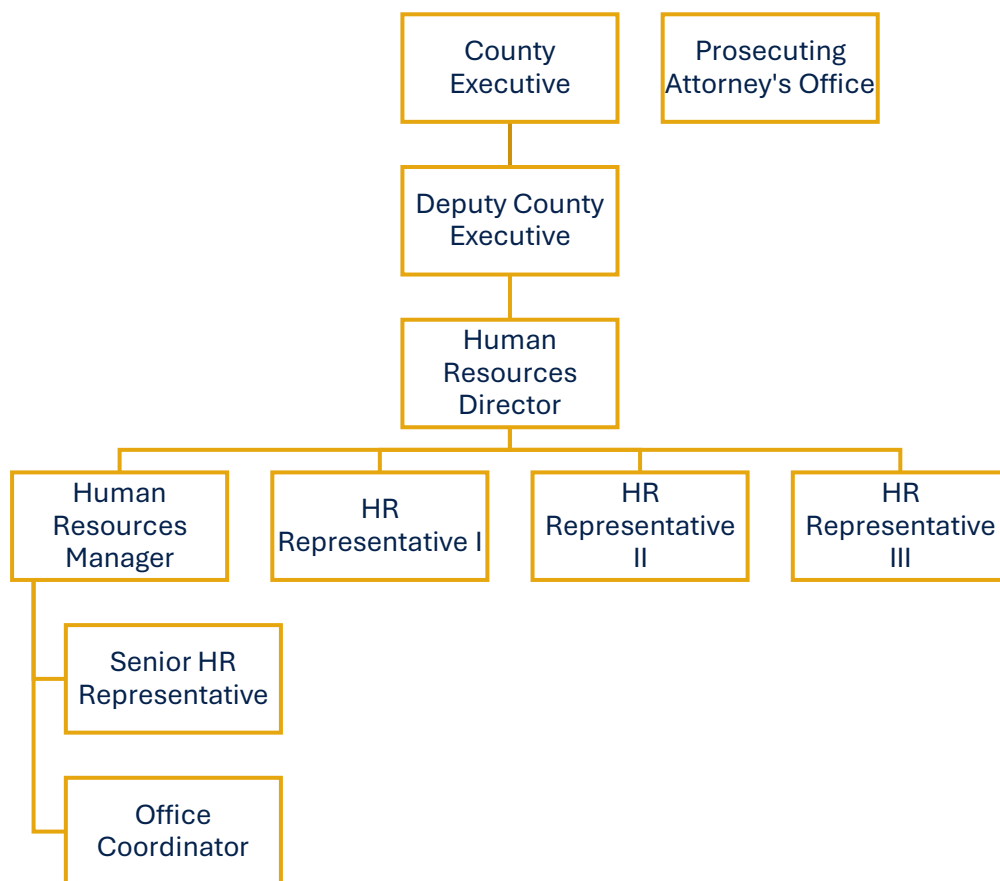
| Recommendation  | Priority | Timeline |
|---|----------|----------|
| 17. Establish a formal process to review and update policies annually, incorporating legal updates and evolving best practices.   | High     | Ongoing  |
| WORKFORCE TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT  |          |          |
| 18. Continue with the implementation of NeoGov Learn. Utilize this system to track training completion rates for employees. Continue to expand training opportunities as needed.  | High     | Ongoing  |
| 19. Adjust onboarding training to include courses specific to administrative policies and procedures related to handling and reporting workplace concerns.  | High     | Q4 2025  |
| 20. Consider alternative formats for training (i.e., in-person events) that occur on a set basis.   | Medium   | 2026     |
| 21. Require training on respectful workplace topics (as well as procedures for handling workplace concerns) to be provided to all staff regularly – ideally every two years or less.  | High     | Ongoing  |
| 22. Implement required training for all new and existing supervisors that must be complete. For new supervisors, this training should be provided within three months of appointment. Provide refresher courses on this training regularly or in response to updates to policies or procedures. | High     | Q1 2026  |
| 23. Broaden the scope and content of training offerings, particularly in the areas of reporting complaints and conflict management. Consider implementing new training on topics Countywide.  | Medium   | Q1 2026  |
| 24. Implement a means of capturing feedback from participants related to the quality of current training offerings and develop a method of proactively identifying new training needs.  | Low      | 2026     |

## 2. EVALUATION OF HUMAN RESOURCES

This chapter provides an overview of the organizational structure surrounding the handling of workplace complaints, including processing and training related to this topic. Findings and recommendations related to personnel structure as well as staffing levels are included in this chapter. Additionally, an assessment of accountability measures, reporting metrics, and relevant documentation is included.

Under the current approach, all complaints can be initially received by any Human Resources (HR) department employee or an employee's immediate supervisor. Investigations are subsequently performed by the HR Director or are assigned to other HR personnel to complete. The current HR department organization structure is shown below:

HR DEPARTMENT ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



As represented in the organizational chart, the Prosecuting Attorney's (PA) Office has some degree of overlap with HR in the area of investigating complaints. The Office is assigned to investigate more complex complaints and/or those that originate within the Human Resources Department or where Human Resources staff would have a conflict of interest. PA Office staff do not report to the County



Executive, but instead to the elected Prosecuting Attorney. Additionally, the County utilizes outside legal counsel – as assigned by the risk pool – for conducting some third-party investigations related to workplace issues that require specialized expertise and guidance.

## **2.1 OPERATIONAL FINDINGS**

This section deals with findings and recommendations related to general operational practices as they relate to the process of complaints related to workplace misconduct (e.g., harassment, discrimination, incivility, etc.).

### **2.1.1 INVESTIGATING AND ADDRESSING COMPLAINTS**

Presently, complaints are largely investigated by the HR department, with involvement from external departments/entities (namely the PA Office or outside legal counsel) in cases that may directly involve HR staff, where HR may not be perceived as objective or neutral, or which rise to a higher level of complexity that require legal expertise. Investigations can be conducted directly in-house or via third-party investigators as necessitated by workload demands.

The process by which complaints are handled has a rudimentary framework, where staff are directed to submit issues to their immediate supervisor, to an HR staff member, or the PA Office. Complaints can also be submitted anonymously if needed. The complaint is eventually directed to the HR Director to make an initial determination on a course of action and to whom the case will be assigned for subsequent investigation. For investigations conducted by Human Resources staff, a final determination (substantiated or unsubstantiated) and a recommendation on necessary corrective action is made by the HR Director, in consultation with internal and external legal counsel if and as needed. For investigations conducted by an outside investigator, the investigator will make a determination and recommendation independently to the County. This determination and recommendation are reviewed internally by Human Resources, in conjunction with legal counsel, to determine next steps and to provide a recommendation to the appropriate decision maker on the case.

Upon review of the data provided, interviews conducted with staff, a best practices assessment, and data collected via a Countywide employee survey, some deficiencies were noted in the current process that should be addressed. The latter instrument – the survey – contained a section polling sentiment from those who had previously submitted a complaint through the HR department. The employee survey was extended to all employees to participate. The survey received input from a total of 559 County employees. A subset of this respondent group (107 participants) had previously submitted a complaint to HR and were asked to react to statements specific to their experience.

Responses for this section are shared in the following table, along with the number of respondents who reacted to each statement (#):

| # | Statement  | Str. D | D   | A   | Str. A | #   |
|---|--|--------|-----|-----|--------|-----|
| 1 | Human Resources was timely in its response.                                    | 12%    | 32% | 45% | 12%    | 103 |
| 2 | I was satisfied with the process overall.                                      | 25%    | 38% | 31% | 6%     | 103 |
| 3 | I was satisfied with the outcome.  | 27%    | 38% | 29% | 6%     | 104 |
| 4 | Human Resources conducted a thorough investigation.                            | 32%    | 33% | 28% | 7%     | 94  |
| 5 | I feel comfortable reporting workplace concerns to Human Resources.            | 30%    | 27% | 30% | 13%    | 104 |
| 6 | My colleagues are comfortable reporting workplace concerns to Human Resources. | 30%    | 43% | 20% | 7%     | 98  |

While this is just one data point in this study, it does indicate a high level of dissatisfaction with the complaint process, its outcomes, and the overall level of comfort staff feel in disclosing workplace concerns to HR. To address this, the project team has developed a series of recommended practices for implementation, which should in turn be formalized via standard operating procedure (SOP) documentation:

- **Centralize the Complaint Handling Function:** There should be one centralized entity responsible for the intake of all complaints Countywide. This entity should also conduct in-house investigations to the best of its ability and rely on external assistance exclusively in instances where either the complaint pertains to staff within the department handling complaints, where HR may not be viewed as objective, those that require legal expertise to investigate or complex cases that would require more time than existing staffing allocations can accommodate. While the current approach largely mirrors this practice, there were instances noted where complaints originated in other departments, largely due to a lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities. This responsibility is commonly allocated to Human Resources departments, and it is our recommendation that the entire investigative process be centralized under the HR department in the County. Most importantly, this should be clearly stated to all County personnel through training or other organization-wide communications.
- **Standardize the Investigative Framework:** A review of investigative data from prior case files shows some inconsistencies in the types of data collected and methodology utilized in conducting the investigation. Investigations should follow a standard prescribed format for data collection, conduct of interviews, basis for making credibility assessments, and determination of outcomes. Standards should be implemented to direct staff on appropriately utilizing external investigators when needed, and external staff should be held to the same standardized framework. Procedures followed during investigations should remain largely consistent from case to case.

- **Implement Timelines Associated with Complaint Handling:** There are no clear timelines regarding the length of time it takes between submitting a complaint and receiving some form of conclusion to an investigation. The County should implement timeline targets for three core components of the investigative process: the length of time from complaint submittal before being acknowledged by HR, the length of time between initial intake and the initiation of an investigation, and the amount of time from conclusion of the investigation to outcome determination. These timelines should be incorporated into the County's policy and shared with all County staff as part of training or any other broad organizational communication.
- **Enhance Communication:** Communication between the intake department and the complainant should be emphasized where possible. A concern noted by some respondents in the Countywide survey was that they did not receive sufficient follow-up from HR/their supervisor following their submittal of a complaint. Status notifications should be a standard component of the complaint handling process going forward, where appropriate, even if there is nothing substantive to report at that point other than the investigation is on-going.
- **Provide Additional Training to Investigative Staff as Needed:** HR staff should be fully equipped to address sensitive workplace issues that may arise during the course of an investigation. Training on utilizing trauma-informed approaches can help position HR staff to approach investigations with a priority on empathy, confidentiality, and providing support resources to individuals reporting concerns related to harassment, discrimination, or other workplace issues. Ongoing and refresher training should be provided to staff conducting investigations on a periodic basis.
- **Utilization of Technology:** The County currently lacks a formal case management system and presently receives and tracks complaints (and associated documentation) in a variety of ways. This can result in inconsistencies in data and application of methodology, which in turn can result in substandard outcomes and difficulty in performing audits. Human Resource staff should transition case management to a digital system. This should be a high priority for implementation by the County to streamline and equalize processes and data management.

The operational adjustments above should be implemented with the intent of improving the clarity, quality, and overall effectiveness of the complaint handling process. As referenced earlier, these changes – as well as the process as a whole – should be memorialized via standard operating procedure documentation. Additionally, these changes should also be accompanied by the implementation of key performance indicators (KPIs) and reporting standards related to the process. Recommendations on this topic can be found in the following subsection.

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**Recommendation 1:** *Centralize complaint processing and investigations under the HR department.*

**Recommendation 2:** *Implement a standardized investigative methodology.*

**Recommendation 3:** *Implement clear timeliness associated with the complaint handling process and enhance communication as part of the process.*

**Recommendation 4:** Provide additional training to HR staff on utilizing trauma-informed approaches. Provide periodic refresher training to HR staff on conducting investigations.

**Recommendation 5:** Utilize a digital case management system for processing all complaints.

## 2.1.2 METRICS AND REPORTING

The County maintains relatively limited metrics related to the handling of complaints. Documentation related to investigations is stored, and the types of complaints (as well as the outcomes) are tracked internally by the County. The following table summarizes the number of investigations conducted by type and outcome over the last three years. Data for 2025 is incomplete and only covers a portion of the year.

INVESTIGATIONS – TYPES AND OUTCOMES (2022 - YTD2025)

|   | 2022          |                 | 2023          |                 | 2024          |                 | 2025          |                 |             |           |
|---|---------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|-------------|-----------|
|   | Substantiated | Unsubstantiated | Substantiated | Unsubstantiated | Substantiated | Unsubstantiated | Substantiated | Unsubstantiated | In-Progress | Total     |
| EE0/Protected Class                           | -             | 1               | -             | -               | 1             | 1               | -             | 1               | -           | 4         |
| Standards of Conduct                          | 2             | -               | 1             | 1               | 2             | -               | 2             | 1               | -           | 7         |
| Prohibiting Harassment                        | 1             | -               | 1             | -               | 1             | -               | 1             | 1               | -           | 4         |
| Sexual Harassment                             | 1             | -               | -             | 1               | -             | -               | 1             | -               | 1           | 3         |
| Appropriate Application of Policies           | -             | 1               | -             | -               | -             | 1               | -             | -               | -           | 2         |
| Hostile Work Environment                      | -             | -               | -             | 1               | 1             | -               | -             | 1               | -           | 3         |
| Retaliation                                   | -             | -               | -             | -               | 1             | -               | -             | -               | -           | 1         |
| Whistleblower, Nepotism, Conflict of Interest | -             | -               | -             | -               | -             | -               | -             | 1               | -           | 1         |
| <b>Total</b>                                  | <b>4</b>      | <b>2</b>        | <b>2</b>      | <b>3</b>        | <b>6</b>      | <b>2</b>        | <b>4</b>      | <b>5</b>        | <b>1</b>    | <b>25</b> |

The data that has been tracked shows that the County has received a total of 25 complaints since 2022, with the most common being related to the Standards of Conduct Policy (accounting for seven total investigations). There are opportunities to expand the types of metrics used for tracking complaints in order to promote a more effective service delivery and promote transparency in the process. These include:

- **Volumes and Types of Complaints:** The County should continue to track the number of complaints received (by month, quarter, and year) and the type of complaint (e.g., Standards of Conduct, Prohibiting Harassment, etc.). This should be expanded to denote the source of the complaint (i.e., whether the complaint was submitted to a supervisor, HR, or another entity involved in receiving

complaints). Repeat complaints, such as those levied against the same individual, should also be flagged accordingly.

- **Timeliness:** Timelines related to complaint processing should be implemented and tracked. The amount of time elapsed between intake and acknowledgement of the complaint by staff, the amount of time between intake and the start of an investigation, and the total time to conduct the investigation should all be defined as part of the data associated with a complaint. The County should implement target processing times for the intake, processing, and closure of complaints and share them with County personnel as an accountability and transparency measure.
- **Complaint Outcomes:** The County already tracks the outcomes of investigations regarding whether investigations found claims to be substantiated or unsubstantiated. This should be expanded to reference any corrective actions taken as a result of the complaint, the number of cases that were escalated to an outside office beyond HR, and the percentage of cases resolved through informal means versus a formal investigation.
- **Demographic Information:** Where possible, the County should track general demographic data associated with a complaint. This should at minimum reference the department or division where the complaint originated but could be expanded (where possible) to reference personal demographics associated with the parties involved, such as race, gender identity, or sexual orientation.
- **Feedback:** The County should poll staff who submitted complaints, or were involved in the process in some way, on their overall level of satisfaction with the procedures they experienced. Brief surveys should be issued that ask participants to rate metrics such as the responsiveness of staff, how they were treated, and their satisfaction with the overall outcome of the process. This should be accomplished in a manner that does not require the identification of the employee involved in the case. Finally, as part of broader employee climate surveys, the County should also gauge the level of trust in the complaint handling process overall.

Implementing these metrics will allow the County to directly measure the success of ongoing investigations, perform analysis to identify potential problem areas/departments as well as training needs, and promote an increased level of accountability within the process. This, in turn, will help build a culture of trust and transparency within the County regarding how workplace issues are resolved.

The tracking of this information should be performed under a structured, confidential system, ideally via a case management module of the County's existing HRIS or through a similar system. Failing that, the use of more rudimentary systems, such as a spreadsheet, would suffice as an interim measure. As these metrics directly relate to highly sensitive materials, this data should be handled in accordance with existing policies related to confidential employee data.

Finally, to further promote accountability within the process, these metrics (as well as existing ones) should be compiled into quarterly and annual reports that are presented to County leadership. Initially, these will be limited by the quantity of data available but will eventually enable the County to perform comparative analyses of prior quarters/years and identify potential issue areas (e.g., a high number of complaints from a specific division, a spike in complaints of a particular type, low satisfaction with outcomes, etc.).

As part of a long-term effort, this approach of reporting out could also be taken further and shared with the broader organization via a report or dashboard. A direct benefit of this approach would be to establish a higher degree of trust in the complaints process among County staff overall. However, this should be considered only after a comprehensive collection and review of data prior to its implementation.

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**Recommendation 6:** *Implement key performance metrics (KPIs) related to the handling of complaints.*

**Recommendation 7:** *Develop quarterly and annual reports on performance metrics related to the complaints process.*

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### 2.1.3 STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

A future complaint handling framework should be structured and documented through the use of clear standard operating procedures (SOPs). Presently, documentation related to the process is lacking, which can result in inconsistent application of methodology, lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities, and ultimately can potentially result in poorer outcomes. This can be remedied via the creation of documentation that is centrally (and regularly) maintained. The complaint and investigative process, including the recommended improvements referenced in this report, should be memorialized via this method. The table below summarizes recommended SOPs for development:

| Topic/Area         | Description of Contents  |
|--------------------|--|
| Intake             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clearly defined channels for complaint submission (HR, supervisor, anonymous hotline, etc.).</li> <li>Standards for initial data collected at time of intake (date, source, type of complaint, and basic facts associated with the complaint).</li> <li>Standard timelines for acknowledging a complaint following initial submittal.</li> <li>Language supporting confidentiality and the County's stance on retaliation.</li> </ul> |
| Initial Assignment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Language directing how to assess and address potential conflicts of interest with a complaint.</li> <li>Standards to assist in prioritizing cases based on severity (e.g., emergency cases where an immediate threat to an individual's safety is concerned).</li> <li>Matrix highlighting when and how cases may be assigned to external entities for investigation.</li> </ul>  |

|                       |  |
|-----------------------|--|
| Investigation         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Roles and responsibilities for investigations (e.g., who is responsible for interviewing, who is responsible for documentation of evidence, and who is responsible for determining final outcomes).</li> <li>• Standards on how to conduct interviews, with an emphasis on ensuring confidentiality and utilizing trauma-informed approaches where needed.</li> <li>• Clear standards on data collection requirements and how to handle data associated with a case.</li> <li>• Documentation standards such as naming conventions, where case files should be stored, and how to document extraneous case notes.</li> <li>• Standardized timelines for conducting an investigation, barring highly complex investigations that require extended review.</li> </ul> |
| Outcomes              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear standards on how outcomes are reached as part of the investigative process, as well as a guide on performing consistency checks to ensure that a case's outcome aligns with past precedent and policies.</li> <li>• A matrix defining potential corrective actions, based on the case's outcome.</li> <li>• Clear timelines on assessing a final outcome following the conclusion of an investigation.</li> <li>• Standard on communicating the results of a case to both complainant and respondent.</li> </ul>  |
| Follow-Up             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Procedures directing staff to conduct follow-up meetings with complainants over a set period of time.</li> <li>• Guidance on tracking that corrective action steps are being followed, with direction on how to address instances where they are not.</li> <li>• Language directing how to appropriately capture feedback from involved parties following the conclusion of a case.</li> </ul>  |
| Storage and Reporting | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy language directing the storage of confidential data collected as a result of an investigation. This should include a retention schedule as well as access protocols.</li> <li>• Standards on reporting on metrics related to the complaint handling process (e.g., quarterly, annually, via live dashboard, etc.). This should include presentation to County leadership on a set basis.</li> <li>• A framework for conducting internal audits of investigation data. This may also be accomplished through utilization of an external department or contracted entity.</li> </ul>   |
| Roles and Training    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear roles matrix defining HR (and other) position's specific involvement in the complaint handling process.</li> <li>• Clear training requirements for each role involved in the process, including investigative training, bias training, and training on documentation standards.</li> </ul>  |

While these SOPs will lay the framework for a future complaint-handling process, they should not be overly prescriptive so as to limit staff's ability to adapt to a case. While a consistent methodology should be implemented, staff should be trained to recognize and adapt to each case they handle.



All SOPs should be developed via a collaborative process as part of implementing the recommendations made throughout this report and should continue to be reviewed annually and updated in response to changes in law/policy or based on “lessons learned” during investigations. Documentation should be made available to all County personnel as part of the initial onboarding process, as well as via the County’s intranet, and HR staff should receive direct training on these standards as part of their role.

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**Recommendation 8:** *Develop standard operating procedures (SOPs) surrounding all aspects of the complaint handling process.*

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## 2.2 STAFFING LEVELS AND ROLES

While complaints may originate in other departments, as indicated in various sections of this report, it was indicated that the majority of this workload currently resides within the HR department. The HR Director leads the overall investigative process and is responsible for either directly performing the investigation or assigning it to another staff member/external investigator as needed. The HR Manager, as well as HR Representatives, have received training on performing investigations and may be called upon to do so as part of their overall duties.

The available workload data related to investigations does not appear to indicate any extensive workload in this area that would require additional staffing increases at this time. A review of workload with HR personnel further reinforced this sentiment, with staff sharing that they felt as though they were appropriately staffed to handle the overall complaint process at this time. The approach of assigning investigative work to HR Directors and generalist-type positions is common, based on our experience working with Counties and municipal organizations across the United States. At the present time, the workload related to workplace harassment and similar investigations does not warrant a dedicated position.

