



MIAMI-DADE COMMISSION ON ETHICS AND PUBLIC TRUST

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Sophia Burgess, Eligibility Interviewer
Miami-Dade Community Action and Human Services Department

FROM: Susannah Nesmith, Staff Attorney
Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust

SUBJECT: INQ 2024-159; Section 2-11.1(c), Prohibition on transacting business with the County.

DATE: October 8, 2024

CC: COE Legal Staff; Letah Parrish, Family and Community Services Division Director, Miami-Dade Community Action and Human Services Department (“CAHSD”); Cornelius Nealy, Self-Help Team Manager, CAHSD; Ali Echevarria, Self-Help Team Manager, CAHSD

Thank you for contacting the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust to request our guidance regarding your ability to participate in the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (“LIHEAP”),¹ which is administered by the Miami-Dade Community Action and Human Services Department (“CAHSD”).

Facts

You, Sophia Burgess, are employed by CAHSD as an Eligibility Interviewer. Your job duties generally include interviewing CAHSD clients, determining their eligibility to participate in various CAHSD-administered assistance programs, and then completing and/or processing the applications of those individuals to participate in said programs. LIHEAP is one of the programs for which you screen CAHSD clients. You advised that you currently work at CAHSD’s Florida City Community Resource Center.

¹ The LIHEAP is a federally funded program administered by CAHSD that financially assists low-income households in paying for cooling or heating, providing eligible households up to \$2,000.00 over a twelve-month period. *Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP)*, LIGHT BILL ASSISTANCE, https://www.miamidade.gov/global/service.page?Mduid_service=ser150420_4216164378 (last visited October 4, 2024).

You are seeking to participate in the LIHEAP. Your CAHSD job duties, as described above, include administrative duties related to CAHSD's operation of the LIHEAP. Your supervisor, Cornelius Nealy, advised that he was aware of your LIHEAP application and that he would not assign you to do any work which might involve, however tangentially, your own application. You advise that you intend to apply for the program at the Naranja Community Resource Center.

Ali Echevarria, the CAHSD supervisor at the Naranja Community Resource Center, was also consulted and provided with the CAHSD policy that lays out the Department's mitigation measures.

Issue

Whether the Miami-Dade County Conflict of Interest and Code of Ethics Ordinance ("County Ethics Code") would prevent you from contracting or otherwise doing business with CAHSD to participate in the LIHEAP.

Discussion

The County Ethics Code generally prohibits a County employee and his or her immediate family members from transacting business with the County department for which the County employee works. *See* Section 2-11.1(c)(2), County Ethics Code. However, section 2-11.1(c)(5)(7) of the County Ethics Code provides that County employees and their immediate family members who are otherwise eligible for assistance with costs associated with housing, childcare, utilities, public transit, healthcare, or other basic or essential human or social services through any County department or agency should be permitted to seek such assistance, so long as they do not administer the program. When a County employee administers a housing or other assistance program to which he or she wishes to apply, Section 2-11.1(c)(6) of the County Ethics Code provides that appropriate mitigation measures by the employing County department must be delineated and implemented before the employee can receive the benefit of the program. Employees in this situation may proceed with an application for assistance **only after** the Ethics Commission has found the employing County department's mitigation plan "sufficient to abate the potential conflict of interest" and said plan must include the removal of the employee "from participation in the administration of the program as regards his or her application." Section 2-11.1(c)(6), County Ethics Code.

CAHSD has crafted and implemented a Procedural Memorandum entitled "Serving Employees and Family Members – Section XVI" that establishes specific mitigation measures to abate potential conflicts of interest related to eligible CAHSD staff and their family members applying to participate in a program administered by CAHSD. Specifically, CAHSD's policy provides:

2..... **A client case file shall be established in every instance that an individual staff person requests services from and/or participation in CAHSD programs.**

....

5. In the event that the services requested require the disbursement of program funds . . . either directly to or on behalf of the individual/staff person, the unit supervisor must arrange a face-to-face staffing with the appropriate division director to staff the case

within one (1) working day.

6. The Division Director shall be responsible for reviewing the case to ensure eligibility; compliance with funding and/or program mandates; and for documenting in the case file his/her review and subsequent approval/disapproval.

(emphasis in original).

Your employment as an Eligibility Interviewer with CAHSD requires you to participate in the administration of the LIHEAP because you process applications and determine eligibility for programs administered by CAHSD, including LIHEAP. However, CAHSD had delineated and implemented a conflict of interest mitigation policy to screen you from participation in the administration of your own application for assistance. Furthermore, your direct supervisor, Cornelius Neely, advised that your application to participate in the LIHEAP will not be processed at the Florida City Community Resource Center where you work; rather, you will be required to submit your application at a different location. You advised that you intend to submit your application to participate in the LIHEAP at the Naranja Community Resource Center. Ali Echevarria, the supervisor of that Community Resource Center, advised that she will conduct the intake of your application to participate in the LIHEAP and then will staff it per the CAHSD policy. Accordingly, in light of CAHSD's policy screening employees from participating in the processing and administration of their own applications for assistance, and the explanations of Mr. West and Ms. Echevarria regarding how that policy will be implemented in your specific case, **we find that the mitigation plan is sufficient to abate the potential conflict of interest.** *See* County Ethics Code § 2-11.1(c)(6); INQ 24-86 (finding CAHSD's mitigation plan sufficient to abate the potential conflict of interest of a Social Worker 1 applying to participate in the same program he administered).

Opinion

After reviewing the facts presented to us, for the reasons discussed above we conclude that **you, Sophia Burgess, may apply and contract or otherwise do business with CAHSD to participate in the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program**, provided that both you and CAHSD abide by the conflict mitigation plan adopted by CAHSD, that you are otherwise removed from participation in the administration of the program as to your application, and provided that you are otherwise eligible to participate in the program. *See* County Ethics Code § 2-11.1(c)(6); INQ 24-86.

Additionally, the County Ethics Code prohibits County employees from exploiting their official position. This means that you may not use your County position to secure special privileges or exemptions with respect to your participation in the LIHEAP or any other County program to which you are applying. *See* County Ethics Code § 2-11.1(g).

This opinion is limited to the facts as you presented them to the Commission on Ethics regarding conflicts under Sections 2-11.1(c) and (d) of the Miami-Dade Conflict of Interest and Code of Ethics Ordinance only. Based on directives from the department that employs you or under state law, other conflicts may apply. If you have additional questions regarding possible conflicts based on your County department directives, contact your department supervisor or the Mayor's Office. For an opinion regarding Florida ethics law, please contact the Florida Commission on Ethics,

P.O. Drawer 15709, Tallahassee, FL 32317, phone number (850) 488-7864, <http://www.ethics.state.fl.us/>.

You must submit this opinion to the Community Action and Human Services Department for inclusion in your application file. The Ethics Commission does not submit this memorandum on your behalf.

INQs are informal ethics opinions provided by the legal staff after being reviewed and approved by the Executive Director. INQs deal with opinions previously addressed in public session by the Commission on Ethics or within the plain meaning of the County Ethics Code. RQOs are opinions provided by the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust when the subject matter is of great public importance or where there is insufficient precedent. While this is an informal opinion, covered parties that act contrary to the opinion may be referred to the Advocate for preliminary review or investigation and may be subject to a formal Complaint filed with the Commission on Ethics and Public Trust.