WHISTLEBLOWING AND MENTAL HEALTH

Whistleblowers face significant psychological, financial, and even physical threats — often by the very institutions they are trying to protect. These courageous individuals may contact Congress for guidance and support when they feel they have nowhere else to turn. Congressional offices may also hear from individuals who are living with mental illnesses and identify as whistleblowers.

This guidance document identifies common forms of whistleblower retaliation and mental health impacts, as well as best practices and resources to help congressional offices manage difficult interactions.

COMMON FORMS OF RETALIATION

Forms of whistleblower retaliation are constantly evolving. Common categories include:

- **Workplace Reprisal:** Employers often resort to Machiavellian tactics to make an example out of the whistleblower. Retaliation may include: administrative leave, termination, or banishment from one's career field; gaslighting or bullying; negative performance reviews; removal of job duties or employment benefits; retaliatory investigations; and security clearance suspension.
- **Criminal and Civil Liability:** Whistleblowers are often treated as if they have committed a crime for exposing a crime. Employers may file retaliatory civil lawsuits (e.g., defamation) or a referral for criminal prosecution. Laws typically do not prohibit these forms of retaliation, leaving whistleblowers vulnerable.
- **Personal Attacks:** Whistleblowers are often subjected to public smear campaigns by their employer to try to discredit them and distract from their disclosures. The retaliator may make false accusations or engage in "doxing" — publicly revealing their personal information. The source may need to take security precautions to protect their and their family's property and safety.

MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS OF WHISTLEBLOWING

The whistleblowing experience can be isolating and traumatic. It may lead to post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and thoughts of self-harm. Solidarity is key to survival, and congressional support can play an important role. However, a congressional office is not expected to be a whistleblower's sole outlet. Taking on that responsibility can be overwhelming and unrealistic, leading to unreasonable expectations for everyone involved. It is important for whistleblowers to practice self-care and develop a community of support through experienced legal counsel, whistleblower advocacy organizations, trusted peers, loved ones, and mental health experts.

HANDLING DIFFICULT INQUIRIES

Some individuals who self-identify as whistleblowers may be living with an unrelated mental illness. Keep in mind, they are still coming forward with their reality and want to be heard. Key practices are to thank them for reaching out; try to understand their concerns and goals; communicate your office's jurisdiction and your time limitations; and offer to share guiding resources. This approach may help provide them with closure.

Regardless of the credibility of an individual's disclosures, congressional offices should not tolerate abusive behavior. Know your office's policy for how to handle people who do not respect your boundaries.

THE NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION LIFELINE OFFERS FREE AND CONFIDENTIAL SUPPORT BY DIALING 988

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OFFICE OF THE WHISTLEBLOWER OMBUDS

202-226-6638 | whistleblower.house.gov
WhistleblowerOffice@mail.house.gov

This screening process will also help identify viable partnerships; individuals who are serious about working with Congress will act respectfully.

GUIDING RESOURCES FOR POTENTIAL WHISTLEBLOWERS

Congressional offices are not expected to vet all potential whistleblower matters — it will depend on your office's priorities and capacity. However, offices can still help individuals who identify as whistleblowers by sharing guiding resources. To manage large volumes of inquiries, offices may also establish whistleblower intake webforms and auto-responses with resources. The following menu is available on the Office of the Whistleblower Ombuds **Resources for Whistleblowers** page.

- **Whistleblower Survival Tips:** Key steps whistleblowers can take to protect themselves while having an impact, including developing a network of support and engaging in self-care.
- **Best Practices for Working with Congress:** Guidelines for whistleblowers to support their interactions with congressional offices.
- **Whistleblower Support Organizations and Legal Resources:** A menu of nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations that have experience working with or representing whistleblowers.
- **Governmental Referrals:** A menu of governmental referrals for public and private sector whistleblowing, as well as a committee jurisdiction tool.

GUIDING RESOURCES FOR CONGRESSIONAL OFFICES

Working with whistleblowers can take a toll on a congressional employee's well-being and even productivity. These cases may generate a range of concerns for staff, such as: being impacted by the intense circumstances of the whistleblower; the need for extreme vigilance and confidentiality in sensitive situations; and engagement in long-term whistleblower matters, which can be isolating and include time pressures. Staff are encouraged to engage the following House offices for support:

- **Office of the Whistleblower Ombuds:** An independent and nonpartisan support office that provides confidential case consultations, intake guidance, and other customized services to assist Member offices and committees in working with whistleblowers — whether constituents or oversight sources. The Office can be reached at 202-226-6638 or **whistleblower.house.gov**.
- **The House's Office of Employee Assistance (OEA):** OEA is staffed by caring behavioral health professionals who provide confidential 1:1 counseling and coaching to help employees manage a wide range of stressors impacting their work and wellness. They also provide workshops to help teams navigate a variety of constituent challenges and optimize resilience. The OEA can be reached at 202-225-2400 or **employeeassistance.house.gov**.
- **Sergeant at Arms:** If an interaction becomes confrontational and you feel unsafe, contact the U.S. Capitol Police at **uscp.gov/contact-us**.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES — OFFICE OF THE WHISTLEBLOWER OMBUDS

Guiding Phrases for Working with Whistleblowers (HouseNet)

Secure Intake Webform and **Template Auto-Response** (HouseNet)

Video: **Whistleblower Retaliation Deep Dive** (Staff Academy)

Video: **House Support for Your Work with Whistleblowers** (Staff Academy)

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