The County should continue to ensure that it provides cross-training on handling investigations to its HR staff, with the goal of ensuring that at least two HR FTEs are fully equipped, and available, to handle the investigative process. Staffing levels should continue to be monitored based on workload data related to complaint processing, and increases should occur in response to specific criteria (e.g., failure to meet internal timeline goals).

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**Recommendation 9:** *Maintain current staffing levels allocated to processing complaints and performing investigations. Continue to provide cross training on this subject to ensure that at least two HR FTEs are equipped to handle investigations.*

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### 2.2.1 ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO INVESTIGATING COMPLAINTS

As part of this engagement, the project team researched the use of “third-party” (e.g., outside of an HR or Legal department) entities to conduct investigations into workplace misconduct. The team contacted or



researched a total of six counties located within Washington state as part of this effort. The table below summarizes our findings from this exercise:

| County    | Ombuds/Independent Reviewer?   |
|-----------|--|
| King      | King County has an Ombuds Office that is independent and handles ethics, whistleblower, and misconduct issues, separate from HR. Regular, less-complex, workplace issues are handled by HR using internal or external investigators. |
| Clark     | No, but ethics complaints can be referred to a commission and third-party investigator as needed.  |
| Snohomish | Yea, via the independent Office of the Public Advocate.  |
| Yakima    | No. Generally handled by HR/Legal; outside investigators only used through risk pool when significant liability or need for objectivity.   |
| Thurston  | No. External assistance may be requested on a case-by-case basis.  |
| Benton    | No.  |

Our research indicated that it was not common for the handling of complaints/investigations to occur outside of HR via an ombuds-type position. Four of six counties polled indicated that they did not utilize such a practice. King County stated that it utilizes such an office for highly complex/controversial issues but allocates standard workplace complaints to its HR department for resolution. Snohomish County was the only respondent to indicate that it utilized an independent office as its sole mechanism for handling these types of complaints.

Another alternative to housing this function within HR would be to assign the complaints process to a department specifically tasked with handling all EEO and related duties that operates independently from HR. This does not appear to be common practice among comparative respondents, but it is a structure also commonly utilized by numerous public sector organizations across the country. Similar to an ombuds-type position, this approach can help mitigate concerns regarding the objective of investigations or address HR staff capacity issues in processing complaints related to workplace issues. Again, the successful implementation of such an approach requires that the EEO function operate outside of HR's direct reporting structure. In Whatcom County's case, an EEO Director position would report directly to the County Executive but be placed at the same hierarchical level as the HR Director, with no shared direct reports.

At this time, however, it is not recommended that Whatcom County utilize such an approach and continue to utilize its HR staff (with assistance from internal/external investigators) to process workplace complaints. While there may be value to be gained from using an independent entity to build trust in the process, the project team believes that similar gains can be achieved through the implementation of recommendations outlined throughout this report. The County should, however, continue to monitor employee sentiments regarding this process, as well as staff's ability to handle the workload associated with investigations, and make considerations for such an approach in the future if necessary.

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*Recommendation 10: Continue to house investigations into workplace issues under the HR department.*

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## 3. POLICIES & PROCEDURES

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Policy language is essential in shaping organizational expectations and ensuring accountability in the workplace. The articulation and application of clear and consistent harassment and discrimination policies establish appropriate standards of conduct in addition to the processes by which concerns are raised, evaluated, and resolved.

Whatcom County policies are grounded in the framework of the County Charter, Code, and personnel policies developed by Human Resources. Together, these documents serve as critical guideposts that define expectations and responsibilities, provide direction for addressing complaints, and support fair and consistent application across the organization. Evaluating the clarity, consistency, and practical application of these policies is therefore a necessary step in strengthening trust, reducing organizational risk, and reinforcing a culture of respect and equity.

At the same time, gaps or inconsistencies in policy language or application can create uncertainty and erode confidence in the organization's ability to respond effectively to complaints. Without clear definitions and standardized processes, employees may be reluctant to report concerns, managers may struggle to apply policies consistently, and the County may be exposed to legal and reputational risks. Addressing these challenges through well-defined policies, consistent enforcement, and ongoing communication ensures that all employees and officials are subject to the same expectations and protections, while also reinforcing the County's commitment to a safe and respectful workplace.

### 3.1 WHATCOM CHARTER AND COUNTY CODE

The Whatcom County Charter addresses that the County Council is required to establish and maintain a personnel system by ordinance. The Charter provides that this article applies to all County positions, except for:

- Contract employees;
- All volunteer members of boards and commissions who are appointed by either the County Council or County Executive;
- All elected County officers;
- County Council members; and
- No more than two other persons in each elected officer's office, and other employees as may become necessary as determined by the County Council.

The Charter also outlines that the County Executive administers the personnel system of the County in accordance with personnel rules adopted by the County Council. These written exemptions are extended further by County Code also excluding:

- Employees of the Sheriff's Department;
- Employees of the Court;
- Deputy Prosecuting Attorneys;
- Employees of the District Court;
- Multi-agency groups who have no contractual agreement with the County for personnel services; and
- Employees serving in temporary, seasonal, or part-time positions.

There are consequential challenges to this current approach, the first being that employees and the County as an employer are unclear of how harassment and discrimination policies can and legally do apply between the listed non-exempt and exempt groups, thus limiting clear enforceability and employee rights. It was also evident that some exempt groups do not entirely understand their exemption and as a result, if a complaint were to arise, there may be no clearly defined and adopted standards to enforce and apply. With the lack of clarity for the outlined exclusions, Human Resources is placed in a difficult situation to enforce standards that may or may not be within their jurisdiction to address or navigate. This causes difficulty in attempting to apply and enforce policies consistently organization-wide.

In exploring this further, there was discussion with the Prosecutor's office, each of the elected officials' offices and County Council staff on whether these offices have opted to apply the present Personnel Policy for harassment and discrimination. The County Council has proactively adopted the County's policies as part of its standards, and other County elected officials' offices have generally applied these standards without formal adoption. There was no indication that the adoption of these policies County-wide would create challenges or be problematic.

All departments headed by elected officials should formally adopt and apply the County's Human Resources personnel policies and procedures relating to harassment and discrimination. Since it does not appear that due to State legislation, it does not appear that this can be directly required or imposed by the County, even with a Charter amendment, the County should still be requested and highly encouraged by the County for all elected officials. The recommended approach provides buy-in and clarity, through strong encouragement of the County's elected officials, and all other exempted employee groups or their supervising authority, to formally adopt the County's harassment and discrimination policies.

The exemption language in the County Charter and Code, does not preclude the ability for the exempted groups to adopt and apply County-approved policies. These should be adopted by established authorities for each exempt group. This is a critical action to promote consistent application of rules, equal accountability and clarity about expectations. Without universal adoption, employees and elected officials will continue to be subject to varying interpretations of policy, thus increasing organizational risk and undermining trust in County processes. The County should have standard policies and procedures

related to harassment that are applicable to all employees - appointed and all elected officials (department directors and County Council).

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**Recommendation 11.** *Each elected office should formally adopt and apply the county-wide harassment and discrimination policies to ensure consistency across all departments, employees, and officials. If voluntary adoption is not achieved, the County should consider pursuing charter and code modifications to provide for application of uniform standards.*

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### 3.1.1 COUNTY CODE REVIEW AND ANALYSIS

The following policy analysis includes a summary of the existing policy language, analysis of this section of code and recommendations regarding the continued application of current code language. It is important to recognize that the County is currently updating policies - and this analysis was conducted on the current policies in effect.

#### COUNTY CODE ANALYSIS

| Code Title(s)               | Personnel System  |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Chapter 3.04 (revised 1993) |   |
| <b>Purpose</b>              | <p><b>Key Components</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A centralized system of personnel management.</li> <li>• Objective recruitment and selection processes and employing the most highly-qualified personnel.</li> <li>• Written standardized personnel policies and procedures, including defined personnel and employment functions.</li> <li>• High-level staff morale, productivity and efficiency.</li> <li>• Cost-effective health and welfare plans which address the needs of a diverse workforce.</li> <li>• Education and training meeting the needs of County employees and reflective of a changing work environment</li> <li>• A safe work environment for employees and volunteers, including preventative safety education programs.</li> </ul> <p><b>Observations &amp; Recommendations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• These purpose statements provide a good, thorough outline of the various needed code components within a personnel policy and system.</li> </ul> |

|                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| <p><b>Scope</b></p> | <p><b>Key Components</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personnel code is applicable to all county positions with clear exceptions outlined.</li> <li>• Union labor agreements are addressed as applicable standards.</li> <li>• Personnel system functions are required to include the following elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Encourage and exercise leadership in the development of effective personnel management</li> <li>- Develop programs for training, safety, health, counseling and welfare</li> <li>- Annual report activities/accomplishments of the personnel system</li> <li>- Establish, maintain and administer a secure, centralized personnel record system for all employees along with recruitment, screening and selection practices</li> <li>- Promote good union-management relations</li> <li>- Assist the prosecuting attorney's office in arbitration/litigation</li> <li>- Monitor and comply with federal, state and local laws</li> <li>- Maintain affirmative action program and provide period EEOC reports</li> <li>- Conduct studies necessary to administer the personnel functions, e.g. wage studies, job analysis, minority representation, etc.</li> <li>- Develop and periodically update written personnel policies, considering input from county administrators and employee groups affected, once approved this can only be amended by resolution.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>Observations &amp; Recommendations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This policy addresses the broad components, authority and functions included in the County's personnel systems.</li> <li>• All exempted groups need to have a personnel policy established and in place, with a recommendation made in this report to have these groups use the same harassment and discrimination policy.</li> <li>• Personnel system elements are briefly defined but do address and contain the core functions of Human Resources. However, there is not a clearly established mechanism of accountability to ensure these elements are being prioritized and addressed.</li> <li>• The annual report referenced should include how each of these outlined code elements are being addressed and what systems and organizational efforts are in place to fulfill code requirements.</li> </ul> |
|---------------------|---|

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| <b>Prohibited Acts</b> | <b>Key Components</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No person shall falsify statements, certificates, marks, ratings, or reports for applications, tests, certifications, or appointments, nor commit fraud or attempt to prevent the impartial execution of this chapter and related policies.</li> <li>• No person shall give or accept valuable consideration for a county position or advantage.</li> <li>• No employee of Whatcom County or other person may obstruct, defeat, or deceive any person regarding their right to examination, certification, eligibility, or appointment under this chapter. Additionally, no one shall provide special or secret information to any person for the purpose of influencing their employment rights or prospects with the county.</li> <li>• Discovery of an unlawful act as identified above shall establish reasonable cause for immediate dismissal.</li> </ul> <b>Observations &amp; Recommendations</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This section outlines that personnel-related discussions and hiring processes and determinations are to occur with integrity and fidelity. The language in code could be clarified a bit as the legalese can make a clear interpretation of meaning challenging.</li> <li>• Participation in a prohibited act is cause for immediate dismissal. Given the gravity of this, additional clarity is needed throughout this section to ensure that applicability can occur.</li> </ul> |
|------------------------|--|

Whatcom County Code § 3.04 establishes a system of personnel management for standardized personnel policies and procedures, with intent to develop a high level of staff morale and ensure a safe work environment for employees and volunteers. This also tasks the County with development of written and standardized personnel policies and procedures, also referred to as the “Whatcom County Employee’s Personnel Handbook.” The handbook is both approved by the county executive and adopted by Council resolution (per § 3.04.040-M). The joint approval process for updating the employee handbook provides for multiple groups to weigh-in on proposed changes and help to finalize the approved standards.

## 3.2 PERSONNEL POLICIES

Clearly written and well-defined personnel policies are essential to effective county management and establishing a positive workforce culture. These policies establish consistent standards for employee conduct and responsibilities, while also providing managers with clear guidance for decision-making. Policies reduce ambiguity, ensure compliance with legal requirements, and promote equitable treatment across the workforce. By setting clear expectations and procedures, personnel policies not only

safeguard the organization against risk but also create a framework that supports organizational efficiency, professional development, and a positive workplace culture.

Regular evaluation and refinement of personnel policies further ensure that they remain aligned with evolving legal standards, workforce expectations, and organizational priorities. In an environment where municipalities must adapt to demographic shifts, changing workplace norms, and heightened public scrutiny, updating policies provides both resilience and flexibility.

During the review and analysis process, Human Resources has proactively worked to adjust and modify some personnel policies demonstrating that modifications that have been proposed and have actively occurred.

### WHATCOM COUNTY EMPLOYEE'S PERSONNEL HANDBOOK

| Code                              | Title(s)  |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| AD142100Z                         |   |
| Establishing Standards of Conduct | <p><b>Key Components</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In addition to job descriptions, employees are expected to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Report on time and prepared to work</li> <li>Reliably attend work and seek advance permission for absences</li> <li>Present an appropriate workplace appearance</li> <li>Interact with public, supervisor and coworkers in a professional manner</li> <li>Follow the Accident Prevention Program</li> <li>Follow departmental Standards for Operations</li> <li>Exhibit honesty</li> <li>Exercise care and diligence in performing duties</li> <li>Follow lawful work orders and instructions</li> <li>Properly handle County property and records in their care</li> </ul> </li> <li>This references the required orientation from supervisors to employees</li> <li>If an employee exhibits unacceptable behavior or conduct, the Department Head will work with Human Resources to evaluate potential disciplinary action.</li> </ul> <p><b>Observations &amp; Recommendations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This requires professional interactions, employee honesty, and following lawful work orders and instructions. There is more that could be added here to enhance not only legal, but also ethical compliance.</li> </ul> |

|                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
|                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This discusses handling circumstances when an employee exhibits unacceptable behavior without addressing how this applies to Department Heads, County Management or Human Resource staff in addressing this.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>AD142200Z</b>                  |   |
| <b>Taking Disciplinary Action</b> | <p><b>Key Components</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This references a Department Head being responsible to take steps toward disciplinary action if an employee exhibits unacceptable conduct, fails to follow policies or laws, or fails to correct performance with corrective action.</li> <li>The Human Resources Manager will guide the Department Head in complying with employees' legal rights and for consistency of practice across the organization.</li> <li>A statement that serious violations include the Department Head and Human Resource Manager consulting the Civil Deputy Prosecutor.</li> <li>The County may request Pre-Defense Legal services through the risk pool for specialized expertise and guidance.</li> <li>The Department Head or designee will gather facts and prepare documentation before interviewing the employee. If the incident may be criminal in nature, the Department Head will notify the Sheriff's Office.</li> <li>Department head may authorize administrative leave with pay and takes appropriate disciplinary action. Possible disciplinary actions include verbal reprimand, written reprimand, suspension, demotion, last chance agreement and termination.</li> </ul> <p><b>Observations &amp; Recommendations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff exemptions are included here, this is another area that needs to be clarified with regard to policy applicability and how disciplinary action should apply when involving positions of leadership, elected officials and others who have historically been exempt in the organization, contingent on the exempt group adopting specific policies for application and then adding clarifying language how this might work.</li> <li>There needs to be broader language that allows for application outside of a typical relationship between an employee and their department head. This can still be included but pathways that address more complex dynamics should be clear and included.</li> <li>The note of serious violations should include a clear definition of what this includes:</li> </ul> |



|                                      |   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
|                                      | <p><b><i>A serious Human Resource violation is any action, behavior, or omission that constitutes a breach of organizational policies, legal requirements, or ethical standards and that poses a substantial risk to the safety, dignity, rights, or well-being of employees or the integrity of the organization. While all complaints are important and will be addressed, violations classified as serious are those that may involve harassment, discrimination, retaliation, threats, violence, misuse of authority, significant breaches of confidentiality, or other conduct that undermines trust and creates a hostile or inequitable work environment.</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human Resources should be responsible for determining what data needs to be gathered and to work with the Department Director that has access to the information. A designee of a Department Director should not gather data about malfeasance of another employee without proper training.</li> <li>• Authorization of leave or disciplinary action should rest with department heads when they are not involved in the matter and are able to make the determination. In cases where the department head is a complainant, under review, or otherwise unable to act, the County Executive or Human Resources (as appropriate) should assume responsibility for authorizing administrative leave with pay and implementing appropriate disciplinary measures.</li> </ul> |
| <b>AD142300Z</b>                     |   |
| <p><b>Prohibiting Harassment</b></p> | <p><b>Key Components</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The description states this policy applies to all employees, volunteers, contractors, and others performing work for Whatcom County.</li> <li>• Defines sexual harassment as sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when such conduct impacts terms or conditions of employment.</li> <li>• Defines harassment as disrespectful conduct toward others base on age (over 40), sex, marital status, sexual orientation including gender identity or expression, race, creed, color, national origin, citizenship or immigration status, families with children families with children, religion, honorably discharged veteran or military status, or the presence of any sensory, mental or physical disability or the use of a trained dog guide or service animal by a disabled person, or any other characteristic protected by law. Examples of harassment may include derogatory comments, displays, pictures, drawings, cartoons, gestures, or jokes in the workplace.</li> <li>• The County promotes a respectful environment and prohibits harassment, including conduct that interferes with an employee's work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment.</li> </ul>   |

- Employees are encouraged to tell a harasser behavior is unwanted.
- Employees are required to report harassment to one of the following:
  - Employee's supervisor or Department Head
  - Supervisor of the accused person
  - Administrative Services (A.S.) Human Resources Manager or designee
- An employee who observes harassment of another employee is encouraged to report the incident.
- If an employee feels a complaint hasn't received adequate attention, or if harassment continues, the employee will report the matter again.
- The County prohibits retaliation and promptly responds to all complaints. This also describes a supervisor or Department Head who receives a complaint.
- Criminal activity is referred by the Department Head to the Prosecutor and Sheriff.

#### **Observations & Recommendations**

- The application of this policy has limitations, even if stating this applies to anyone performing work for the County, based on the County Charter and County Code.
- The definition of sexual harassment has a concluding statement of when such conduct impacts terms and conditions of employment. While this is definitely an important component, it doesn't and could be misread to need to apply to all instances of sexual harassment. Ontario County, New York, has a good example of this:
 

*Sexual harassment is a form of gender-based discrimination and is unlawful under federal and state law. It includes all forms of gender-based discrimination—such as gender role stereotyping and differential treatment based on gender—regardless of whether the conduct involves sexual contact, touching, or sexually suggestive behavior. The impact of the behavior, rather than the intent, determines whether harassment has occurred.*
- The included definition for harassment is robust and shows that harassment is an element that is not tolerated at the County. Providing examples that may cause this occur is also a helpful reference point.
- The statements of promoting a respectful environment and prohibiting harassment are good zero tolerance approaches, but more can be added here to demonstrate the County's commitment and the why behind this.

|   |   |
|---|---|
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple reporting options are outlined and present an opportunity to address a complaint based on a circumstance and who might be involved. However, anyone who can receive a report needs to have adequate training in how to appropriately process a complaint, including information to gather and transfer to Human Resources and with a defined timeframe to do so. It's also good that an employee is required to report an incident of harassment, further reiterating a zero tolerance within the organization.</li> <li>The responsibility should not be placed on employees to follow up on complaints, nor should an employee be encouraged to submit multiple and repeated complaints for the same issue, apart from recurrence, rather Human Resources should have a clearly established process, including follow-up from Human Resources as an expectation. Treating every complaint with significance but clarity in that the same processes, with information as appropriate, can be shared.</li> <li>More details are needed to define how the County is willing to ensure that retaliation is strictly prohibited and communicating the rights and protections of employees submitting a complaint.</li> <li>Clarification needs to be added that all supervisors cannot receive and handle a complaint, or the list of those who can receive and handle a complain, referenced in Section 4 of this policy, needs to be expanded to include supervisors.</li> <li>Questions of criminal activity should be processed through Human Resources to manage the entirety of the complaint, including addressing criminal implications with law enforcement and legal.</li> </ul> |
| <b>AD145100Z</b>                                    |   |
| <b>Promoting Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO)</b> | <p><b>Key Components</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This policy applies to terms, conditions, and privileges of employment for qualified applicants and employees in all County departments, except for positions that require females as an occupational qualification in Juvenile Dentition and Sheriff's Corrections facilities.</li> <li>The County Executive administers the personnel system following County Code and the Administrative Services Code.</li> <li>The Human Resources Manager administers the personnel system to afford equal employment opportunity, to attract and retain a qualified, diverse workforce and assure consistent practices across departments.</li> <li>Department heads will implement equal employment practices for all employees except positions not covered under the personnel system.</li> <li>Discrimination is prohibited based on protected class.</li> </ul>   |

|                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
|                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employees are encouraged to report discrimination to one of the following: an employee's supervisor or Department Head or Human Resources Manager or representative.</li> <li>• The County will investigate all reports of discrimination, promptly and thoroughly, and the Human Resources Manager serves as the EEO Compliance Officer.</li> </ul> <p><b>Observations &amp; Recommendations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is confusion in this section on applicability based on exemption status. This needs to be clarified.</li> <li>• Employees are encouraged but not required to make a complaint of discrimination. This should match a harassment complaint, either both are "encouraged" or should be listed as "will" report.</li> <li>• EEO reporting relationships should be the same as submitting a complaint for harassment.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>AD141050Z</b>                    |  |
| <b>Monitoring Work Expectations</b> | <p><b>Key Components</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This policy prescribes that a supervisor is required to provide training and orientation to each newly hired or transferred employee. This includes a supervisor communicating work priorities, efforts, and performance expectations. It includes the types of communication that may be used, including addressing standards of conduct.</li> <li>• Supervisors are required to monitor employee performance and to take corrective action when performance doesn't meet expectations, through coaching, counseling, training or a performance improvement plan.</li> </ul> <p><b>Observations &amp; Recommendations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This should be strengthened to require that the supervisor share and reiterate Standards of Conduct.</li> <li>• Specific policy violations should be listed as times when Human Resources must be engaged. Supervisors should clearly understand how and when to involve Human Resources in these instances.</li> <li>• This does provide good clarity that if an employee's performance fails to improve despite corrective action, the Supervisor will involve the Department Head and Human Resources Manager before taking any disciplinary action.</li> </ul> |

There are multiple identified gaps in the current policy language. The following outline includes some of the notable areas for improvement.

- Policies should explicitly outline the procedures for addressing violations or grievances when they involve a department director, an elected official, or Human Resources staff, as these situations create unique challenges and potential conflicts of interest. To preserve fairness and credibility, employees must have access to multiple reporting channels beyond the immediate supervisory chain, such as reporting to an independent HR designee, a county attorney's office, or the County Executive. Policies should also define the circumstances under which a third-party investigator is engaged to avoid any perception of bias and ensure impartiality.
- Specification is needed addressing employees who are undergoing a corrective action plan or disciplinary action. It is vital that personnel policies clearly outline the parameters and expectations for employees who are subject to a corrective action plan or disciplinary measures. Policies should specify the rights of employees to due process and union representation throughout the corrective or disciplinary process, ensuring consistency with collective bargaining agreements. Clear timelines for performance improvement, the nature of documentation required, and the role of supervisors in monitoring progress should be identified to reduce ambiguity and support accountability. Limitations on eligibility for promotions, transfers, or special assignments during an active corrective action plan should be included, while maintaining compliance with negotiated labor agreements. Additionally, the policy should provide guidance on the process for successfully completing a corrective plan and regaining full standing, including any follow-up evaluations to confirm sustained improvement.
- A conflict management policy is essential for ensuring that workplace disputes are handled consistently, fairly, and constructively. In municipal environments where collaboration among departments, elected officials, and staff is critical, the absence of a clear policy can allow conflicts to escalate, erode trust, and undermine productivity. By establishing defined procedures, roles, and responsibilities, such a policy ensures that issues are addressed early and impartially rather than through inconsistent or ad hoc approaches.
- Exit interviews, when established as a standard practice in policy, provide valuable insight into the employee experience and help identify recurring themes that may affect retention, morale, or organizational culture. By systematically collecting feedback from departing employees, management can better understand workplace challenges, uncover patterns related to supervision or policies, and highlight opportunities for improvement. The only reference to a required exit interview is in relation to an employee transferring between County Departments.

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**Recommendation 12.** *Integrate harassment and discrimination policies into broader administrative initiatives with clearly assigned responsibilities for training, resource management, and incident handling.*

**Recommendation 13.** *Clearly define prohibited behaviors including harassment, discrimination, bullying, retaliation, and bias within the policy to eliminate ambiguity.*

**Recommendation 14.** *Ensure policies are widely accessible by posting them on the intranet, in employee handbooks, newsletters, in physical spaces, onboarding packets, and public-facing websites.*

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### 3.3 POLICY APPLICATION

This analysis also considers the application of policies in circumstances of complaint processing and investigation, working through various personnel issues, including concerning behavior from employees determined to violate policies, and moving forward options for policy adjustments that more clearly and definitively address needed actions or appropriate approaches.

The internal processing of employee complaints lacks some clarity and consistency, which has led to uneven approaches in how matters are reviewed, investigated and communicated. Without a standardized framework, staff and supervisors may interpret policies differently or rely on informal practices, resulting in uncertainty for employees and potential inequities in how similar issues are handled. Inconsistent documentation further complicates the process, as the absence of uniform procedures limits the organization's ability to track outcomes, identify trends, and ensure accountability in the resolution of issues.

The lack of clarity also extends to who is responsible for initiating and reviewing requests, how decisions are documented, and where policies are applied in practice. In some cases, matters are routed through Human Resources, while in others they are handled at the department level or informally by supervisors. These variations create risks of miscommunication, duplication of effort, and even the perception of favoritism, all of which can undermine employee trust and the credibility of organizational processes.

To address these challenges, there is a strong need to establish clear standard operating procedures (SOPs) that define roles, responsibilities, and steps to be followed in processing employee concerns, particularly those involving harassment, discrimination, or other sensitive matters. SOPs should ensure consistency in documentation, investigation, and application of policy, regardless of department or individual involved. By institutionalizing these practices, the organization will not only strengthen compliance and transparency but also build confidence among employees that their concerns will be handled fairly, consistently, and with the seriousness they deserve. All individuals that are charged with receiving complaints should be fully trained upon appointment and with refresher training provided at least every two years.

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**Recommendation 15.** *Establish consistent reporting channels and ensure all staff who can receive complaints are fully trained to process a complaint.*

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### 3.4 POLICY COMMUNICATION, ACCESSIBILITY AND UNDERSTANDING

Frequent communication with employees about existing personnel policies is critical to ensuring that expectations are understood and consistently applied. Employees need to know not only what the policies say but also how they are to be used in practice. This is particularly important for policies

dealing with sensitive issues such as harassment, discrimination, and workplace conduct. Clear communication helps reinforce that the organization takes these issues seriously, provides avenues for reporting concerns without fear of retaliation, and demonstrates a commitment to fairness and accountability.

Equally important is providing employees with simple and accessible instructions on how to report non-compliance. In cases involving discrimination or harassment, staff must be confident that multiple reporting channels are available, that complaints will be reviewed impartially, and that the process will be transparent. Establishing routine reminders through regular communication ensures employees know how to access these reporting options whenever needed.

Tools such as employee newsletters, email updates, intranet postings, and regular staff meetings can be valuable in highlighting key policies and clarifying procedures. These tools allow organizations to reinforce expectations, spotlight updates, and ensure that critical policies remain visible and top of mind. Embedding policy highlights into routine communications also normalizes discussion around compliance and creates a culture of openness and accountability.

At the same time, policy clarity and communication have sometimes been complicated by exemptions or exceptions that create confusion. When policies are riddled with complex carve-outs, it becomes more difficult for employees to fully understand how they apply, leading to inconsistency in practice. Regular communication can help reduce this confusion but simplifying policies where possible and clearly explaining the reasons for any exemptions will be essential to building trust and ensuring equitable application across the organization.

While general orientation processes exist, harassment and discrimination policies are not consistently emphasized as part of onboarding for new employees and elected officials. As a result, some individuals may enter their roles without a full understanding of County policies, reporting procedures, or available resources. This gap increases the likelihood of policy violations, unreported incidents, and reduced confidence in organizational protections.

The County should implement mandatory onboarding training for all newly elected officials and new employees on harassment and discrimination policies, reporting mechanisms, and available resources. Providing this training at the outset of service or employment ensures that individuals are fully informed of their responsibilities, the County's standards of conduct, and the procedures in place to protect both staff and the public.

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**Recommendation 16.** *Provide regular reminders to employees and elected officials about the harassment policy, reporting procedures, and available resources.*

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### 3.5 POLICY REVIEW AND UPDATING

The County's recent efforts to update its personnel policies are commendable and demonstrate a clear commitment to improving organizational practices. These updates reflect recognition of the importance



of providing employees with relevant, current, and well-structured guidance on workplace expectations, rights, and responsibilities. By modernizing its policies, the County has taken meaningful steps toward strengthening clarity, consistency, and accountability in its personnel management.

At the same time, policies should not be viewed as static documents but as living tools that require regular review. It is recommended that the County implement a process for frequent evaluation of its personnel policies from an equity, application, and functional standpoint. This will allow the organization to identify gaps, address emerging issues, and make minor adjustments proactively, rather than waiting for challenges to arise.

Ongoing review and incremental refinement will also ensure that employees can rely on a stable and consistent policy environment. A regular cycle of evaluation reinforces fairness, maintains compliance with evolving laws and standards, and sustains employee trust in the organization's commitment to transparency and equity. By adopting this approach, the County can balance flexibility with stability and create personnel policies that remain both current and dependable.

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***Recommendation 17. Establish a formal process to review and update policies annually, incorporating legal updates and evolving best practices.***

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## 4. WORKFORCE TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT

This chapter contains findings and recommendations related to the training program(s) on offer that are related to handling and mitigating workplace issues and concerns. This includes training on workplace misconduct such as harassment and discrimination, as well as training specific to supervisory and leadership personnel on these topics.

### 4.1 EXISTING TRAINING PROGRAMS

The project team was provided with examples of the types of training offered by the County in the areas of preventing and responding to workplace issues such as harassment and discrimination. The project team reviewed current (or recently offered) training materials and developed summaries of specific courses and/or modules on offer below:

#### Training Item/Document

#### Summary Description

#### EMPLOYEE WIDE

These programs are offered to all County personnel regardless of role.

##### Onboarding Portal

Employees are provided with a series of tasks they are required to engage in as part of their orientation process. This is accessed through NeoGov. Specific trainings/forms relevant to this study are listed in the following column.

- Prohibiting Harassment Acknowledgement Form.
- Respectful Workplace Training Video (1 Hour)
- Sexual Harassment Training Video (1 Hour)
- Review of Key Employment Policies.
- Review of Workplace Safety Information.

##### Building a Respectful Work Environment

Presentation from an external HR consultant. Aims to educate staff on creating a respectful work environment that does not include discrimination and harassment.

- Defines and identifies workplace harassment, including different forms of harassment as well as what is not considered harassment.
- Defines retaliation, discusses personal conduct and responsibilities, and provides a high-level overview of how to report complaints.

### **Inclusive, Respectful, and Safe Workplace Training**

- Letter of Agreement discussing three-hour training sessions focused on workplace culture to be offered.

## **SUPERVISORY TRAINING**

These programs are offered to those who directly supervise staff or are in other leadership positions.

### **Leadership Training**

The project team was provided with attendance records for various leadership training webinars (on demand and live). The types of trainings (relevant to the areas of this study's focus) are summarized in the next column:

- Conducting Personnel Investigations.
- Preventing Harassment and Discrimination in the Workplace.
- The Supervisor's Role in Preventing and Minimizing Liability for Discrimination, Harassment and Retaliation

### **Supervisors' Legal Landmines**

Presentation for County supervisors as part of *Whatcom County Supervisor Tune Ups*. Focused on training supervisors to mitigate issues that could negatively impact the County from a liability perspective.

- Discusses supervisory liability related to workplace issues and provides an overview of HR "Law".
- Highlights recurring actions by supervisors that are considered problematic.
- Provides various best practices related to retaliation, HR practices, and ensuring that decisions related to employment decisions are well documented.

### **Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) and Unconscious Bias Required Leadership Training**

- Flyer advertising four sessions focused on DEIB and Unconscious Bias. Hosted by a third-party consultant.

### **The Supervisor's Role in Preventing and Minimizing Liability for Discrimination, Harassment and Retaliation**

Presentation slides accompanying a webinar available to supervisory staff.

- Provides an overview of discrimination and harassment law fundamentals and how to prevent these issues.
- Defines protected activity and retaliation in the workplace.

- Provides best practices related to creating a respectful work environment.

## HUMAN RESOURCES TRAINING

These materials are applicable to Human Resources staff.

### Atana eBooks

White papers/marketing material developed by a third-party consultant. Each provides an overview and practices of creating a respectful workplace and preventing sexual harassment, respectively.

- Defines the importance of respect in the workplace. Provides key elements towards creating a healthy workplace culture.
- Defines the problems, roadblocks, and solutions to preventing sexual harassment in the workplace.
- Training programs from this consultant were also acquired.

### Conducting Lawful HR Investigations

Multiple presentations/notes related to HR training on conducting personnel investigations.

- Notes from a seminar focused on training HR staff on conducting investigations into workplace conduct in a legal and compliant manner.
- Slides providing an overview of a presentation also focused on performing personnel investigations.
- Flyer advertising a presentation towards preventing poor workplace culture, avoiding legal landmines, and performing comprehensive internal investigations.

### Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging – Why It Matters

Third-party training focused on discussing the importance of DEIB in the workplace.

- Defines DEIB as well as the differences between equity and equality. Makes the business case for DEIB in the workplace.
- Discusses the importance of respective/perspective, defines implicit bias, and provides historical context for issues related to DEIB in the County.

- Provides practices and steps related to implementing DEIB initiatives in Whatcom County.

As shown by the table, the County has offered a varied series of trainings on topics pertinent to workplace issues and overall organizational culture. All new County personnel are required to complete targeted training modules as part of their onboarding program, via the use of NeoGov for digital learning. In addition, there are specific supervisory modules as well as training for HR staff on how to handle workplace issues and process complaints.

## 4.2 OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPAND

While the County has demonstrated providing a broad array of training opportunities for its staff, there are opportunities to broaden these efforts further. Based on our review of the training materials on offer, there are several key improvement opportunities that the County should consider implementing as part of its approach for training on the general topic of workplace culture/concerns.

The County utilizes NeoGov to facilitate online training, most prevalently during the onboarding process. This is continuing to be expanded, with several additional course offerings and functionalities to be rolled out in the upcoming months/years. NeoGov Perform, which is the learning management tool used by the County, will allow the County to assign specific modules to staff, assign recurring training, track completion rates, and tie training to its overall performance framework.

The project team was provided the ability to review the upcoming version of this system via access to a test environment. It was noted that the updated training environment comes with a large number of pre-built and custom learning modules that employees will have access to. One-off learning events appear to also be advertised through this system. Training can be marked as required, and this functionality does appear to be configurable for different types of positions and roles (e.g., supervisor-specific courses). While the LMS contains training on a variety of topics ranging from financial principles to customer service, modules related to maintaining a respectful workplace, promoting diversity, and handling complaints appear to be included as course offerings.

In general, this approach marks a positive step towards improving the consistency and accountability behind training on the topics of workplace harassment, discrimination, and other related items. The County should continue to implement this expanded set of functionalities and incorporate the use of the LMS into standard administrative procedures related to training on the aforementioned topics. This system can and should be used as a centralized location for tracking records related to training, and content offerings should continue to be expanded based on the needs of the County.

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**Recommendation 18:** *Continue with the implementation of NeoGov Learn. Utilize this system to track training completion rates for employees. Continue to expand training opportunities as needed.*

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## 4.2.1 ONBOARDING

A key strength of the County is its recent transition to utilizing an online platform (NeoGov) to ensure that all new employees are provided with training on topics such as harassment, discrimination, and other workplace issues. Staff are provided with specific modules (as shown in the table in section 4.1) that they must complete in order to proceed with their employment with the County.

One noted deficiency in these courses is that they are pre-built modules provided by NeoGov. As a result, onboarding training omits County-specific policies and procedures. An opportunity to improve the quality of this required training would be to implement custom-built modules that directly reference the County's administrative policies related to these topics (e.g., harassment, discrimination, nepotism, conflict, etc.) as well as the defined procedures on how to report and handle issues related to them. These trainings should be updated and refreshed based on any changes to County policies or procedures.

Finally, there is an opportunity to provide training in a variety of formats to accommodate employee preferences, which can lead to more positive training outcomes. As noted previously, the County has offered several in-person trainings on these topics on occasion. However, it appears as though onboarding training is exclusively facilitated online. There should be opportunities for new personnel to engage in non-digital training mediums that allow for increased interactivity (e.g., Q&A sessions). Regular in-person training sessions facilitated by staff involved in handling complaints (e.g., HR or PA Office staff) should be considered for implementation. This sentiment was reflected in the survey: 35 individuals noted a desire for more in-person and/or interactive training approaches.

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**Recommendation 19:** *Adjust onboarding training to include courses specific to administrative policies and procedures related to handling and reporting workplace concerns.*

**Recommendation 20:** *Consider alternative formats for training (i.e., in-person events) that occur on a set basis.*

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## 4.2.2 ONGOING TRAINING

There does not appear to be any ongoing training on the topics of workplace incivility, harassment, discrimination, etc., at least on a consistent basis. A review of online training materials did not appear to show any modules being established as recurring on a set basis (e.g., annually). Training is currently only required during the onboarding period. This was further reflected in how respondents rated the frequency of training in the online survey:

| How often do you receive training? | %   |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| Annually                           | 22% |
| Every 2–3 years                    | 27% |
| Only during onboarding             | 21% |

| How often do you receive training? | %   |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| Never                              | 5%  |
| Other (please specify)             | 25% |

A total of 49% of respondents indicated that they had received training on either an annual, biannual, or triannual basis on the topics of preventing harassment, reporting complaints, and managing conflict. Other respondents indicated that they had only received this training during onboarding, never received training, or noted that they had received inconsistent training on these topics during their time with the County. Additionally, 76 respondents noted that the biggest improvement that could be made for the County's training on these topics would be to offer it more frequently – the most common suggestion for improvement among all respondents.

It is worth noting that with the advent of NeoGov Perform, employees will have access to recurring training opportunities via the online system. It is important, however, that the County establish required recurring training on the topics pertinent to this study (e.g., reporting harassment, preventing workplace discrimination, etc.). General industry practices suggest refresher training on these topics be provided no less frequently than once every three years. As with the training provided during onboarding, an employee's completion of this training should be tied to the overarching performance management approach (e.g., completion of this training should be a metric utilized as part of employee evaluations).

Effective training on policies require not only coverage during onboarding but provides periodic refresher training during employment. This is especially critical for significant policies such as harassment. All employees should be required to attend refresher training on these policies at least every two years.

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**Recommendation 21:** *Require training on respectful workplace topics including harassment (as well as procedures for handling workplace concerns) to be provided to all staff regularly at least every two years.*

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### 4.2.3 SUPERVISORY TRAINING

While the County does provide opportunities for its supervisors to train on topics specific to their role (e.g., conducting investigations, potential sources of liability, etc.), it was apparent that there is no requirement for supervisors to engage in these courses. The County should implement a practice that requires all new supervisors to complete training related to mitigating and handling workplace issues within three months of beginning their position as a supervisor.

The NeoGov LMS already contains several supervisor-specific trainings. These should be issued as required courses for all new and existing supervisory staff. As with employee-wide training, these should also be provided on a recurring basis (at least every two years) to refresh skills and train on new policies and procedures (upon implementation of the policy). Supervisory training should focus on providing those with direct reports with a comprehensive knowledge of procedures related to receiving and

handling workplace concerns, understanding who/when to notify HR or another investigative body, and how to mitigate workplace issues through fostering a positive workplace culture.

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**Recommendation 22:** *Implement required training for all new and existing supervisors that must be complete. For new supervisors, this training should be provided within three months of appointment. Provide refresher courses on this training regularly or in response to updates to policies or procedures.*

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#### 4.2.4 ADDITIONAL TRAINING EXPANSION OPPORTUNITIES

There are also opportunities to broaden the training content on offer or reinforce specific concepts that staff may have less familiarity with. At the initiation of this study, the County did not appear to offer training courses on conflict resolution, abuse of power, or bystander intervention. Two of these concepts (conflict resolution and bystander intervention) do appear to be a part of the new NeoGov course catalog, however. Regardless, survey results showed varying degrees of participation in specific trainings:

| Have you received training on:            | Yes | No  |
|---|-----|-----|
| Preventing workplace harassment           | 95% | 5%  |
| Reporting harassment complaints           | 76% | 24% |
| Conflict management or dispute resolution | 58% | 42% |

The table shows that a significant number of staff (95%) had received training on preventing harassment. However, a smaller percentage had received training on how to report complaints (76%), and even fewer had received conflict management training (58%). This represents a need for the County to broaden access to these topics. Additional topics for training that were suggested by staff included training specific to generating a positive workplace culture, addressing interdepartmental conflicts, and diversity-focused training.

A final suggested improvement would be to develop a standardized feedback mechanism for training. The County should provide feedback forms following each training program (ideally through digital means) that ask participants to rate the quality of the training's content, participants' confidence in the training's content, and the applicability of the training to their daily role. Feedback should be leveraged by the County to ensure that current training offerings are meeting staff's expectations, and adjustments to training modules should be made in response to this feedback. Additionally, employee engagement surveys should be used by the County to identify new training offerings. This could also be accomplished through direct requests from staff – NeoGov does appear to have a function that allows users to submit requests for training to the County directly. Implementing this approach generally ensures that training offerings are effective and that the County continues to be proactive in addressing training needs identified by employees.

**Recommendation 23:** *Broaden the scope and content of training offerings, particularly in the areas of harassment prevention, reporting complaints and conflict management.*

**Recommendation 24:** *Implement a means of capturing feedback from participants related to the quality of current training offerings and develop a method of proactively identifying new training needs.*

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## APPENDIX A: CURRENT STATE ASSESSMENT

Whatcom County, with a 2020 population of 226,847, is in the northwestern corner of the State of Washington and contains 2,109 square miles. Whatcom County is a "home rule charter" county - one of seven in the state. The adopted charter establishes a separation between legislative and administrative functions. The County Council, consisting of seven members elected on a non-partisan basis, is responsible for legislative responsibilities. A full-time, elected county executive oversees administrative functions. In addition to these positions, several other government functions are overseen by elected officials, including the Assessor, Auditor, Prosecuting Attorney, Sheriff, and Treasurer. Other departments are overseen by department heads appointed by the County Executive. Whatcom County has approximately 1,094 employees with a 2025 budget of \$364.8 Million.

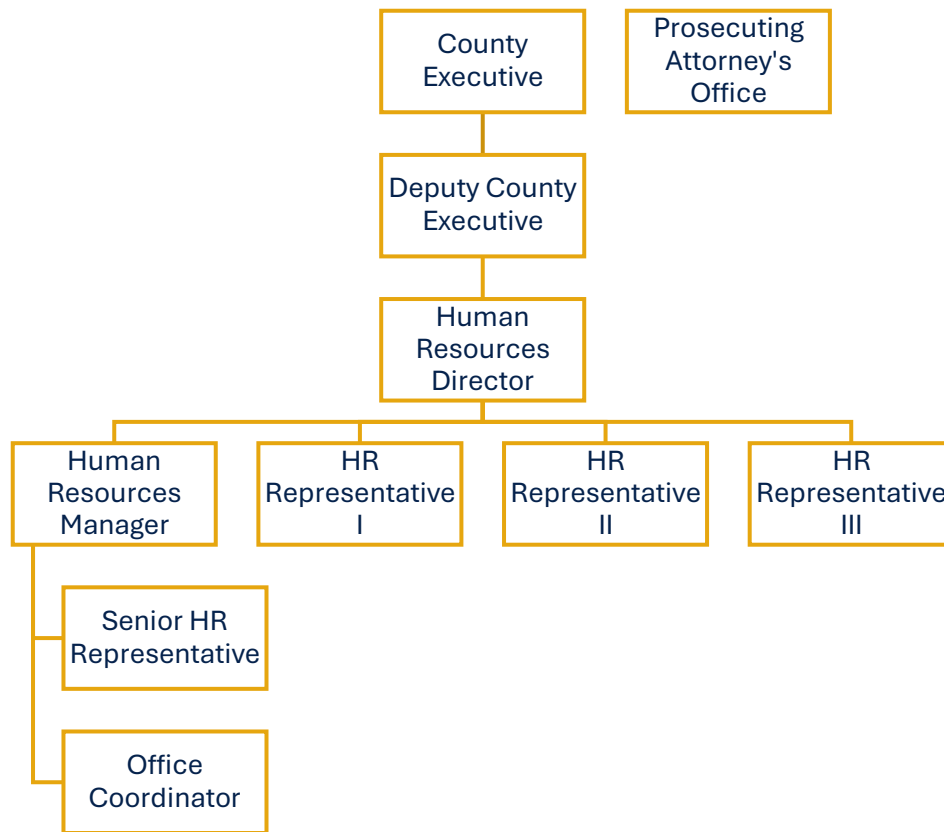
The Whatcom Human Resources Division sits within the Administrative Services Department which is an internal services department that provides a variety of support services such as maintenance and custodial service, accounting, payroll, employee benefits and information systems supports to county departments and agencies. The Administrative Services Department has 89.5 FTEs with a 2025 budget of \$25.3 Million.

The Human Resources Division provides leadership in attracting and retaining quality staff for effective service to the citizens of Whatcom County. The Human Resources Division has 9 FTEs and the total 2025 budget for the Human Resources Division is \$4,359,508.

### A1.1 ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The following chart outlines the organizational placement and structure of the Human Resources Department. Presently, complaints may be received by anyone within Human Resources or an immediate supervisor. All complaints are then investigated by the Human Resources Director or assigned to others to complete. Depending on the severity of a complaint received, the Prosecuting Attorney's Office may be involved in a complaint investigation and may engage with outside counsel, as assigned by the risk pool, for specialized expertise and guidance. While the Attorney's Office is organizationally part of the County, it functions independently under the direction of the elected Prosecuting Attorney.

**TABLE 1: WHATCOM COUNTY HUMAN RESOURCES  
DEPARTMENT ORGANIZATIONAL CHART**



There are nine full-time positions budgeted within the Human Resources Department. The Department recently made efforts to recruit a temporary Risk and Labor Relations Manager position in early 2025. This recruitment, however, was unsuccessful and no one was selected to fill the temporary role.

The following table outlines current staff positions from the Department, summarizing each role's primary duties. These summaries reflect core responsibilities and are not intended to be full job descriptions.

| Position Title                  | Authorized Positions | Key Roles and Responsibilities   |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|--|
| <b>Human Resources Director</b> | 1                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Directs county-wide Human Resources operations, including strategic planning, organizational development, and policy implementation to align with county goals and regulatory compliance.</li> <li>Leads collective bargaining efforts, negotiates contracts, manages labor disputes and grievances, and ensures contract compliance in coordination with legal counsel.</li> </ul> |

| Position Title                               | Authorized Positions | Key Roles and Responsibilities   |
|--|----------------------|--|
|  |                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Oversees recruitment, classification, compensation, benefits, safety training, and employee records in accordance with legal standards and regulations. Supervises staff, sets performance standards, conducts evaluations and manages training needs.</li> <li>Prepares and manages Department budgets, negotiates service contracts, and addresses operational costs.</li> <li>Collaborates with executive leadership and departments to resolve complex issues and represents the County at Council meetings, public forums, and interagency functions.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Human Resources Manager</b>               | 1                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Oversees daily HR functions including recruitment, benefits, labor relations, and training.</li> <li>Supervises designated staff. Manages labor negotiations, disciplinary processes, grievances, and confidential investigations.</li> <li>Serves as Alternate Risk Manager and Safety Officer; manages workers' compensation, loss control, risk pool liaison activities, and workplace safety programs.</li> <li>Advises on policy and legal matters, supports compliance with collective bargaining agreements and employment law, manages budget components, and oversees administrative contracts.</li> <li>Develops and delivers organizational training, responds to complex public inquiries and records requests, and represents the County and Human Resources in public forums and Council settings.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Senior Human Resources Representative</b> | 1                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advises management on disciplinary actions, participates in negotiations and grievance processes, and represents the County in arbitration, mediation, and hearings.</li> <li>Administers pay plans, conducts job analyses and salary surveys, reviews job descriptions and payroll records for accuracy and compliance, and makes recommendations on benefit plans and reclassifications.</li> <li>Interprets and ensures compliance with employment laws, labor agreements, and County policies. Develops</li> </ul>  |

| Position Title                           | Authorized Positions | Key Roles and Responsibilities  |
|--|----------------------|---|
|  |                      | <p>and updates policies, procedures, and practices, and conducts sensitive investigations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guides departments in developing fair and legally compliant hiring processes, including job descriptions, interview tools, supplemental questions, and assessments.</li> <li>Leads initiatives from planning to execution, conducts research and analysis to support organization-wide improvements. Manages complex data, generates reports and recommends improvements.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Human Resources Representative I</b>  | 1                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Performs professional and technical work across multiple areas including recruitment, benefits, compensation, leave administration, and employee relations. Assists with training delivery, gathers labor negotiation data, and supports grievance response efforts.</li> <li>Assists departments with hiring processes, develops interview tools, ensures non-discriminatory practices, and supports compliance with employment laws and collective bargaining agreements.</li> <li>Conducts basic research, gathers data, and provides preliminary analysis to support decision-making, audits, investigations, and policy development. Inputs and maintains data, generates reports, and participates in HR projects to improve systems, resolve issues, and support organizational goals.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Human Resources Representative II</b> | 3                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Performs professional and technical work across multiple HR functions, including project coordination, policy development, and compliance with labor laws and collective bargaining agreements.</li> <li>Supports recruitment and selection by developing application materials, advising departments, attending job fairs, and ensuring equitable, non-discriminatory practices.</li> <li>Conducts research, audits, and investigations and prepares analyses and recommendations on employment-related issues.</li> </ul>  |

| Position Title                            | Authorized Positions | Key Roles and Responsibilities  |
|---|----------------------|---|
|   |                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Administers benefits and leave programs, including coordination with third-party administrators and support for employee enrollment and issue resolution.</li> <li>• Manages job classification and compensation functions by analyzing positions, preparing job descriptions, and conducting salary and benefit surveys.</li> <li>• Supports labor relations by gathering data for negotiations and grievances, advising on discipline and performance issues, and representing the County at hearings and mediation sessions.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Human Resources Representative III</b> | 1                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Performs a wide range of professional HR functions, independently planning and executing tasks in recruitment, benefits, employee relations, and compliance with laws and labor agreements.</li> <li>• Serves as a resource to departments by advising on complex hiring processes, developing interview tools, and ensuring equitable and non-discriminatory practices.</li> <li>• Leads projects across functional areas, developing implementation plans, coordinating stakeholders, and completing technical initiatives.</li> <li>• Conducts research, investigations, and audits; prepares comprehensive reports and recommendations related to employment practices, policy interpretation, and legal compliance.</li> <li>• Manages benefit and leave programs, job classifications, compensation analyses, and HRIS functions.</li> <li>• Participates in labor relations and negotiations, provides support on grievances and disciplinary actions, serves as a mediator, and represents the County in hearings and formal proceedings.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Office Coordinator</b>                 | 1                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serves as the first point of contact for internal and external customers, providing confidential administrative support and responding to sensitive inquiries within scope and authority.</li> <li>• Assists with recruitment activities including job postings, applicant tracking, testing coordination, and use of online tools to support recruitment efficiency.</li> </ul>   |

| Position Title | Authorized Positions | Key Roles and Responsibilities  |
|----------------|----------------------|---|
|                |                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Performs data entry and reporting in the Human Resources Information System (HRIS), manages benefit enrollment for new hires, and audits enrollment data as needed.</li> <li>Coordinates logistics and maintains records for County-sponsored training, events, and Human Resources files, including personnel and administrative documentation.</li> <li>Processes financial and administrative tasks such as accounts payable/receivable, purchase requisitions, and contract compliance tracking.</li> <li>Contributes to web content updates, collaborates on process improvements, maintains a professional reception area, and trains temporary or support staff as assigned.</li> </ul> |

## A-1.2 POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

This chapter presents a summary of the current policies and procedures pertaining to the establishment and maintenance of a respectful workplace environment and healthy employee relations. The documentation is to identify the current policies and procedures in place that will be analyzed and evaluated during this study.

The scope of this study encompasses a comprehensive evaluation of Whatcom County Human Resources policies and procedures related to preventing workplace harassment, processing harassment complaints, and the separation of employees facing harassment allegations. Additionally, this also includes policies relative to identifying and mitigating personnel issues, conflict management, disciplinary processes, complaint disputes and resolutions, termination, resignation, etc.

An important point to note is that County Code exempts some positions from Chapter 3.04 of the Whatcom County Code, and the personnel system established under Article 7 of the County Charter. However, they remain subject to applicable state and federal laws, including those that prohibit harassment, discrimination, and other unlawful conduct. The following excerpt from the County Code, Chapter 3.04 summarizes the exemptions:

### 3.04.020 Scope.

This chapter applies in its entirety to all county positions except:

- A. Those positions exempted from coverage by the County Charter;
- B. Employees of the sheriff's department in all matters of selection, appointment, promotion, transfer, reinstatement, demotion, discipline, suspension and discharge under the Whatcom County civil service commission rules and regulations;

- C. The court reporters of the superior court, and any other employee of the court identified by the court to be exempt from this chapter;
- D. Deputy prosecuting attorneys;
- E. Any employees of the district court identify by the court to be exempt from this chapter;
- F. Multi-agency groups who have no contractual agreement with the county for personnel services;
- G. Those employees serving in temporary, seasonal, or part-time county positions (Ord. 93-042 Exh. B; formerly 2.57.030. Ord. 82-36 § 2 (part)).

Based on input received from the Whatcom County Prosecuting Attorney's Office, the following summarizes our understanding of the current status of separate policies and procedure manuals for the exempt offices:

- **Sheriff's Office:** The Sheriff's Department has publicly available policies, accessible here: <https://www.whatcomcounty.us/4094/Policies-and-Procedures>.
- **Prosecutor's Office:** The office is currently in the process of formalizing and adopting written personnel policies.
- **Courts, including court reporters:** To our knowledge, the courts do not currently have their own standalone written personnel policies.
- **Treasurer, Auditor, and Assessor:** Although not formally adopted, the Treasurer, Auditor and Assessor's Offices do not have separate HR policies and procedures for the areas under review and currently comply with the standards and procedures that are utilized by Human Resources. The Assessor's Office has adopted Social Media Use and Staff Owned Property policies that are also in effect.
- **County Council:** The County Council Office has stated, through its Council Office Policies document, compliance with County policies available on Inside Whatcom and within the Employee Handbook.

The following points summarize the key regulations, policies and procedures are currently in place at Whatcom County and which will be evaluated in this study:

1. **County Charter Article 7:** Outlines that the County Council shall establish and maintain a personnel system for the County, with stated exemptions. Executive is to administer the personnel system of the County in accordance with personnel rules adopted by the County Council. (*Revised 2005*)
2. **Whatcom County Code § 3.04:** Establishes a centralized system of personnel management for standardized personnel policies and procedures, to develop a high level of staff morale and ensure a safe work environment for employees and volunteers, with stated limitations of applicability for various County groups. This also tasks the County with development of written and standardized personnel policies and procedures, also referred to as the "Whatcom County Employee's Personnel Handbook." The handbook is both approved by the county executive and adopted by Council resolution (per § 3.04.040-M). (*Revised 1993*)

3. **The Whatcom County Employee's Personnel Handbook:** Provides a detailed outline of all established and adopted personnel policies, including prohibiting harassment. There is a stated requirement for all new employees to take Preventing Harassment training.
- a. **Establishing Standards of Conduct (AD142100Z):** Requires interactions with the public, supervisor, and coworkers to be in a courteous and professional manner. Supervisors are required to provide orientation of these standards of conduct to each newly hired employee. *(Revised August 2, 2021)*
  - b. **Taking Disciplinary Action (AD142200Z):** Outlines steps that the Department Head takes in coordination with Human Resources to take disciplinary action. For serious violations, this includes work with Civil Deputy Prosecutor and possibly requesting Pre-Defense Legal services through the Washington Counties Risk Pool. The Department Head thoroughly investigates prior to action and may authorize administrative leave with pay while the matter is being investigated. After considering evidence, testimony, and expert advice, the Department Head will determine the appropriate level of discipline. *(Revised August 2, 2021)*
  - c. **Prohibiting Harassment (AD142300Z):** defines sexual harassment and harassment, describing that the County promotes a respectful work environment, prohibits harassment, encourages employees to tell a harasser that their behavior is unwanted. This policy outlines those designated to receive reports of harassment, prohibits retaliation, and requires a prompt County response to all harassment complaints. Accused parties are required to immediately cease inappropriate behavior and to cooperate with any investigative efforts. Confidentiality is also addressed as a requirement. *(Revised April 11, 2022)*
  - d. **Promoting Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) (AD145100Z):** Addresses the County Executive administering the personnel system, establishing the Human Resources Manager to administer this system and to afford equal employment opportunity through standardized employment practices. This prohibits discrimination based on protected class. A reporting relationship is established between an employee, their supervisor or Department Head or the Human Resources Manager. This also prohibits retaliation and establishes that all reports of discrimination be promptly and thoroughly investigated. The Department Head acts based on investigative findings and the Human Resource Manager serves as EEO Compliance Officer. *(Revised April 11, 2022)*
  - e. **Separating from Employment (AD145800Z):** Addresses employees who provide written notice of resignation or retirement. Upon notice, the Department Head confirms the separation and coordinates with Human Resources to address needed actions to remove the employee from current systems and regain County-owned equipment. The Department Head may authorize one month of extra benefits based on funding availability. *(Revised January 4, 2018)*
  - f. **Taking Disciplinary Action (AD142200Z):** Applies to regular employees in all departments except the Sheriff's Office. The Department Head will begin steps toward disciplinary action if an employee exhibits unacceptable conduct, fails to follow policies or laws, or fails to correct performance despite corrective action. The Human Resources Manager and Department Head



coordinate to administer disciplinary action, with the Department Head ultimately taking the appropriate Disciplinary Action from verbal reprimand to termination. *(Revised August 2, 2021)*

- g. **Reporting & Resolving Complaints (AD 113100Z):** Encourages employees to bring forward complaints or concerns to their supervisor or Department Head. This references the policies specific to Preventing Harassment and Reporting Discrimination. It describes that Supervisors will promptly collect information about the complaint or concern and seek to resolve it within their authority. The Supervisor is also required to immediately engage the Department Head and Human Resources for concerns that may involve harassment, discrimination, workplace violence, or violations of a collective bargaining agreement. *(Revised August 2, 2021)*

### A-1.3 TRAINING

The project team was provided with various training materials as part of initial data collection requests. The following sections of this chapter summarize the materials available in three categories:

- **Employee Training:** Materials that are available to all County personnel, including new hire orientation and onboarding materials.
- **Supervisory Training:** Materials that are available to those in supervisory or managerial positions.
- **Human Resources Training:** Materials that are available to staff within the Human Resources department.

The materials included in this chapter are focused on the overarching concepts identified as a focus for this study (e.g., how to address workplace issues such as harassment and discrimination). For each category of personnel (employee, supervisory, HR), a table containing the name and a high-level description of each training item has been developed in each of the following sections.

As per County policy, all new employees are required to attend training on maintaining a respectful workplace and to participate in sexual harassment training as part of their new hire orientation process. Various ad-hoc trainings are offered to employees as well as those in dedicated supervisory/managerial positions.

### EMPLOYEE TRAINING

The following training materials are available to all employees Countywide.

| Training Item/Document | Summary Description  |
|------------------------|--|
| Onboarding Portal      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prohibiting Harassment Acknowledgement Form.</li> </ul> |

Employees are provided with a series of tasks they are required to engage in as part of their orientation process. This is accessed through NeoGov. Specific trainings/forms relevant to this study are listed in the following column.

- Respectful Workplace Training Video (1 Hour)
- Sexual Harassment Training Video (1 Hour)
- Review of Key Employment Policies.
- Review of Workplace Safety Information.

#### **Building a Respectful Work Environment**

Presentation from an external HR consultant. Aims to educate staff on creating a respectful work environment that does not include discrimination and harassment.

- Defines and identifies workplace harassment, including different forms of harassment as well as what is not considered harassment.
- Defines retaliation, discusses personal conduct and responsibilities, and provides a high-level overview of how to report complaints.

#### **Inclusive, Respectful, and Safe Workplace Training**

- Letter of Agreement discussing three-hour training sessions focused on workplace culture to be offered.

## **4.2 SUPERVISOR TRAINING**

The breakdown of training specific to those in supervisory/managerial positions is as follows:

### **Training Item/Document**

### **Summary Description**

#### **Leadership Training**

The project team was provided with attendance records for various leadership training webinars (on demand and live). The types of trainings (relevant to the areas of this study's focus) are summarized in the next column:

- Conducting Personnel Investigations.
- Preventing Harassment and Discrimination in the Workplace.
- The Supervisor's Role in Preventing and Minimizing Liability for Discrimination, Harassment and Retaliation

#### **Supervisors' Legal Landmines**

Presentation for County supervisors as part of *Whatcom County Supervisor Tune Ups*. Focused

- Discusses supervisory liability related to workplace issues and provides an overview of HR "Law".

on training supervisors to mitigate issues that could negatively impact the County from a liability perspective.

- Highlights recurring actions by supervisors that are considered problematic.
- Provides various best practices related to retaliation, HR practices, and ensuring that decisions related to employment decisions are well documented.

#### **Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) and Unconscious Bias Required Leadership Training**

- Flyer advertising four sessions focused on DEIB and Unconscious Bias. Hosted by a third-party consultant.

#### **The Supervisor's Role in Preventing and Minimizing Liability for Discrimination, Harassment and Retaliation**

Presentation slides accompanying a webinar available to supervisory staff.

- Provides an overview of discrimination and harassment law fundamentals and how to prevent these issues.
- Defines protected activity and retaliation in the workplace.
- Provides best practices related to creating a respectful work environment.

## **HUMAN RESOURCES TRAINING**

The breakdown of training provided to HR staff is as follows:

### **Training Item/Document**

### **Summary Description**

#### **Atana eBooks**

White papers/marketing material developed by a third-party consultant. Each provides an overview and practices of creating a respectful workplace and preventing sexual harassment, respectively.

- Defines the importance of respect in the workplace. Provides key elements towards creating a healthy workplace culture.
- Defines the problems, roadblocks, and solutions to preventing sexual harassment in the workplace.
- Training programs from this consultant were also acquired.

### **Conducting Lawful HR Investigations**

Multiple presentations/notes related to HR training on conducting personnel investigations.

- Notes from a seminar focused on training HR staff on conducting investigations into workplace conduct in a legal and compliant manner.
- Slides providing an overview of a presentation also focused on performing personnel investigations.
- Flyer advertising a presentation towards preventing poor workplace culture, avoiding legal landmines, and performing comprehensive internal investigations.

### **Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging – Why It Matters**

Third-party training focused on discussing the importance of DEIB in the workplace.

- Defines DEIB as well as the differences between equity and equality. Makes the business case for DEIB in the workplace.
- Discusses the importance of respective/perspective, defines implicit bias, and provides historical context for issues related to DEIB in the County.
- Provides practices and steps related to implementing DEIB initiatives in Whatcom County.

## **ATTENDANCE FOR ON-DEMAND/LIVE TRAININGS**

The project team was provided with attendance numbers for webinars provided by Summit Law, a third-party consultant. These trainings were provided for the year 2022:

| Training Title   | Attendance |
|--|------------|
| [ON DEMAND] Basics of Bargaining for Public Employers (60 minutes)   | 3          |
| [ON DEMAND] Basics of Just Cause for Public Sector Supervisors (90 minutes)  | 3          |
| [ON DEMAND] Conducting Personnel Investigations (90 minutes)   | 2          |
| [ON DEMAND] Effective Performance Evaluations (60 minutes)   | 2          |
| [ON DEMAND] Preventing Harassment and Discrimination in the Workplace (75 minutes)                                       | 54         |
| [ON DEMAND] The Attendance Maze – A Primer on Protected Leave (90 minutes)   | 3          |
| [ON DEMAND] The Supervisor's Role in Preventing and Minimizing Liability for Discrimination, Harassment and Retaliation  | 2          |
| [ON DEMAND] Wage and Hour Law Fundamentals (90 minutes)  | 2          |
| Basics of Bargaining for Public Employers (60 minutes)   | 8          |
| Basics of Just Cause for Public Sector Supervisors (90 minutes)  | 22         |
| Conducting Personnel Investigations (90 minutes)   | 8          |
| Effective Performance Evaluations (60 minutes)   | 9          |
| Preventing Harassment and Discrimination in the Workplace (75 minutes)   | 31         |
| The Attendance Maze – A Primer on Protected Leave (90 minutes)   | 16         |
| The Supervisor's Role in Preventing and Minimizing Liability for Discrimination, Harassment and Retaliation (90 minutes) | 18         |
| Wage and Hour Law Fundamentals (90 minutes)  | 13         |
| <b>Grand Total</b>   | <b>196</b> |

## A-1.4 INVESTIGATIONS

The Department shared a combination of 19 summaries of complaints and investigations, some of which contained multiple complaints with a total of 25 items raised. These were either investigated by the Human Resources Department or, depending on the complexity of the complaint, a third-party external investigator. The documentation varied with the files from summaries that included an overview briefing note, the formal complaint, intake form, full investigation notes and a report with findings, to an overview briefing note and the complaint.

The complaints covered included a range of concerns from sexual harassment (including touching), discrimination, abuse of power, favoritism, hostile work environment, retaliation, inappropriate relationships, unprofessional conduct, unethical behaviors, harassment, failure of supervisors in their duty to manage complaints, nepotism and conflict of interest.

The policies referenced in these complaints and investigations included the following:

### POLICIES REFERENCED IN COMPLAINTS AND INVESTIGATIONS

|                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Conflict of Interest              | Promoting Equal Employment Opportunity |
| Establishing Standards of Conduct | Monitoring Workplace Expectations      |
| Prohibiting Harassment            | Nepotism                               |
| Job Description Requirements      | Reporting and Resolving Complaints     |
| Juvenile Room Check               | Sheriff's Office Policy                |
| Juvenile Code of Ethics           | Whistleblower                          |

## SUMMARY OF COMPLAINTS

A total of 19 complaints were received from January 2022 to March 2025, with reviews and investigations conducted for each, since some complaints alleged multiple issues, there were a total of 25 issues raised. The complaints were filed by Whatcom staff and a member of the public against a Whatcom employee. The following table summarizes, by type of complaint and finding, the complaints/investigations processed during the four-year period.

|   | 2022          |                 | 2023          |                 | 2024          |                 | 2025          |                 |             |       |
|---|---------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|-------------|-------|
|   | Substantiated | Unsubstantiated | Substantiated | Unsubstantiated | Substantiated | Unsubstantiated | Substantiated | Unsubstantiated | In-Progress | Total |
| EEO/Protected Class                           | -             | 1               | -             | -               | 1             | 1               | -             | 1               | -           | 4     |
| Standards of Conduct                          | 2             | -               | 1             | 1               | 2             | -               | 2             | 1               | -           | 7     |
| Prohibiting Harassment                        | 1             | -               | 1             | -               | 1             | -               | 1             | 1               | -           | 4     |
| Sexual Harassment                             | 1             | -               | -             | 1               | -             | -               | 1             | -               | 1           | 3     |
| Appropriate Application of Policies           | -             | 1               | -             | -               | -             | 1               | -             | -               | -           | 2     |
| Hostile Work Environment                      | -             | -               | -             | 1               | 1             | -               | -             | 1               | -           | 3     |
| Retaliation                                   | -             | -               | -             | -               | 1             | -               | -             | -               | -           | 1     |
| Whistleblower, Nepotism, Conflict of Interest | -             | -               | -             | -               | -             | -               | -             | 1               | -           | 1     |
| <b>Total</b>                                  | 4             | 2               | 2             | 3               | 6             | 2               | 4             | 5               | 1           | 25    |

## SUMMARY OF INVESTIGATIONS

The following is a summary of the 19 complaint reviews and investigations:

- 9 complaints were substantiated
- 9 complaint findings were unsubstantiated
- 1 complaint review is still in-progress
- 2 complaints were sent to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) by the complainants
- 3 complaints resulted in the termination of employment
- 3 complaints resulted in separation agreements
- 1 complaint was sent to the Human Rights Commission in response to the findings of the complaint that resulted in a termination of employment

These are broken down on an annual basis below:

### ANNUAL COMPLAINTS RECEIVED

| Year | Complaints Received                      | Types of Complaints   |
|------|--|---|
| 2022 | 2 – Substantiated<br>2 – Unsubstantiated | EEO/Protected Class; Standards of Conduct, Prohibiting Harassment, Sexual Harassment; and Appropriate Application of Policies |

| Year                     | Complaints Received   | Types of Complaints   |
|--------------------------|---|---|
| 2023                     | 1 – Substantiated<br>2 – Unsubstantiated                    | Hostile Work Environment; and Standards of Conduct, Prohibiting Harassment, Sexual Harassment   |
| 2024                     | 4 – Substantiated<br>2 – Unsubstantiated                    | EEO/Protected Class; Standards of Conduct, Prohibiting Harassment; Retaliation; Hostile Work Environment; and Appropriate Application of Policies |
| 2025<br>(as of May 2025) | 2 – Substantiated<br>3 – Unsubstantiated<br>1 – In-Progress | Standards of Conduct, Prohibiting Harassment, Sexual Harassment; Hostile Work Environment; and Whistleblower, Nepotism and Conflict of Interest   |

## RESULTING ACTIONS OF COMPLAINTS

### SUBSTANTIATED CLAIMS

The 9 complaints that were substantiated resulted in the following: 3 terminations, 3 employee separations agreements, 4 written reprimands, 1 verbal reprimand, 1 reassignment of tasks for complainant, and 3 additional issue-specific trainings.

### UNSUBSTANTIATED CLAIMS

The 9 complaints that were determined unsubstantiated resulted in the following: 3 complainant resignations, 2 additional issue-specific trainings, 1 reassignment of tasks for complainant, and consideration for future policy and training updates. There is 1 complaint that was partially investigated with staff efforts documented to coordinate this which were unsuccessful.

### PENDING DETERMINATIONS

There is one complaint currently in-progress of investigation.

## HR INVESTIGATION ROLE AND WORKLOAD

Three HR staff members are trained to lead an investigation, including the Human Resources Director, Manager, and Senior Human Resources Representative. Human Resources may facilitate an entire investigation, including witness interviews, Weingarten meetings (if potential discipline,) management meetings, review with legal, documentation of findings, recommendation on outcome, and follow up with complainant/witnesses. If Human Resources outsources the investigation to an external investigator, HR may still assist in facilitating the process, providing space for interviews, addressing any claims of retaliation, reviewing final investigatory reports with legal, and offering a recommendation for potential



outcome or resolution. Some other work has at times been delegated to further Human Resources staff, which may include help with fact finding, Weingarten meetings, and documentation.

The Human Resources Director is the primary point person for all complaints received and ensures that these are fully investigated and resolved. Of the 19 complaints investigated during the past five years, 9 were completed by HR staff and third-party investigators conducted 10.

## APPENDIX B: BEST PRACTICES ASSESSMENT

This report presents an evaluation of the County's current HR Policies and Procedures related to practices, assessed against established best management practices in local government. The analysis is a key component of the broader study designed to identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities for improvement across County departments.

The findings outlined herein will directly inform the development of targeted recommendations to enhance efficiency, consistency, and service delivery, aligning with recognized public sector standards. Conducting this type of evaluation provides significant value by offering an objective baseline of current operations, promoting transparency, and ensuring that County services remain responsive to community needs.

Furthermore, aligning with best practices supports continuous improvement, informed decision-making, and accountability, ultimately contributing to more effective governance and public trust.

### A-2.1 DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENT

This Best Management Practices (BMP) assessment represents an important step in reporting on initial key findings and opportunities related to Whatcom County and its approach in working with issues relative to harassment and discrimination. This diagnostic assessment of best practices is divided into the major subsections of: Harassment & Discrimination Training; Policy Development & Application; Investigations; Process Management, Resolutions & Outcomes.

Best management practices are drawn from a combination of nationally recognized Human Resource (HR) standards and professional guidance, as well as historic data and evolving trends in local government human resources management. Core sources include:

- International City/County Management Association (ICMA) HR and Ethics Standards and Model Ordinances
- National Association of Counties (NACo) HR Handbook and Risk Management Toolkit
- Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) Harassment and Discrimination Model Policies
- International Public Management Association for Human Resources (IPMA-HR) Public Sector HR Best Practices
- U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) Enforcement Guidance; and
- Washington Counties Risk Pool Risk Management Best Practices Guide for Counties.

These sources reflect both statutory compliance requirements and broader principles of ethical, transparent, and effective HR management in public organizations.

An 'X' in the Meets column indicates that the practice does not meet the described operational target. A '~' indicates some progress toward the operational target, but the best practices are still unmet. A '✓' indicates that the best practice is met.

| Title   | Best Practice / Operational Target  | Meets Target | Improvement Opportunity / Notes   |
|---|---|--------------|---|
| <b>HARASSMENT &amp; DISCRIMINATION TRAINING</b> |   |              |   |
| Employee Training                               | Training is provided to all employees on a regular basis. Initial training is provided at onboarding, and refresher courses are offered each year.  | ~            | Training is readily available for employees. However, there is no ongoing training requirement beyond initial training provided during the onboarding process.                |
| Manager and Supervisory Training                | Managers and supervisors receive training specific to their role. This is offered as part of onboarding or within six-months following a promotion and refresher courses are offered every two years. | X            | There are no clear training opportunities being provided for supervisors to address complaints and issues related to harassment and discrimination.                           |
| Training for Elected Officials and Executives   | Senior executives and elected officials attend and participate in workplace harassment and discrimination training.   | ~            | Training is available to elected officials and senior executives but it is not required and is not being highly utilized.   |
| Training Formats                                | Training is offered in a variety of formats (e.g., virtual (live and recorded), in-person) to promote accessibility for employees working shifts outside of regular business hours.                   | ~            | There have been trainings offered in a variety of formats. However, the only required training related to the topics under review appear to be hosted virtually at this time. |
| Participant Interaction                         | Where possible, training content promotes interactivity with the audience (e.g., case studies, scenarios) and allows for questions and sharing from audience members.                                 | ~            | In-person training does appear to support this, but due to the reliance on digital mediums for required training, interactivity is more limited.                              |

| Title                                     | Best Practice / Operational Target   | Meets Target | Improvement Opportunity / Notes   |
|---|--|--------------|---|
| Training Content                          | <p>Training content is comprehensive and covers multiple aspects of workplace culture, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- General workplace harassment</li> <li>- Sexual harassment</li> <li>- Discrimination and retaliation</li> <li>- Nepotism and conflicts of interest</li> <li>- Conflict resolution</li> <li>- Abuse of power/authority</li> <li>- Bystander intervention</li> </ul> | ~            | Current trainings lack a specific focus on the following: conflict resolution, abuse of power/authority, bystander intervention.  |
| Organizational Application                | Training is organization-specific and clarifies policies and processes for reporting complaints related to workplace concerns.   | X            | Current trainings do not appear to train on policies and procedures specific to the County and are more general in nature.  |
| Customized Training                       | Training is tailored to address issues, challenges and opportunities for specific teams and the broader organization based on identified complaint trends and emerging issues.   | X            | Trainings are broad covering general themes and issues, not specific to the County context or identified trends.  |
| Continued Evaluation of Training Approach | Training is evaluated for its effectiveness via the collection of employee feedback. Effectiveness measures include the clarity and usefulness of training, the level of confidence staff have in the described procedures, and overall suggestions for improvement.   | X            | No feedback mechanism on training effectiveness is in place at this time.   |
| Training Completion Records               | The organization has an established method of tracking the completion of required training. This is a metric incorporated into the organization's overarching performance management process.  | ~            | The present online training system tracks data for those who have completed training. However, there is not data that clearly identifies those who haven't participated in trainings. |

| Title                                       | Best Practice / Operational Target   | Meets Target | Improvement Opportunity / Notes  |
|---|--|--------------|--|
| <b>POLICY DEVELOPMENT &amp; APPLICATION</b> |  |              |  |
| County-wide Policy                          | A single, clear harassment and discrimination policy is adopted that is applicable to all departments and elected officials.   | X            | The County Charter Article 7 and Chapter 3.04 of the Whatcom County Code include exemptions from the application of policies outlined in the County's personnel handbook.  |
| Clear Policy Definitions                    | Policies clearly define prohibited behaviors, including gender-based, race-based, sexual harassment, bullying, retaliation, and discrimination.  | X            | The policies address prohibited behaviors in brevity with a lack of clear description and specification of behaviors that are unacceptable and how these behaviors are addressed.  |
| Consistent Investigation Procedures         | Use of centralized, impartial investigative procedures county-wide, ideally through HR or a trained third-party investigator.  | ~            | HR has generally taken the lead on policy investigations. However, at times, investigative responsibilities are redistributed to the prosecutor or a third-party entity. There is not a clear policy or approach when this should occur. |
| Clear and Accessible Incident Reporting     | The County has multiple, clearly established avenues for reporting concerns of harassment, discrimination or other Human Resources policy violations. These include anonymous options and third-party reporting. | ~            | Employees have historically had the ability to report issues and concerns to HR. However, there is not a definitive reporting approach, reporting tree and process.  |
| Transparency and Accessibility              | Policies are posted within intranet sites, employee handbooks, printed documents, onboarding documents, and public-facing websites.  | ~            | Policies are available to employees through an intranet site. These are not fully publicly available and accessible to prospective and former employees.   |

| Title                               | Best Practice / Operational Target   | Meets Target | Improvement Opportunity / Notes  |
|-------------------------------------|--|--------------|--|
| Issuance of Policy Reminders        | Employees and elected officials within the County are periodically provided written and/or posted reminders of harassment and discrimination policies and procedures, reporting options, etc.                        | X            | Regular refresher content is not presently provided to staff on these topics. There are efforts to begin this regularly with the new NEOGOV Learning Management System.  |
| Annual Review of Policy             | The County annually reviews and updates policies based on legal updates and evolving best practices.   | ~            | Policy evaluation, review and refinement is a recently adopted and implemented practice by HR staff during the last year.  |
| INVESTIGATIONS                      |  |              |  |
| Consistent Investigation Procedures | The County uses centralized, impartial investigative procedures countywide, through HR or a trained third-party investigator. The procedures used are consistent and pre-determined.                                 | X            | Investigative procedures have varied from case-to-case.  |
| Consistent Investigative Reports    | The County uses a detailed and consistent report framework that clearly outlines the complaint, data collection methodology, information obtained from interviews and alternate sources and credibility assessments. | X            | Investigative reports include varied levels of detail and methodology used varies from case-to-case. Some reports detail a significant level of investigation with application of policies, interviewing staff members and a close-out of the investigation, while others very briefly mention that an investigation occurred. The same amount of detail is needed for each investigative report and the same information should be gathered for each. |

| Title  | Best Practice / Operational Target   | Meets Target | Improvement Opportunity / Notes   |
|--|--|--------------|---|
| Whistleblower Protections                    | Policy explicitly prohibits retaliation against complainants, witnesses, or participants in an investigation.  | ~            | While there are specific whistleblower protections at state and county levels, the Policy and Procedures manual does not fully address this regarding complaints and participation in investigations. |
| Trauma-Informed Approaches                   | The County adopts trauma-informed practices that prioritize empathy, confidentiality, and access to support resources for individuals reporting harassment or discrimination.  | X            | The County does not currently utilize trauma-informed approaches and HR staff have not received training on trauma-informed practices.  |
| Alternate Dispute Resolutions                | The County offers alternative resolution pathways such as conflict resolution and mediation, when appropriate, to address complaints outside of formal investigations.   | X            | The County does not currently offer alternate supports for complaints outside of the investigation process.   |
| Established Timelines and Format of Response | Specific timelines for investigative steps and final resolutions are established and clearly communicated. All parties involved understand these timelines to promote responsiveness. Complainants are also provided with a clearly defined method of communication regarding determinations and final outcomes. | X            | Timelines for investigative procedures and steps are not defined. There is no clear communication outlined for an investigative process.  |
| Confidentiality Standards                    | Clear standards for confidentiality are addressed in policy while acknowledging and addressing legal transparency requirements.  | X            | Expectations of confidentiality and policies for HR to keep investigative data classified are not clearly defined and addressed.  |

| Title   | Best Practice / Operational Target  | Meets Target | Improvement Opportunity / Notes   |
|---|---|--------------|---|
| Third-Party Investigations                                    | A policy is in place for use of external investigators when complaints include a conflict-of-interest with HR staff.  | ~            | Although third-party investigators have been involved from time to time, their role and involvement is not clearly defined.   |
| PROCESS MANAGEMENT, RESOLUTIONS & OUTCOMES                    |   |              |   |
| Use of Management Database to Track and Manage All Complaints | Track all harassment/discrimination complaints through an HRIS or secure, auditable database.   | X            | Presently complaints are received and tracked in a variety of ways, and this variance is demonstrated in HR files and databases. It is difficult to audit and review the processing of complaints within the current system and efforts are being made by HR staff to transition to an electronic database. |
| Use of Management Database to Track and Manage All Complaints | The County has a system for collecting and analyzing data on harassment and discrimination complaints to identify patterns, root causes, and areas for targeted intervention. | ~            | HR has recently begun to examine complaints to identify broader trends. The process needs a systematic methodology and approach for optimal trend analysis and broader solution development.  |
| Equity and Inclusion Evaluation                               | Harassment and discrimination policy with broader equity, diversity, and inclusion goals.   | ~            | While policies focus on the importance of respectful workplace and prohibiting harassment, the County should further expand policies to include broader equity, diversity and inclusion values and goals.   |



| Title                              | Best Practice / Operational Target  | Meets Target | Improvement Opportunity / Notes  |
|------------------------------------|---|--------------|--|
| Staff Roles and Responsibilities   | Clear lines of authority define the roles and responsibilities of staff in addressing harassment and discrimination. Responsibilities are outlined for organizational training, resource and incident management. | ~            | Application of HR responsibilities in processing complaints aren't fully defined, addressed and implemented.   |
| Exit Interviews                    | Exit interviews include questions to evaluate and detect culture and patterns of issues not formally reported.  | ✓            | HR began collecting exit interviews about a year ago with implementation of the NEOGOV system. Specific questions are asked about reasoning for transition including cultural issues.                      |
| Public Reporting of Aggregate Data | The County publishes aggregate, anonymized annual data about complaints and resolutions to demonstrate transparency and accountability.   | X            | No, information tends to get publicized through public information requests per the WA Public Records Act Chapter 42.56 RCW.   |
| Final Documentation                | All resolutions and outcomes are equally documented and tracked.  | ~            | There is presently documentation compiled and tracked for every case. The level of information available and the types of information included, tracked and assessed can differ causing parity challenges. |

## 2.2 KEY STRENGTHS

Although the diagnostic assessment is designed to identify improvement opportunities, it also recognizes existing strengths of the current processes. Some of the key strengths of Whatcom County include:

- Training is readily available for employees through an online system.
- The current system tracks data on completed training for employees.
- The County is currently working on the deployment of a new training system.
- Policies are accessible to current employees through an internal intranet.
- HR has begun implementing a process of policy evaluation, review, and refinement in the past year.

- Employees have historically had the ability to report issues and concerns to HR.
- Some third-party investigators have been utilized, showing a willingness to seek external expertise when needed.
- Documentation is compiled and tracked for every case, providing a basic structure for recordkeeping.
- Policies address prohibited behaviors, even though they are brief, indicating foundational content is in place.
- Whistleblower protections are recognized at both state and county levels, even if not fully integrated into internal manuals.

These are just a few examples of the strengths of the current operations and where the County is meeting or is actively working to meet best practices.

## **2.3 KEY OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT**

The comparison of the County's current approach to best management practices also identified some improvement opportunities. Notable issues include:

- Make training on harassment and discrimination mandatory for all employees on a set annual basis (e.g., every two years).
- Develop and implement clear training programs for supervisors, specifically addressing complaint management and harassment issues.
- Increase training participation among elected officials and senior executives who currently underutilize available resources.
- Establish a single, distinctly adopted policy framework applicable across the entire County, with consideration of modifications to charter exemptions.
- Expand and clarify policy language to fully describe prohibited behaviors and their consequences.
- Clearly define roles and responsibilities for HR investigations, ensuring consistent application regardless of complaint severity or complexity.
- Develop a standard reporting process and reporting tree for employee concerns and complaints.
- Make applicable policies publicly accessible to prospective, current, and former employees.
- Standardize investigative procedures, including defined timelines, communication protocols, and confidentiality expectations.
- Define the role of third-party investigators and when they are to be utilized.
- Standardize the level and type of information compiled during investigations to ensure parity and consistency.

The above items do not align with best practices and indicate challenges that impact the efficiency and effectiveness of the processes and operations. The Matrix project team will expand on these and other issues in subsequent analyses, drafts, and final reports.

## APPENDIX C: EMPLOYEE SURVEY SUMMARY

Matrix Consulting Group was engaged by Whatcom County, Washington, to assess its policies and procedures (e.g., harassment, discrimination, etc.) related to how issues in the workplace are addressed. As part of this assessment, the project team issued an anonymous survey to all County personnel. This allowed the project team to collect direct input from employees on these topics to identify potential issues and opportunities for improvement.

The survey was distributed via SurveyMonkey (as well as in paper format) and was active from June 10, 2025, to July 11, 2025. The digital survey distributed directly to those with County email addresses received 553 responses out of a potential 1,182 respondents. In addition, the project team received paper surveys from six respondents without access to email, raising the total to 559 for a response rate of 47.3%.

### KEY FINDINGS

The following key findings were identified as a result of this analysis:

- **Overall Response Rate:** 559 total responses (47.3% response rate), representing various departments with highest participation from Public Works (17.7%), Health and Community Services (17.5%), and Sheriff's Office (10.5%).
- **Understanding of Policies:** The majority of respondents reported that they "Mostly" or "Completely" understood policies, particularly harassment prohibition (90%) and standards of conduct (84%). There was lower level of understanding for policies related to nepotism avoidance (77%) and conflict resolution (76%).
- **Awareness of Procedures:** Results indicated a higher awareness of complaint processing (70%) and disciplinary procedures (67%), slightly less for complaint resolution (64%). Managers and supervisors demonstrated higher procedural awareness compared to temporary and non-supervisory staff. 82% of all respondents knew how to submit a concern.
- **Training and Development:** Overall, 95% of respondents had received training on preventing harassment, but fewer had been trained on reporting harassment (76%) and conflict management (58%). The responses regarding the frequency of training were inconsistent, with significant variation noted across departments and position types. Training was perceived as helpful or very helpful by only 38% of respondents.
- **Experiences with HR:** Overall, 20% of respondents had previously reported issues to HR. Dissatisfaction with complaint handling was prevalent; 63% were dissatisfied with the process, 65% were dissatisfied with outcomes and the thoroughness of HR investigations, and 57% were uncomfortable reporting issues to HR, citing concerns about support, communication, and retaliation.
- **Barriers to Reporting Future Concerns:** For those who had previously submitted a complaint, the primary barriers to reporting include lack of trust in HR (75%), previous negative experiences (63%), fear of retaliation (62%), and confidentiality concerns (59%).

- **Supervisory Confidence and Support:** Supervisors reported strong confidence in managing workplace issues (96% agreement). However, 27%-28% noted gaps in the clarity of reporting processes, training adequacy, and HR support.
- **Employee's Perception of Supervisor and HR Effectiveness:** There was higher levels of agreement (75%-87%) regarding direct supervisor effectiveness in addressing workplace issues. However, there was slightly lower confidence in HR handling complaints impartially (60%) and being responsive (72%).
- **Retaliation Concerns:** Only 43% felt comfortable reporting issues without fear of retaliation, with 26% explicitly fearful and 31% unsure. Retaliation concerns are more pronounced among non-supervisory staff, temporary staff, and specific demographic groups.

Additional results and analysis related to these findings can be found through the remainder of the document.

### A-3.1 SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

Respondents were given the option to provide demographic information at the conclusion of the survey. This information is used throughout this report to further analyze differences in results based on the respondent group. These were entirely optional questions; participants were able to skip the question if they chose to do so. Each demographic table shows the total number of participants who decided to skip the question compared to those who responded. The first question asked participants which department they belonged to:

| Which department do you belong to? | %     | #  |
|------------------------------------|-------|----|
| Administrative Services            | 4.2%  | 20 |
| Assessor                           | 4.2%  | 20 |
| Auditor                            | 1.9%  | 9  |
| County Council                     | 1.7%  | 8  |
| County Executive                   | 1.3%  | 6  |
| District Court                     | 2.5%  | 12 |
| District Court Probation           | 1.3%  | 6  |
| Emergency Medical Services         | 0.6%  | 3  |
| Facilities Management              | 2.1%  | 10 |
| Ferry                              | 0.8%  | 4  |
| Finance                            | 0.8%  | 4  |
| Health and Community Services      | 17.5% | 83 |
| Hearing Examiner                   | 0.0%  | 0  |
| Human Resources                    | 0.6%  | 3  |
| Information Technology             | 1.3%  | 6  |
| Juvenile Court Administration      | 1.9%  | 9  |
| Law Library                        | 0.0%  | 0  |
| Medical Examiner                   | 1.1%  | 5  |
| Parks & Recreation                 | 3.8%  | 18 |
| Planning & Development Services    | 5.5%  | 26 |
| Prosecuting Attorney               | 6.7%  | 32 |
| Public Defender                    | 4.8%  | 23 |
| Public Works                       | 17.7% | 84 |
| Sheriff                            | 10.5% | 50 |
| Superior Court                     | 3.6%  | 17 |
| Superior Court Clerk               | 2.1%  | 10 |

|                              |      |            |
|------------------------------|------|------------|
| Treasurer                    | 1.3% | 6          |
| WSA Whatcom County Extension | 0.2% | 1          |
| <b>Total</b>                 |      | <b>475</b> |
| <b>Skipped</b>               |      | <b>84</b>  |

475 respondents provided input towards this question, while 84 opted to skip. The three largest respondent groups consisted of Public Works (17.7%), Health and Community Services (17.5%), and the County Sheriff (10.5%). Participants were then asked to select the option that best represented their gender identity:

| <b>What best represents your gender identity?</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>#</b>   |
|---|----------|------------|
| Man   | 34.2%    | 171        |
| Woman   | 44.8%    | 224        |
| Prefer not to specify                             | 20.2%    | 101        |
| None of the above (please specify)                | 0.8%     | 4          |
| <b>Total</b>                                      |          | <b>500</b> |
| <b>Skipped</b>                                    |          | <b>59</b>  |

44.8% of participants identified as women, while 34.2% identified as men. 20.2% did not wish to specify their gender identity. Next, participants were asked to share what best reflects their race and/or ethnicity:

| <b>What best reflects your race or ethnicity?</b> | <b>%</b> | <b>#</b>   |
|---|----------|------------|
| American Indian or Alaska Native                  | 0.6%     | 3          |
| Asian   | 1.6%     | 8          |
| Black or African American                         | 0.6%     | 3          |
| Hispanic or Latino                                | 2.8%     | 14         |
| Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander         | 0.2%     | 1          |
| White   | 70.6%    | 353        |
| Prefer not to specify                             | 22.2%    | 111        |
| Other (please specify)                            | 1.4%     | 7          |
| <b>Total</b>                                      |          | <b>500</b> |
| <b>Skipped</b>                                    |          | <b>59</b>  |

70.6% of survey respondents identified as White, making it by far the largest respondent group. 22.2% elected not to specify their race or ethnicity. Those who selected "Other" indicated belonging to one or more of the races and ethnicities specified above.

The next question asked respondents to share their approximate tenure (e.g., length of employment) with the County:

**How long have you worked for the County?**

|   | %     | #          |
|---|-------|------------|
| Less than 5 years                       | 47.6% | 234        |
| 5 years or more but less than 10 years  | 16.9% | 83         |
| 10 years of more but less than 20 years | 19.9% | 98         |
| 20 years or more                        | 15.7% | 77         |
| <b>Total</b>                            |       | <b>492</b> |
| <b>Skipped</b>                          |       | <b>67</b>  |

The survey saw a high response rate from individuals who had worked for Whatcom for five years or less, accounting for 47.6% of those who responded to this question. Responses from other tenure lengths were relatively similar, ranging from 15.7% to 19.9%. Finally, the demographic portion of the survey concluded by asking participants to select the option that best describes their role with the County:

**What best reflects your position?**

|                                  | %     | #          |
|----------------------------------|-------|------------|
| Department Head/Elected Official | 2.0%  | 10         |
| Division Manager or Supervisor   | 21.4% | 106        |
| Staff (Non-Supervisory)          | 74.8% | 371        |
| Temporary Staff                  | 1.8%  | 9          |
| <b>Total</b>                     |       | <b>496</b> |
| <b>Skipped</b>                   |       | <b>63</b>  |

74.8% of participants identified themselves as non-supervisory staff, while 21.4% were in a managerial or supervisory role.

## A-3.2 EMPLOYEE UNDERSTANDING

A series of questions asked employees about their understanding of various policies and procedures related to addressing workplace issues. Each subsection of this chapter relates to a specific question or topic and highlights differences in response rates based on key demographics (where applicable).

### COUNTY POLICIES

The first question broadly asked whether participants understood specific policies. The digital version of the survey allowed participants to access these documents via a link to the County's intranet. A total of 552 individuals provided input in this section, while seven opted to skip one or more responses.

| # | Policy                             | Not at All | Slightly | Mostly | Completely |
|---|------------------------------------|------------|----------|--------|------------|
| 1 | Prohibiting Harassment             | 1%         | 9%       | 35%    | 55%        |
| 2 | Establishing Standards of Conduct  | 4%         | 11%      | 37%    | 47%        |
| 3 | Monitoring Workplace Expectations  | 5%         | 13%      | 37%    | 44%        |
| 4 | Avoiding Nepotism                  | 10%        | 14%      | 31%    | 46%        |
| 5 | Reporting and Resolving Complaints | 7%         | 15%      | 39%    | 39%        |
| 6 | Resolving Conflicts of Interest    | 8%         | 16%      | 34%    | 42%        |

As indicated by the chart, respondents were highly likely to report that they “Mostly” or “Completely” understood the policies in question. Participants had a better understanding of the first three policies in this list, but a slightly lower understanding of the fourth through sixth listed policies.

### DIFFERENCES BY TENURE

There were no notable differences in responses based on the length of the participant’s employment with the County. All respondent groups had similar levels of understanding of each policy, regardless of their tenure.

### DIFFERENCES BY DEPARTMENT

The following differences in understanding by department were noted:

- Overall, 90% of staff mostly or completely understood the prohibiting harassment policy. This trend extended to most departments. However, understanding was slightly lower for staff belonging to Finance (75%) and HCS (77%).
- 81% of respondents understood the policy on workplace expectations. Several departments (Executive, Court, EMS, Ferry, HR, IT, and Juvenile Court) all posted 100% mostly or completely understanding ratings. 66% of Auditor staff indicated a more complete understanding of this policy.
- 77% mostly or completely understood the policy on avoiding nepotism. Understanding was lower among staff belonging to the following departments: Auditor (56%), Court Probation (50%), Parks and Recreation (61%), and PDS (62%).
- 76% of staff were mostly or completely aware of the policy on resolving conflicts of interest. By comparison, 56% of Auditor staff and 56% of Parks and Recreation staff were aware of this policy.



## DIFFERENCES BY GENDER IDENTITY

There were no significant differences in response rates for this question based on the respondent's gender identity.

## DIFFERENCES BY RACE/ETHNICITY

There were no significant differences in understanding of policies based on the respondents' race or ethnicity.

## DIFFERENCES BY POSITION TYPE

There were few significant differences in the understanding of policies based on position type, except for those who identified as temporary staff. This was the only group where the percentage of respondents who did not understand one (or more) policies exceeded 20%. 22% did not know of the Monitoring Workplace Expectations and the Avoiding Nepotism policies.

One other notable deviation was that 70% of Department Heads/Elected Officials reported “Mostly” understanding the Establishing Standards of Conduct policy, compared to 37% of staff overall.

## DIFFERENCES BY EXPERIENCE

There were no significant differences in understanding of policy between those who had submitted a complaint to HR previously compared to those who had not.

## UNDERSTANDING OF PROCEDURES

A second question in this section asked if participants were aware of three procedures related to addressing workplace issues. 549 individuals provided input:

| # | Are you aware of the following procedures?   | Yes | No  |
|---|--|-----|-----|
| 1 | Processing Harassment Complaints             | 70% | 30% |
| 2 | County Employee Disciplinary Process         | 67% | 33% |
| 3 | County Employee Complaint Resolution Process | 64% | 36% |

70% of participants were aware of the complaint processing process, 67% knew of the disciplinary process, and 64% were aware of the complaint resolution process.

## **DIFFERENCES BY TENURE**

Those who had worked for the County for 20 years or more were slightly more likely to understand each of these policies compared to other respondent groups, though this was only generally around 5% higher for each procedure.

## **DIFFERENCES BY DEPARTMENT**

The following differences by department were noted:

- 70% of the overall staff knew of the procedure behind processing harassment complaints. 100% of multiple respondent groups knew of this policy, including Executive, Ferry, HR, IT, and Medical Examiner. Understanding was lower among staff belonging to Auditor (56%), Council (50%), Finance (50%), and PDS (54%).
- 69% of overall respondents knew of the disciplinary process. 100% awareness ratings were provided by the same groups mentioned in the prior bullet. Agreement ratings were notably lower among Council (38%) and PDS (42%).
- 65% of staff knew of the complaint resolution process. Only PDS (38%) posted a score notably lower than other respondent groups for this topic.

## **DIFFERENCES BY GENDER IDENTITY**

57% of those who preferred not to disclose their gender identity indicated understanding the complaint resolution process. This was lower than those who identified as men (69%) and women (67%).

## **DIFFERENCES BY RACE/ETHNICITY**

Overall, 69% of respondents understood the disciplinary process. Awareness was higher among those who identified as American Indian/Alaskan Native (100%), Asian (86%), Hispanic/Latino (77%), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (100%).

## **DIFFERENCES BY POSITION TYPE**

Understanding of these procedures decreased based on the classification of the respondents:

- 100% of Department Heads/Elected Officials were aware of all three procedures.
- 83% of Division Managers/Supervisors were aware of the harassment and disciplinary processes (75% knew of the complaint resolution process).
- Approximately 65% of non-supervisory staff were aware of each procedure.
- 44% of temporary staff were aware of the harassment and complaint resolution procedures. 22% knew of the disciplinary process.

## DIFFERENCES BY POSITION TYPE

Results did not indicate a significant difference in awareness of policies between those who had submitted complaints to HR versus those who had not.

## UNDERSTANDING OF THE REPORTING PROCESS

This question asked if participants were aware of how (and where) to report concerns regarding harassment, discrimination, or other workplace issues. 549 participants responded:

| Do you know where/how to report concerns? | %   |
|---|-----|
| Yes                                       | 82% |
| No  | 18% |

82% of respondents knew where and how to report workplace conduct issues, signifying a large majority of respondents.

## DIFFERENCES BY TENURE

There was a slight variation in overall understanding of the reporting process based on tenure. 91% of those with 20+ years of experience understood the process, compared to 77% of those with five to ten years of experience. Those who had been with Whatcom for less than five years, as well as those employed for ten to 20 years each, aligned with the overall response rate of 82%.

## DIFFERENCES BY DEPARTMENT

Multiple departments demonstrated a strong understanding of how to report workplace concerns, as evidenced by 95% or more of respondents selecting “Yes” for this question. Administrative Services, County Executive, EMS, Ferry, HR, IT, Medical Examiner, Court Clerk, and Treasurer all fell into this group.

Conversely, the following departments responded “No” at a rate of 25% or more (approximately 10% higher than the overall response rate): Assessor (25%), Auditor (56%), and Finance (33%). These departments contained the highest number of respondents who were unsure how to report concerns to HR.

## DIFFERENCES BY GENDER IDENTITY

91% of those who identified as men knew where/how to report a complaint, compared to 80% of women and 79% of those who did not disclose a gender identity.

## DIFFERENCES BY RACE/ETHNICITY

Overall, 83% of respondents knew how to submit a complaint regarding workplace conduct. Awareness was lower among staff who identified as Black or African American (67%) as well as Hispanic/Latino respondents (77%).

## DIFFERENCES BY POSITION TYPE

100% of Department Heads/Elected Officials knew how to report a concern. 92% of Division Managers/Supervisors, 80% of non-supervisory staff, and 78% of temporary staff also knew how to report a concern.

## DIFFERENCES BY EXPERIENCE

While not significantly different, 74% of those who had submitted a complaint were aware of how the reporting process worked, compared to 83% of those who had not submitted a report.

## TYPES OF TRAINING

One question focused on training related to workplace conduct. It asked if the participant had received training on three specific topics. It received input from 540 respondents:

| Have you received training on:            | Yes | No  |
|---|-----|-----|
| Preventing workplace harassment           | 95% | 5%  |
| Reporting harassment complaints           | 76% | 24% |
| Conflict management or dispute resolution | 58% | 42% |

Results show that a large number of respondents had received training on preventing harassment – 95% to be precise. However, training on the other topics seemed less prevalent; 76% of staff had been trained on reporting complaints, and 58% had been given conflict management training.

## DIFFERENCES BY TENURE

There was no distinct correlation between the length of employee tenure and the types of training staff had received. Those who had worked for the County for 20 years or more were slightly (approximately 5%) more likely than others to have received training on reporting harassment complaints or resolving conflicts.

## DIFFERENCES BY DEPARTMENT

Key differences by department are summarized below:

- While 95% of respondents reported having been trained on preventing harassment, Auditor (70%), Ferry (75%), and Medical Examiner (80%) staff reported slightly lower participation rates.
- Overall, 76% of participants were trained on reporting harassment. Several departments reported a 100% participation rate, including County Executive, EMS, HR, Court Clerk, and Treasurer. Conversely, lower participation rates in this training were noted by Auditor (56%) and Finance (50%).
- 58% of respondents had received conflict management training. 100% of respondents in HR, Treasurer, and Whatcom County Extension had received this training. Lower participation rates were noted among respondents belonging to County Council (38%), and EMS (33%).

## DIFFERENCES BY GENDER IDENTITY

Those who identified as men were more likely to have received training on reporting harassment complaints and conflict management. 85% of men received training on the former (compared to 77% overall), and 71% had received training (compared to 59% overall). 51% of women indicated having received training on conflict management.

## DIFFERENCES BY RACE/ETHNICITY

Results indicated that staff had received equal access to training on preventing harassment and reporting harassment, regardless of race/ethnicity. Some variation occurred for training related to conflict management, however. Participants who belonged to respondent groups outside of the two largest ones (which were White and undisclosed) appeared to be slightly more likely to have received training on this topic.

## DIFFERENCES BY POSITION TYPE

Key differences by position type included:

- 90% or more of all position types had received training on preventing harassment, save for temporary staff (67% had received this training).
- 90% of Department Heads/Elected Officials and 87% of Managers/Supervisors indicated they had been trained on reporting harassment. 74% of non-supervisory staff and 56% of temporary staff had received this training.
- Managers/Supervisors were most likely to have received training on conflict management – 71% had attended such training. By comparison, 60% of Department Heads/Elected Officials, 56% of non-supervisory staff, and 44% of temporary staff had been trained on this topic.

## DIFFERENCES BY EXPERIENCE

The only notable difference highlighted in this section was that 44% of those who had submitted a complaint to HR had received training on conflict management, compared to 62% of those who had not.

## TRAINING FREQUENCY

Participants were also asked how often they had received training on these topics, where applicable:

| How often do you receive training? | %   |
|------------------------------------|-----|
| Annually                           | 22% |
| Every 2–3 years                    | 27% |
| Only during onboarding             | 21% |
| Never                              | 5%  |
| Other (please specify)             | 25% |

The results indicated some variation in training frequency. 22% received annual training, 27% received training every two or three years, and 21% only received training on the previous topics during their onboarding period. 5% of respondents stated that they had never received training on any of the topics referenced in the prior question.

The 25% of respondents who selected other were asked to share the frequency of their training via an open response section. These have been summarized in the bullets below:

- 46 respondents were unsure of the frequency of training. Several of these comments noted being new to the County and having either received training on these topics during onboarding or not having received it. An additional 19 also stated that they were unsure of the frequency but also noted that training can occur irregularly.
- 31 respondents shared their belief that trainings on these topics only occur in response to an internal or high-profile issue.
- 12 individuals noted only receiving the training once (with no clear timeframe). Ten more participants indicated having only been trained on these topics once within their decade-plus tenure with the County.
- 11 participants stated they received training during onboarding.
- Two participants received training once every five years, one stated training was offered “as-needed”, one shared it occurred every one or two years, and one shared that training was offered annually.

The variation in responses to this question indicates that there may be a lack of structure surrounding how training is offered on these topics. This is also supported by the narrative comments received for the “Other” category.

## DIFFERENCES BY TENURE

Those who had been working for the County for less than five years were more likely to indicate receiving training on an annual basis. 33% of this respondent group stated they were trained this frequently, compared to 23% overall. Longer-tenured staff were more likely to receive training on these topics every two to three years, or on a different basis (captured under “Other”).

## DIFFERENCES BY DEPARTMENT

Some key differences by department were noted for this question:

- Ferry (50%) and Juvenile Court (67%) staff were most likely to indicate that they receive annual training on these topics. By comparison, zero respondents from Probation, EMS, Finance, and Examiner indicated they received annual training. Overall, 24% of respondents indicated they received training on an annual basis.
- Overall, 27% of staff stated they received training every two to three years. Executive (50%), Court (50%), Probation (83%), and EMS (67%) had the highest number of staff indicating receiving training on this basis. 0% of Council, Finance, HR, IT, and Juvenile Court received training this frequently.

## DIFFERENCES BY GENDER IDENTITY

Men were slightly more likely to indicate receiving training annually (25%) or every two to three years (37%) compared to other groups. By comparison, 23% of women received training annually, and 23% received training every two to three years. 17% of those who did not specify received annual training, and 23% received it every two to three years.

## DIFFERENCES BY RACE/ETHNICITY

There were minimal differences in response rates based on the race/ethnicity that respondents identified as regarding training frequency. Something that was highlighted, however, is that 13% of Asian respondents did not receive any training on these topics whatsoever, compared to 5% of staff overall.

## DIFFERENCES BY POSITION TYPE

Frequency of training varied slightly among respondent groups:

- 80% of Department Heads/Elected Officials indicated they received training annually or at least every two to three years, compared to around 50% overall.
- Similarly, 70% of Managers/Supervisors indicated they received training annually.
- 22% of non-supervisory staff had only received training on these topics during onboarding, as did temporary staff.
- 22% of temporary staff also had never received training on any of these topics.

## DIFFERENCES BY EXPERIENCE

Training frequency did not differ significantly between those who had submitted complaints to HR and those who had not.

## TRAINING QUALITY AND IMPROVEMENTS

A set of questions asked participants to rate the quality of the training they received on topics such as harassment, discrimination, and conflict, and to provide any potential improvements they would like to see implemented. A total of 539 participants rated the quality of training:

| How would you rate the quality of training?            | %   |
|--|-----|
| I have not received any training on these topics (N/A) | 3%  |
| Not helpful at all                                     | 6%  |
| Somewhat helpful                                       | 24% |
| Neutral  | 28% |
| Helpful  | 27% |
| Very Helpful   | 11% |

38% found the training they received to be helpful or very helpful, while 30% found it somewhat helpful or not helpful at all. 3% of participants indicated having not received training on the referenced topics.

### **DIFFERENCES BY TENURE**

Sentiment towards the quality of training varied slightly based on the length of employment, specifically among those with 10 to 20 years of tenure. 32% of this group found the training to be helpful/very helpful, while other groups were more positive about the training, with ratings of helpful/very helpful ranging from 40% to 45%.

### **DIFFERENCES BY DEPARTMENT**

Overall, 38% of respondents rated the training they received as helpful or very helpful. Those most likely to find the training to be helpful/very helpful included Administrative Services (65%), Executive (100%), EMS (100%), Finance (75%), HR (100%), and IT (75%).

Conversely, HCS (27%), PA (25%), and Court Clerk (20%) were the departments most likely to not find the training to be helpful or very helpful.

### **DIFFERENCES BY GENDER IDENTITY**

Overall, 52% of those who identified as men found training to be helpful or very helpful. By comparison, 36% of women and 24% of those who did not disclose a gender identity shared this sentiment. 39% of those who did not disclose their gender identity found the training to be somewhat helpful or not helpful at all.

### **DIFFERENCES BY RACE/ETHNICITY**

Participants rated the quality of training similarly with no significant differences based on their race/ethnicity.

### **DIFFERENCES BY POSITION TYPE**

Regardless of position type, each respondent group rated the quality of the training similarly - approximately 40% of each group rated it as helpful/very helpful, while 30% rated it as somewhat or not helpful.

### **DIFFERENCES BY EXPERIENCE**

Both those who had and had not previously submitted complaints to HR rated the quality of the training they had received similarly.

### **IMPROVEMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

A final question in this section asked participants to provide suggestions for how training on these topics could be improved. Each comment was analyzed by the project team and was categorized into thematic areas based on said analysis. 259 responses were received. These have been summarized below:



- 76 comments indicated a desire for more frequent training. These comments noted that training on these topics should be offered on a standardized schedule (ideally annually) for all County employees and elected officials. Suggestions also included having more frequent opportunities for refresher training (e.g., a brief module every six months).
- 39 comments referenced the content and scope of the training as an improvement opportunity. Examples of how respondents wanted the scope of the content in the current training expanded included focused on how to create a positive workplace culture, addressing interdepartmental conflict, and providing training focused on diversity. Additionally, several comments noted that conflict resolution training is largely unavailable to those not in supervisory or leadership positions.
- 35 comments noted a desire for different training methods. Several of these referenced a desire for more in-person training opportunities as well as more interactive experiences in general. These comments noted that videos and other online platforms were not as effective in establishing an understanding of how to address workplace issues.
- 33 comments did not specifically reference the content/method of training but noted that they took issue with a perceived lack of enforcement and accountability when it comes to either attending training or applying concepts learned during said training. Some of these comments noted that they felt that policies and practices related to workplace conduct are unevenly enforced.
- 31 comments did not suggest an improvement. 28 of these fell under “N/A” or “No Suggestions”, but three specifically noted that the training they had received was of high quality.
- 30 comments dealt with the process for reporting and handling complaints, not specifically training. These responses noted a need for more reporting mechanisms (especially those that guarantee anonymity) as well as making procedures for handling workplace issues more consistent between departments. Some of these comments also noted a need for updates to policies to make them more comprehensive. One additional comment mentioned that more modern tools (such as an LMS) would be useful for tracking training.
- Seven comments referenced a need for more support and approachability from HR and other entities involved in processing complaints. Some comments referenced the perception that complaints may not be taken seriously or a lack of openness in communication. Similarly, six more comments applied the same concepts to leadership/supervisory staff.

### **A-3.3 REPORTING EXPERIENCE**

This chapter deals with questions identifying if respondents had reported a workplace concern to HR, as well as their sentiments regarding the overall process associated with doing so.

#### **REPORTING CONCERNS TO HR**

The survey asked specifically if respondents had ever reported a workplace concern to Human Resources (HR). In total, 547 respondents provided input into this question, with 12 opting to skip:

| Have you reported a concern to HR? | %   | #   |
|------------------------------------|-----|-----|
| Yes                                | 20% | 107 |
| No                                 | 80% | 440 |

20% of participants indicated reporting some sort of workplace issue to HR at some point during their employment with the County, while 80% had not. This question was then used to direct **only** those (107 respondents) who had reported a concern towards questions specific to their experience during the reporting process. The results of this section are summarized throughout the remainder of this chapter.

## DIFFERENCES BY TENURE

The likelihood of a participant reporting a concern to HR increased slightly based on their length of employment. Only 15% of those with the County for five years or less had reported such a concern. This increased to 20% among those with five to ten years of employment, then to 23% among the other two respondent groups (10-20, 20+).

## DIFFERENCES BY DEPARTMENT

Key differences by department are shown below. Note that percentages in this section are based on the number of respondents who identified as belonging to the department and did not skip the question.

- Multiple departments did not have any respondents indicate that they had submitted a complaint, including Ferry, Finance, IT, Treasurer, and County Extension.
- Departments with the highest number of respondents who had reported a concern included Auditor (33%), Council (38%), EMS (33%), and HR (33%). Overall, around 20% of respondents had submitted a complaint.

## DIFFERENCES BY GENDER IDENTITY

Those who did not specify a gender identity were more likely to have reported a workplace concern in the past. 35% of this group indicated that they had submitted a complaint. By comparison, 20% of women and 10% of men had submitted a concern to HR.

## DIFFERENCES BY RACE/ETHNICITY

Out of the 94 respondents who had reported a concern, 57% identified as White and 39% opted not to disclose their race or ethnicity. The remaining 3% represented one or two individuals belonging to one or two respondent groups. To maintain the anonymity of respondents, the project team opted not to include the specific race/ethnicity of this particular respondent group in this report. This data may still be used by the project team to analyze key differences in employee experiences.

It is worth highlighting, however, that those who did not disclose their race/ethnicity were more likely to have submitted a complaint compared to other demographics – 33% of these individuals had reported a complaint, compared to 19% of all respondents.

## DIFFERENCES BY POSITION TYPE

40% of the ten respondents identifying as Department Heads/Elected Officials had reported a concern to HR. 28% (of 106) of Division Managers/Supervisors had submitted a complaint, as had 16% (of 371) of non-supervisory personnel. No temporary staff indicated having reported a concern to HR.

## EXPERIENCE REPORTING CONCERNS

Participants were asked to react to a number of statements regarding how their complaint was handled. Respondents could strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each statement. This section received input from 106 respondents:

| # | Statement  | Str. D | D   | A   | Str. A |
|---|--|--------|-----|-----|--------|
| 1 | Human Resources was timely in its response.                                    | 12%    | 32% | 45% | 12%    |
| 2 | I was satisfied with the process overall.                                      | 25%    | 38% | 31% | 6%     |
| 3 | I was satisfied with the outcome.  | 27%    | 38% | 29% | 6%     |
| 4 | Human Resources conducted a thorough investigation.                            | 32%    | 33% | 28% | 7%     |
| 5 | I feel comfortable reporting workplace concerns to Human Resources.            | 30%    | 27% | 30% | 13%    |
| 6 | My colleagues are comfortable reporting workplace concerns to Human Resources. | 30%    | 43% | 20% | 7%     |

The following bullets summarize key findings from this question:

- 56% of participants felt that HR provided a timely response after a complaint was submitted. This was the only statement that received a majority level of agreement.
- 63% of participants were not satisfied with the overall process related to their complaint.
- 65% were not satisfied with the eventual outcome of their complaint.
- 65% did not feel as though HR conducted a thorough investigation.
- 57% of participants reported feeling uncomfortable reporting workplace concerns to HR.
- 72% shared that they felt as though their colleagues may also feel uncomfortable sharing workplace concerns.

From a high-level overview of results, there appears to be a level of dissatisfaction among respondents regarding the investigative process and its outcomes. Additionally, results point to a sentiment of

potential distrust with how HR handles complaints, as well as the level of comfort in reporting workplace concerns.

Those who disagreed with any of the above statements were asked to provide a narrative explanation for their rating. A total of 74 comments were collected and are summarized below:

- 20 of these comments broadly referred to a lack of trust in HR when handling workplace issues. These comments shared perceptions that the department prioritizes supporting the County organization over supporting employees.
- 18 comments indicated that they did not feel adequately supported by HR after submitting a complaint. These comments focused on a lack of communication from HR or the perception that department staff were not interested in their complaint.
- 14 comments raised issues with the process of handling complaints, highlighting a lack of transparency into how complaints were handled, that the process can be lengthy, and that they were not effectively communicated with during the process.
- Five comments noted they were dissatisfied with the outcome of their report, and that the issue was not sufficiently addressed.
- Five comments highlighted cultural issues within their department (by directors, managers, or supervisors) that are not appropriately addressed.
- Four comments explicitly stated that they fear retaliation if they make a complaint.
- Eight comments stated “N/A”.

## DIFFERENCES BY TENURE

The following differences based on the participant’s length of employment with the County were noted:

- Those who had been with the County for the shortest period were more positive towards the timeliness of the process (#1). 71% of respondents with five years tenure or less agreed with this statement. This decreased between each respondent group (5-10 years, 59%, 10-20 years, 44%, 20+ years, 33%).
- 50% of those with five years of employment or less were satisfied with the process (#2), compared to 36% overall. Disagreement towards this statement increased based on the length of employment, with 78% of those with 20+ years of experience disagreeing with this statement.
- Similarly, 47% percent of those with five years or less of employment were satisfied with the outcome of their complaint (#3). This decreased with each respondent group, with 72% of the longest tenured respondents disagreeing.
- 50% of respondents who had been employed for five years or less agreed that HR conducted a thorough investigation of their complaint (#4). Agreement decreased among those with 5 to 10 years of employment (38%), 10 to 20 years of employment (29%), and 20+ years of employment (19%).

- 60% of those who had five years of employment or less felt comfortable reporting concerns to HR (#5). This decreased to 38% among those with 5 to 10 years tenure, 33% for those with 10 – 20 years employment, and then 28% among longer tenured staff.
- Responses varied less significantly between respondent groups regarding how they perceived their colleague's comfort with reporting issues (#6). While shorter-tenured staff were more positive (38%), other groups' agreement ratings ranged from 25% to 22%.

## DIFFERENCES BY DEPARTMENT

This cross-tabulation resulted in the largest number of respondent groups containing one respondent. This poses a risk of identifying a respondent based on their responses. Therefore, this information has not been included in this report.

## DIFFERENCES BY GENDER IDENTITY

The following key findings were noted:

- 50% of those who did not specify a gender identity were not satisfied with HR's timeliness (#1), compared to 63% of men and 59% of women.
- Overall, 62% of respondents were not satisfied with the outcome (#2). This varied based on gender identity. 56% of men disagreed with this statement, 59% of women disagreed, and 72% of those who did not disclose were unsatisfied.
- 50% of men were satisfied with the outcome of their report (#3), compared to 39% of women and 22% of those who did not disclose.
- 75% of those who did not specify a gender identity felt that HR did not conduct a thorough investigation of their complaint (#4). 53% of men and 63% of women shared this sentiment.
- 57% of women felt comfortable sharing concerns with HR (#5), compared to 53% of men and 25% of those who did not disclose.
- Women were much more likely to feel as though their colleagues could report a concern (#6). 44% of women agreed with this statement. By comparison, only 19% of men and 12% of those who did not disclose agreed with this sentiment.

## DIFFERENCES BY RACE/ETHNICITY

Key differences in response rates are noted below:

- 76% of those who did not disclose their race/ethnicity were dissatisfied with the outcome of their report (#3), compared to 64% overall and 55% of those who identified as White.
- 68% of those who did not specify a race/ethnicity felt uncomfortable reporting concerns to HR (#5), compared to 46% of White respondents and 56% overall.
- 80% of undisclosed respondents felt that their colleagues were not comfortable reporting concerns to HR (#6), compared to 68% overall.

- For the small respondent group that did not belong to either of the groups mentioned above (White, Unspecified), 100% disagreement was provided to all statements in this section, save for #6.

## DIFFERENCES BY POSITION TYPE

Differences in experiences reporting concerns are summarized below:

- 69% of Managers/Supervisors found HR to be timely in its response (#1), compared to 55% overall.
- 50% of Department Heads/Elected Officials and 59% of Managers/Supervisors were satisfied with the process overall (#2). By comparison, 26% of non-supervisory staff indicated being satisfied with the process. Each group also provided the same agreement ratings towards the following statement (#3) regarding the outcome of their report.
- 50% of Department Heads/Elected Officials and 54% of Managers/Supervisors believed that HR conducted a fair investigation (#4). Only 28% of non-supervisory staff agreed with this statement.
- 67% of Managers/Supervisors felt comfortable reporting concerns to HR (#5), as did 50% of Department Heads/Elected Officials. Only 34% of non-supervisory staff agreed with this statement.
- 50% of Department Heads/Elected Officials felt that their colleagues felt comfortable sharing concerns with HR. By comparison, this statement received only 36% agreement from Managers/Supervisors and only 24% agreement from non-supervisory staff.

## BARRIERS TO REPORTING CONCERNS

Those who had reported a concern to HR were also asked if they perceived any potential barriers to submitting a complaint. Participants could select up to six options, one of which allowed for written input, that they felt could be limiting staff's ability to comfortably share their concerns with HR. 97 participants provided input for this question:

| What may prevent you from reporting concerns to HR? | %   | #  |
|---|-----|----|
| Fear of retaliation                                 | 62% | 60 |
| Lack of clarity on the process                      | 38% | 37 |
| Lack of trust in HR                                 | 75% | 73 |
| Previous negative experiences                       | 63% | 61 |
| Confidentiality concerns                            | 59% | 57 |
| Other (please specify)                              | 20% | 19 |

The three most common barriers to reporting concerns were a lack of trust in HR (75%), prior negative experiences (63%), and a fear of retaliation (62%). 59% of participants also indicated concerns regarding the confidentiality of reports. 20% of those who responded to this question also provided written responses, summarized below:

- Six comments shared experiences indicating a lack of neutrality/employee support during the HR process, which led to an overarching lack of trust with the department. A common perception shared

was that HR exists solely to protect those in senior/leadership positions as opposed to other employees.

- Three comments clearly stated they did not perceive any barriers to reporting issues.
- Two comments felt that the process was too protracted, which serves as a limitation for future reports.
- Two comments noted that they were confused about whether their specific issue should be reported to their Union or HR first.
- Two comments were marked as “N/A” due to no specific strength or issue being identified.
- One comment stated they had experienced all of the above barriers at some point previously.
- One comment shared that mismanagement of their complaint led to their mistrust of the process.
- One comment shared that they feared retribution/retaliation, while one other noted that they were concerned that their complaint may indirectly impact their colleagues.

## **DIFFERENCES BY TENURE**

The following key differences based on participants’ length of employment were noted:

- Those employed between ten and twenty years were more concerned with fear of retaliation compared to others. 83% of this group stated this as a barrier to reporting a concern, compared to 62% overall.
- 59% of those employed between five and ten years perceived a lack of clarity regarding the process, compared to 38% overall.
- Longer tenured staff (ten years or more) were more likely to indicate having prior negative experiences reporting issues. 70% of those with ten to twenty years of experience, and 88% of those with twenty or more years of experience, selected this as an option. 62% selected this overall.

## **DIFFERENCES BY DEPARTMENT**

This cross-tabulation resulted in the largest number of respondent groups containing one respondent. This poses a risk of identifying a respondent based on their responses. Therefore, this information has not been included in this report.

## **DIFFERENCES BY GENDER IDENTITY**

Overall, each respondent group provided similar input towards this question regarding barriers to filing complaints. Some key differences included:

- Women were least concerned with the fear of retaliation. 54% of women selected this option, compared to 69% of men and 68% of those who did not disclose their gender.
- 79% of those who did not disclose their gender identity were concerned with a lack of trust in HR. 69% of men and 73% of women selected this option.



- 59% of those identified as women had prior negative experiences reporting complaints, compared to 63% of men and 68% of those undisclosed.
- Only 31% of men were concerned about the confidentiality of their complaint. By comparison, this barrier was selected by 59% of women and 68% of those who did not disclose a gender identity.

## DIFFERENCES BY RACE/ETHNICITY

Perceived barriers towards reporting complaints did not differ significantly between those of varying racial and ethnic identities.

## DIFFERENCES BY POSITION TYPE

Key differences for this group of respondents included:

- Lack of trust in HR, prior negative experiences, and confidentiality concerns were indicated as barriers by 100% of Department Heads/Elected Officials.
- 64% of Managers/Supervisors felt a lack of trust in HR. This group was also less likely than others to indicate a fear of retaliation, prior negative experiences, and confidentiality concerns compared to other groups.
- Being the largest respondent group, non-supervisory staff's response closely aligned with the overall responses contained in 4.2. The single largest barrier – selected by 78% of these respondents – was lack of trust in HR.

## A-3.4 SUPERVISORY QUESTIONS

Similar to the previous section, the survey featured questions specific to those in supervisory or management positions. Respondents were asked to identify if they were responsible for supervising employees:

| Are you in a supervisory/managerial role? | %   | #   |
|---|-----|-----|
| Yes                                       | 25% | 136 |
| No  | 75% | 408 |

The 25% of respondents who indicated supervising personnel were then asked questions specific to their experience as supervisors. These are summarized in the following sections.

## SUPERVISOR MULTIPLE-CHOICE STATEMENTS

Supervisors were provided with several statements related to their understanding, training, and overall support received related to the handling of workplace issues. This section received input from 134 participants in total:



| # | Statement  | SD | D   | A   | SA  |
|---|--|----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 | I understand my supervisory obligation under County policy regarding providing a positive work environment and addressing workplace issues that are brought to me. | 1% | 2%  | 38% | 59% |
| 2 | I have received training on my responsibilities in handling workplace issues and complaints.   | 5% | 11% | 54% | 31% |
| 3 | The training I received was sufficient to prepare me for my supervisory obligations.   | 5% | 21% | 47% | 27% |
| 4 | I feel confident handling my supervisory responsibilities.   | 0% | 5%  | 53% | 42% |
| 5 | I feel confident in supporting employees who bring forward workplace complaints.   | 2% | 9%  | 39% | 50% |
| 6 | I have the requisite skills to identify and address workplace issues and complaints.   | 1% | 3%  | 52% | 44% |
| 7 | The reporting process for raising issues to HR is clear.   | 5% | 23% | 45% | 27% |
| 8 | I feel supported by HR to address workplace issues and complaints.   | 7% | 21% | 47% | 25% |

The following bullets summarize key findings from this section:

- Three statements received very strong overall agreement of 90% or higher. 98% of supervisors understood their obligations regarding maintaining a positive workplace and handling issues (#1). 95% agreed that they feel confident handling their supervisory duties (#4). Lastly, 96% of participants felt equipped to identify and address workplace issues and complaints (#6).
- 85% of supervisory staff had received training on their responsibilities for handling issues and complaints (#2).
- 89% felt confident supporting employees who brought forward workplace complaints (#5).
- Three statements received slightly higher disagreement ratings compared to others – though overall agreement was still higher by comparison. 27% of supervisory staff felt that the training they had received was not sufficient in preparing them to handle their duties (#3). 28% of respondents did not find the reporting process to HR to be clear (#7). Lastly, 28% did not feel supported by HR in addressing workplace issues and complaints (#8).

The findings from this section overall show that supervisors generally feel confident in handling workplace issues and supporting staff, but there may be opportunities to strengthen the external framework (e.g., training, reporting procedures) to better support them. Though agreement was high across all statements in this section, the three with higher disagreement ratings still represent 25% of those who responded to this section.

## DIFFERENCES BY TENURE

Key differences in response rates based on tenure are noted below:

- 58% of those with five to ten years of experience agreed that the process for reporting concerns to HR was straightforward (#7), compared to 73% overall.

## DIFFERENCES BY DEPARTMENT

Key differences in response rates included:

- Overall, 85% of supervisory respondents indicated having received training on handling workplace complaints (#2). This was lower among those belonging to Facilities Management (50%), HCS (71%), and Medical Examiner (50%).
- 74% of supervisors found the training they received to be sufficient (#3). Agreement ratings were lower among Facilities (50%), HCS (46%), and Medical Examiner staff (50%).
- Overall, 72% found the process of reporting concerns to HR to be clear. This sentiment was shared by only 50% of Facilities Management Staff, 42% of HCS staff, and 50% of Juvenile Court Admin. staff.
- 72% of supervisors felt supported by HR when addressing workplace issues. Agreement ratings were lower among staff from Facilities (50%), HCS (54%), Juvenile Court (50%), PDS (33%), and Superior Court (33%).

## DIFFERENCES BY GENDER IDENTITY

The following key differences were noted based on each respondent's gender identity:

- 62% of those who did not disclose a gender identity agreed that their supervisory training prepared them for their obligations (#3), compared to 82% of men and 68% of women.
- 96% of those who identified as men felt confident supporting employees (#5), compared to 89% of women and 77% of those who did not disclose.
- 84% of men were clear on the reporting process to HR (#7), compared to 67% of women and 62% of those who did not specify.
- 65% of those who did not disclose their gender identity felt supported by HR (#8). By comparison, 80% of men and 71% women shared this sentiment.

## DIFFERENCES BY RACE/ETHNICITY

The following key differences were recorded:

- Overall, only 15% of supervisory staff felt that they had not been effectively trained in handling workplace issues (#2). This increased to 30% among those who did not disclose their race/ethnicity, and 33% among those who identified as Asian.
- 52% of those who did not specify their race/ethnicity felt effectively trained for the supervisory obligations (#3), compared to 72% overall.

## DIFFERENCES BY POSITION TYPE

This question primarily applies to those within the Department Head/Elected Official and Manager/Supervisory categories. Key differences are highlighted below:

- 40% of Department Heads/Officials felt that they did not receive sufficient training (#3), compared to 24% overall.
- 90% of Department Heads/Officials indicated that the process for raising issues to HR was clear (#7), compared to 73% of Managers/Supervisors.

## DIFFERENCES BY EXPERIENCE

Key differences based on whether the respondent had or had not submitted a prior complaint to HR are summarized below:

- 59% of those who had submitted complaints agreed that they had received sufficient training to handle issues (#3). By comparison, 79% of those who had not submitted a complaint agreed with this statement.
- 62% of those who had submitted a concern previously felt that the process for reporting concerns to HR was clear (#7) and that they felt supported by HR (#8). Those who had not submitted a complaint provided a 76% agreement rating to each of these statements.

## IMPROVEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Supervisory personnel were asked to list specific resources or support that would better enable them to manage workplace issues. This question received input from a total of 60 respondents. Responses to this section are summarized below:

- 24 respondents suggested improving or increasing the frequency of training on handling topics related to workplace issues.
- Nine comments indicated they would like to feel better supported when addressing workplace concerns, including more collaboration between HR and other involved entities.
- Eight comments stated they would like to see better, more comprehensive policies in place that are clear on supervisory expectations. Five additional comments indicated that the process involved in handling workplace concerns could be made clearer and more transparent.
- Seven comments noted a need for more accountability when it comes to handling workplace concerns, highlighting that the process is inconsistent between departments and/or the individual handling the complaint.
- Seven comments provided praise or offered no suggestions.

### A-3.5 EMPLOYEE-WIDE QUESTIONS

A series of question banks was provided to all respondents, regardless of their previous answers. These asked for general input regarding the effectiveness of supervisors, Human Resources, and Department Directors/Managers in addressing workplace issues and concerns.

#### STATEMENTS REGARDING DIRECT SUPERVISORS

Participants were asked to provide input towards a series of statements related to how effectively their direct supervisor addressed workplace issues. This section received input from a total of 527 responses:

| # | Statement  | SD | D   | A   | SA  |
|---|--|----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 | My supervisor understands their obligations under County policy regarding providing a positive work environment and addressing workplace issues. | 6% | 7%  | 41% | 47% |
| 2 | My supervisor has the knowledge and skills needed to handle workplace issues and complaints.   | 7% | 11% | 40% | 42% |
| 3 | I feel confident reporting workplace issues to my supervisor.  | 9% | 12% | 36% | 43% |
| 4 | My supervisor identifies and addresses workplace issues and complaints.  | 8% | 13% | 40% | 39% |
| 5 | The reporting process for raising workplace issues is clear.   | 8% | 17% | 42% | 32% |

The following bullets summarize key findings from this section:

- 87% of staff agreed or strongly agreed that their supervisor had a clear understanding of their obligations for maintaining a positive workplace and handling concerns.
- 82% indicated that their supervisor had the skills and knowledge necessary for handling issues and complaints.
- 80% of participants agreed that they felt confident reporting issues to their supervisor.
- 79% agreed that their supervisor identifies and addresses workplace issues and complaints.
- 75% of participants felt that the process for raising issues to their supervisor was clear.

Overall, agreement towards this section was high – each statement received a rating of 75% agreement or higher. Agreement was, however, slightly lower compared to statements in the prior chapter (five). It is also worth noting that statements #4 and #5 received the highest disagreement ratings of 21% and 25%, respectively, indicating that a portion of staff feel that their supervisor does not effectively identify issues and that the process for reporting a concern is unclear.

## DIFFERENCES BY TENURE

There were no significant differences in response rates based on the participant's length of employment for this question bank.

## DIFFERENCES BY DEPARTMENT

Key differences by department are noted in the following bullets:

- 88% of employees felt their supervisor understood their obligations (#1). Agreement was similar across departments, with multiple groups posting agreement ratings of 100%. Response rates were slightly lower among staff from Auditor (75%) and PA Office (78%).
- Responses regarding how well-equipped supervisors were in handling complaints (#2) varied by department. While several groups had agreement ratings of 100%, lower ratings were provided by EMS (67%), Parks and Rec (72%), and the PA Office (72%).
- 79% of respondents felt comfortable reporting issues to their supervisor (#3). This sentiment was shared by 63% of Council staff, 67% of EMS staff, and 68% of PA Office staff. These were the only departments to provide agreement ratings lower than 70%.
- Overall, 79% of respondents felt that their supervisor addressed workplace issues effectively (#4). Only EMS (67%), PA Office (69%), and Sheriff (69%) posted agreement ratings lower than 70%.
- 74% of staff found the reporting process to be clear (#5). Agreement was lower among those belonging to Auditor (63%), Probation (67%), HCS (65%), and Parks and Recreation (66%),

## DIFFERENCES BY GENDER IDENTITY

Key differences based on the respondent's gender identity are summarized below:

- Those who identified as men and women were closely aligned in their responses towards statements #1 through #4. Each group's overall agreement ratings were within 2% of each other for each statement. Agreement for each group deviated towards statement #5 (clarity of the reporting process); 84% of men and 76% of women agreed with this statement.
- Those who did not disclose a gender identity provided a lower level of agreement towards all statements in this section. 79% felt that their supervisor understood their obligations, 67% felt that their supervisor knew how to handle issues, 67% agreed that they were confident reporting concerns to their supervisor, 65% indicated their supervisor addressed concerns, and 60% felt that the process for reporting concerns was clear.

## DIFFERENCES BY RACE/ETHNICITY

Key differences based on how respondents identified are summarized below:

- Multiple respondent groups provided agreement ratings of 90% or higher for statements in this section. Respondents who identified as American Indian/Alaska Natives, Black/African American,

Hispanic/Latino, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander all provided agreement ratings of 90% to 100% for all statements in this section.

- Agreement ratings from individuals who did not disclose a specific racial/ethnic identity, as well as those who identified as Asian, were slightly lower overall. Each respondent group provided disagreement ratings of 25% or higher for all statements in this section.
- Those who did not disclose had the highest disagreement ratings for statements #3 through #6. 31% did not believe their supervisor had the skills to handle issues (#3), 34% did not feel confident reporting issues to their supervisor (#4), 35% did not believe that their supervisor effectively identifies/addresses workplace issues (#5), and 38% did not find the process for reporting issues to be clear.

## **DIFFERENCES BY POSITION TYPE**

There were no significant differences in response rates towards statements in this section based on the type of position the respondent belonged to.

## **DIFFERENCES BY EXPERIENCE**

Key differences based on whether the respondent had or had not submitted a prior complaint to HR are summarized below:

- 91% of those who had not submitted complaints felt that their supervisor understood their obligations under policy (#1), compared to 71% of those who had reported a concern.
- 62% of those who had reported a workplace issue felt that their supervisor had the skills and knowledge to address the issue (#2), compared to 87% of those who had not submitted complaints.
- 63% of those with a history of submitting complaints felt confident reporting a complaint to their supervisor (#3), compared to 83% of those who had not done so.
- 65% of participants who had reported a concern felt that their supervisor identifies and addresses workplace issues (#4). 83% of those who had not reported concerns to HR agreed with this statement.
- 78% of those who had not submitted a workplace issue felt that the reporting process was clear (#5). By comparison, 61% of those who had submitted such a concern agreed with this statement.

## **IMPROVEMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

Employees were asked to share what specific resources or support would help their supervisor better manage workplace issues. A total of 213 comments were collected and are summarized below:

- 29 comments noted a need for more communication and transparency in how the process related to handling workplace issues works at the supervisor level.
- 23 comments suggested that additional training for their supervisor would assist them in meeting their obligations.

- Eight comments highlighted a need for a more standardized and transparent process for handling complaints. Six additional comments noted that supervisors would benefit from more precise and up-to-date policy language.
- Six comments highlighted concerns that supervisors were not effectively handling workplace issues. Two more comments noted that their supervisors may lack the interpersonal skills to navigate these topics. One additional comment suggested providing more autonomy to supervisors to handle complaints, and another suggested implementing better internal communication tools to handle the process.
- Six comments noted that a lack of access/support from HR could be a limiting factor in handling concerns at a supervisory level, with three additional comments stating that once reports exceed the supervisory level, there is a fear of inaction or retaliation present. Two more comments highlighted a lack of support/employee advocacy from this department.
- One comment noted that the primary source of workplace issues for them arises from external factors, such as the public they serve.
- 29 comments stated that they felt their supervisor handled/is handling workplace concerns well and had no suggestions. Other respondents in this group said they were unaware of any potential improvements or stated "N/A".

## STATEMENTS REGARDING HUMAN RESOURCES

Another question bank featured statements related to Human Resources and its handling of workplace issues and complaints. This section received input from 513 participants overall:

| # | Statement   | SD  | D   | A   | SA  |
|---|---|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 | HR staff are available to assist me with workplace issues.                          | 8%  | 18% | 58% | 17% |
| 2 | HR staff are responsive when I approach them with workplace issues.                 | 8%  | 20% | 55% | 17% |
| 3 | I trust HR to handle complaints related to workplace issues in an impartial manner. | 17% | 23% | 45% | 15% |
| 4 | HR is adequately staffed to handle complaints related to workplace issues.          | 10% | 25% | 51% | 14% |

Findings from this section are summarized in the following bullets:

- 74% of participants felt that HR staff were available to assist with workplace issues, while 26% disagreed.
- 72% agreed that staff were responsive when approached with workplace issues, while 28% felt that responsiveness was lacking.



- 60% of staff indicated that they trusted HR to handle complaints in an impartial manner, while 40% disagreed.
- 65% of respondents noted that HR appeared staffed to adequately handle complaints, while 35% felt that the department was not staffed appropriately.

Though overall agreement exceeded 60% for all statements in this section, the higher level of disagreement (ranging from 26% to 40%) indicates that there may be some staff who hold negative perceptions regarding how HR handles workplace issues.

## **DIFFERENCES BY TENURE**

Differences in response rates based on tenure are noted below:

- 84% of those who had been with the County for less than five years felt that HR staff were available (#1), compared to 61% of those who had worked with the County for ten to twenty years.
- This trend continued with the remaining three statements in this question bank. Agreement ratings were lower for those with ten to twenty years of experience for all of these statements, while other groups had similar ratings. 57% felt that HR was responsive (#2), 41% felt that HR handled the complaint impartially (#3), and 56% felt that HR was adequately staffed (#4).
- Statement #3 specifically had some mixed responses based on tenure. 74% of newer staff felt that HR would handle their complaint impartially, while 52% of those with 20+ years of experience agreed.

## **DIFFERENCES BY DEPARTMENT**

Differences in response rates by department included:

- Overall, 75% of respondents felt that HR staff were available to assist with workplace issues (#1). Agreement was higher among several departments, but lower among those in PDS (54%) and the Sheriff's Office (59%).
- HR responsiveness was rated higher (#2) by those in Administrative Services (95%), Court (100%), Ferry (100%), Finance (100%), HR (100%), IT (100%), and Public Defender (95%). Conversely, lower agreement ratings were provided by EMS (50%) and PDS (48%).
- 60% of staff expected HR to conduct an impartial investigation (#3). Agreement exceeded 90% for multiple departments, including Administrative Services, District Court, HR, and Medical Examiner. Those most likely to share that HR may not be impartial were PDS (44%), Superior Court (47%), and Court Clerk (44%).
- 65% of all respondents felt that HR was adequately staffed to handle reports (#4). For this question, agreement was generally above 85% from most departments. However, only 50% of EMS, 46% of HCS, and 29% of PDS staff agreed with this statement.

## **DIFFERENCES BY GENDER IDENTITY**

Key differences based on participants' gender identity are noted below:



- 40% of those who did not disclose a gender identity did not feel supported by HR (#1), compared to 17% of men and 22% of women.
- 44% of those who did not disclose also did not feel as though HR staff were responsive (#2), compared to 19% of men and 23% of women.
- 60% of those who preferred not to specify their identity indicated that they did not trust HR to perform an impartial investigation (#3). By comparison, this sentiment was shared by 34% of men and 33% of women.
- Finally, 48% of undisclosed individuals felt that HR was not adequately staffed to address complaints (#4). This sentiment was shared by 28% of men and 34% of women.

## **DIFFERENCES BY RACE/ETHNICITY**

Key differences by respondent group are summarized below:

- Overall, 24% of respondents did not think that HR was available to assist them with workplace issues (#1). Disagreement was high among those who did not specify an identity. This group provided a rating of 42%. This group also provided higher levels of disagreement towards the remaining statements in this section. 42% did not find HR staff to be responsive (#2), 61% did not find HR to be impartial in its investigation (#3), and 48% did not think HR was staffed appropriately (#4).
- 100% of American Indians/Alaskan Natives and 92% of Hispanics/Latinos agreed that HR was appropriately staffed to address workplace issues (#4).

## **DIFFERENCES BY POSITION TYPE**

Differences based on the type of position the respondent belonged to are highlighted below:

- 90% of Department Heads/Elected Officials felt that HR was available to handle workplace issues (#1). This received 76% agreement overall, with non-supervisory staff providing the lowest agreement rating of 74%.
- 89% of Department Heads/Elected Officials and 86% of temporary staff found HR staff to be responsive (#2). 79% of Managers/Supervisors and 72% of non-supervisory staff agreed with this statement.
- 59% of non-supervisory staff trusted HR to conduct an impartial investigation (#3). 80% of Elected Officials/Department Heads agreed, as did 71% of Managers/Supervisors and temporary staff.
- 57% of Division Managers/Supervisors felt that HR was appropriately staffed to handle complaints (#4), as did 67% of non-supervisory staff.

## **DIFFERENCES BY EXPERIENCE**

Key differences based on whether the respondent had or had not submitted a prior complaint to HR are summarized below:

- 61% of those who had submitted a concern felt that HR staff were available (#1), and 55% viewed HR as responsive to their concern (#2). This statement received agreement levels of 78% and 77% from those who had not reported a workplace issue.
- 58% of those who had submitted a complaint did not feel as though HR conducted an impartial investigation (#3). By comparison, 35% of the other respondent group shared this sentiment.
- 50% of those with experience reporting concerns felt HR was adequately staffed to handle complaints (#4), compared to 68% of those who had not submitted an issue.

### STATEMENTS REGARDING DIRECTORS/SUPERVISORS

The next question bank in this section dealt with perceptions surrounding how Department Directors and Supervisors handled workplace issues and complaints. This section received input from a total of 515 participants overall:

| # | Statement  | SD  | D   | A   | SA  |
|---|--|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 | Department Directors and Supervisors are available to assist me with workplace issues.                     | 5%  | 9%  | 57% | 28% |
| 2 | Department Directors and Supervisors are responsive when I approach them with workplace issues.            | 7%  | 13% | 53% | 28% |
| 3 | Department Directors and Supervisors handle complaints related to workplace issues in an impartial manner. | 11% | 17% | 48% | 25% |
| 4 | My Department is adequately staffed to handle complaints related to workplace issues.                      | 9%  | 20% | 47% | 24% |

Findings from this question bank are summarized below:

- 85% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that Directors/Supervisors were available to assist them with workplace issues, while 15% disagreed.
- 81% agreed that Directors/Supervisors were responsive when approached with workplace issues. 19% disagreed.
- 73% of participants agreed that Directors/Supervisors handled complaints in an impartial manner. 27% did not.
- 71% of respondents noted that their Department was staffed appropriately to handle complaints, while 29% disagreed.

Similar to prior sections, each statement in this question bank received an agreement rating higher than 50%, ranging from 71% to 85%. Some issues regarding the impartiality of investigations, as well as staff capacity to handle complaints, were raised by 25% or more of the respondents for this section.

### DIFFERENCES BY TENURE

Key differences based on tenure are noted below:

- Those with five to twenty years of experience were less positive towards the responsiveness of Directors/Supervisors (#2) compared to others. Overall, this received 80% agreement but received 74% and 72% agreement from these groups.
- 81% of newer staff (five years or less) felt that Directors/Supervisors handled complaints impartially, compared to 73% overall.

## **DIFFERENCES BY DEPARTMENT**

The following differences by department were noted:

- While 81% of respondents found their Directors/Supervisors to be responsive (#2), agreement was lower among those from Facilities (60%) and PA Office (65%).
- Overall, 73% agreed that Directors/Supervisors handled complaints impartially (#3). Agreement was higher than 90% among those in Court, Probation, Ferry, IT, Court, and Court Clerk. The lowest agreement ratings came from Finance (50%) and PA Office (58%).
- 71% of staff felt their department was staffed appropriately to handle complaints (#4). At the departmental level, results generally aligned (or exceeded) this overall value. However, only 39% of PDS staff agreed with this statement.

## **DIFFERENCES BY GENDER IDENTITY**

Key differences based on participants' gender identity are noted below:

- 27% of those who did not disclose a gender identity felt that their Directors/Supervisors were not available to assist them (#1). By comparison, 8% of men and 14% of women indicate similarly.
- 37% of undisclosed individuals shared that Directors/Supervisors were not responsive (#2). 18% of respondents disagreed with this statement overall.
- 48% of those who preferred not to share their identity felt that Directors/Supervisors handled complaints in an impartial manner (#3), compared to 25% overall.
- Lastly, 44% of those who kept their gender identity anonymous did not think their department was staffed to handle complaints (#4). Overall, this statement received 28% disagreement.

## **DIFFERENCES BY RACE/ETHNICITY**

Key differences based on how respondents identified are summarized below:

- Those who did not disclose their gender identity provide higher levels of disagreement towards statements in this section. 28% did not feel as though Directors/Supervisors were available to assist with workplace issues (#1), 37% found Directors/Supervisors to be unresponsive (#2), 46% felt that their complaint was not handled in an impartial manner (#3), and 42% did not believe their department was staffed appropriately to handle complaints (#4).

- 100% of American Indian/Alaskan Native, Hispanic/Latino, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander staff agreed that Directors/Supervisors were available (#1) and responsive (#2) when approached with workplace issues.

## DIFFERENCES BY POSITION TYPE

Differences based on position type are summarized below:

- Elected Officials and Managers/Supervisors were more positive towards statements #1 through #3, with each group providing agreement ratings of 90% or higher.
- 77% of non-supervisory staff felt as though Directors/Supervisors were responsive when approached with concerns (#2).
- 70% of non-supervisory staff felt that complaints were handled in an impartial manner (#3).
- 100% of temporary workers felt that their department was appropriately staffed to handle complaints (#4). The other three respondent groups were less likely to agree – providing agreement ratings of 71% (non-supervisory), 72% (Manager/Supervisory), and 80% (Department Head/Elected Official).

## DIFFERENCES BY EXPERIENCE

Key differences based on whether the respondent had or had not submitted a prior complaint to HR are summarized below:

- 70% of those who had reported a workplace issue felt that Directors/Supervisors were available to assist them (#1). 61% felt that Directors/Supervisors were responsive (#2). Each statement received 85% and 79% overall agreement, respectively.
- 54% of participants who indicated reporting an issue felt that Directors/Supervisors handled their complaint impartially (#3), compared to 78% of those who had not submitted a complaint.
- 51% of respondents who had submitted a concern felt that their department was staffed to handle complaints, compared to 76% of those who had not.

## SENTIMENT REGARDING REPORTING WORKPLACE ISSUES

A question posed to all respondents was whether they felt as though employees could report workplace misconduct (or other issues) without fear of retaliation. This question received input from 527 respondents:

| Do you believe you can report issues without fear of retaliation? | %   | #   |
|---|-----|-----|
| Yes   | 43% | 227 |
| No  | 26% | 139 |
| Unsure  | 31% | 161 |

While “Yes” represented the single largest respondent group for this question (accounting for 43% of respondents), a notable portion of respondents (26%) felt that there was a chance that reports of

workplace issues could be met with retaliation. Furthermore, 31% were unsure of their sentiment towards this question.

## **DIFFERENCES BY TENURE**

55% of those employed for over 20 years felt that they could report issues without fear of retaliation. This was compared to 48% of those employed for five years or less, 41% of those employed for five to ten years, and 31% of those employed between ten and twenty years.

## **DIFFERENCES BY DEPARTMENT**

Key differences included:

- The following departments had 80% or more of their respondents indicate “Yes” (no fear of retaliation): Probation, HR, Medical Examiner, Treasurer. Departments least likely to select “Yes” included: Council (38%), HCS (36%), PA (34%), Public Defender (39%), and Public Works (39%).
- The most likely departments to select “No” (that there is a risk of retaliation) included: Executive (33%), EMS (33%), HCS (30%), PA (38%), and Sheriff (38%).
- The departments with the highest ratings of “Unsure” include Administrative Services (50%), Council (50%), Facilities (50%), and Finance (50%).

## **DIFFERENCES BY GENDER IDENTITY**

Key differences by respondent group included:

- 58% of men felt that issues could be reported without fear of retaliation, compared to 42% of women and 25% of those who did not disclose a gender identity.
- 45% of those who did not disclose their gender identity felt that they could not report issues due to retaliation. This was shared by 17% of men and 22% of women.
- 25% of men, 35% of women, and 31% of those who did not share a gender identity were unsure regarding this topic.

## **DIFFERENCES BY RACE/ETHNICITY**

Key differences by respondent group included:

- 67% of Black/African American staff did not believe that issues could be reported without fear of retaliation. This sentiment was shared by 44% of staff who did not provide their racial/ethnic identity. Overall, 25% of respondents felt that this was an issue.
- 67% of American Indian/Alaskan Native staff felt that they could submit a complaint without being retaliated against. Overall, 43% of respondents agreed.

## DIFFERENCES BY POSITION TYPE

While 90% of Department Heads/Elected Officials felt that complaints could be submitted without fear of retaliation, other respondent groups were more mixed towards this question:

- 58% of Managers/Supervisors agreed with this sentiment, while 19% disagreed and 24% were unsure.
- 39% of non-supervisory staff agreed, while 27% disagreed and 33% were unsure.
- 67% of staff felt that they could submit complaints without fear of retaliation, while 33% disagreed.

## DIFFERENCES BY EXPERIENCE

Approximately 51% of individuals who had submitted a complaint previously indicated that they perceived the potential for retaliation for their complaint. 28% of this respondent group felt that retaliation was not an issue, and 27% were unsure.

Conversely, around 48% of those who had not submitted a complaint previously did not think retaliation would be an issue. 21% believed retaliation did exist, and 32% were unsure.