

Chapter 21 Utah Protection of Public Employees Act

67-21-1 Short title.

This chapter is known as the "Utah Protection of Public Employees Act."

Enacted by Chapter 216, 1985 General Session

67-21-2 Definitions.

As used in this chapter:

- (1) "Abuse of authority" means an arbitrary or capricious exercise of power that:
 - (a) adversely affects the employment rights of another; or
 - (b) results in personal gain to the person exercising the authority or to another person.
- (2) "Communicate" means a verbal, written, broadcast, or other communicated report.
- (3) "Damages" means general and special damages for injury or loss caused by each violation of this chapter.
- (4) "Employee" means a person who performs a service for wages or other remuneration under a contract of hire, written or oral, express or implied.
- (5)
 - (a) "Employer" means the public body or public entity that employs the employee.
 - (b) "Employer" includes an agent of an employer.
- (6) "Good faith" means that an employee acts with:
 - (a) subjective good faith; and
 - (b) the objective good faith of a reasonable employee.
- (7) "Gross mismanagement" means action or failure to act by a person, with respect to a person's responsibility, that causes significant harm or risk of harm to the mission of the public entity or public body that employs, or is managed or controlled by, the person.
- (8) "Judicial employee" means an employee of the judicial branch of state government.
- (9) "Legislative employee" means an employee of the legislative branch of state government.
- (10) "Political subdivision employee" means an employee of a political subdivision of the state.
- (11) "Public body" means any of the following:
 - (a) a state officer, employee, agency, department, division, bureau, board, commission, council, authority, educational institution, or any other body in the executive branch of state government;
 - (b) an agency, board, commission, council, institution member, or employee of the legislative branch of state government;
 - (c) a county, city, town, regional governing body, council, school district, special district, special service district, or municipal corporation, board, department, commission, council, agency, or any member or employee of them;
 - (d) any other body that is created by state or local authority, or that is primarily funded by or through state or local authority, or any member or employee of that body;
 - (e) a law enforcement agency or any member or employee of a law enforcement agency; and
 - (f) the judiciary and any member or employee of the judiciary.
- (12) "Public entity" means a department, division, board, council, committee, institution, office, bureau, or other similar administrative unit of the executive branch of state government.
- (13) "Public entity employee" means an employee of a public entity.
- (14) "Retaliatory action" means the same as that term is defined in Section 67-19a-101.

(15) "State institution of higher education" means the same as that term is defined in Section 53B-3-102.

(16) "Unethical conduct" means conduct that violates a provision of Title 67, Chapter 16, Utah Public Officers' and Employees' Ethics Act.

Amended by Chapter 16, 2023 General Session

67-21-3 Reporting of governmental waste or violations of law -- Employer action -- Exceptions.

- (1)
- (a) An employer may not take retaliatory action against an employee because the employee, or a person authorized to act on behalf of the employee, communicates in good faith:
 - (i) the waste or misuse of public funds, property, or manpower;
 - (ii) a violation or suspected violation of a law, rule, or regulation adopted under the law of this state, a political subdivision of this state, or any recognized entity of the United States; or
 - (iii) as it relates to a state government employer:
 - (A) gross mismanagement;
 - (B) abuse of authority; or
 - (C) unethical conduct.
 - (b) For purposes of Subsection (1)(a), an employee is presumed to have communicated in good faith if the employee gives written notice or otherwise formally communicates the conduct described in Subsection (1)(a) to:
 - (i) a person in authority over the person alleged to have engaged in the conduct described in Subsection (1)(a);
 - (ii) the attorney general's office;
 - (iii) law enforcement, if the conduct is criminal in nature;
 - (iv) if the employee is a public entity employee, public body employee, legislative employee, or a judicial employee:
 - (A) the state auditor's office;
 - (B) the president of the Senate;
 - (C) the speaker of the House of Representatives;
 - (D) the Office of Legislative Auditor General;
 - (E) the governor's office;
 - (F) the state court administrator; or
 - (G) the Division of Finance;
 - (v) if the employee is a public entity employee, but not an employee of a state institution of higher education, the director of the Division of Purchasing and General Services;
 - (vi) if the employee is a political subdivision employee:
 - (A) the legislative body, or a member of the legislative body, of the political subdivision;
 - (B) the governing body, or a member of the governing body, of the political subdivision;
 - (C) the top executive of the political subdivision; or
 - (D) any government official with authority to audit the political subdivision or the applicable part of the political subdivision; or
 - (vii) if the employee is an employee of a state institution of higher education:
 - (A) the Utah Board of Higher Education or a member of the Utah Board of Higher Education;
 - (B) the commissioner of higher education;
 - (C) the president of the state institution of higher education where the employee is employed;or

- (D) the entity that conducts audits of the state institution of higher education where the employee is employed.
- (c) The presumption described in Subsection (1)(b) may be rebutted by showing that the employee knew or reasonably ought to have known that the report is malicious, false, or frivolous.
- (2) An employer may not take retaliatory action against an employee because an employee participates or gives information in an investigation, hearing, court proceeding, legislative or other inquiry, or other form of administrative review held by the public body.
- (3) An employer may not take retaliatory action against an employee because the employee has objected to or refused to carry out a directive that the employee reasonably believes violates a law of this state, a political subdivision of this state, or the United States, or a rule or regulation adopted under the authority of the laws of this state, a political subdivision of this state, or the United States.
- (4) An employer may not implement rules or policies that unreasonably restrict an employee's ability to document:
 - (a) the waste or misuse of public funds, property, or manpower;
 - (b) a violation or suspected violation of any law, rule, or regulation; or
 - (c) as it relates to a state government employer:
 - (i) gross mismanagement;
 - (ii) abuse of authority; or
 - (iii) unethical conduct.

Amended by Chapter 174, 2022 General Session

67-21-3.5 Administrative review of retaliatory action against a public entity employee.

- (1) A public entity employee who believes that the employee's employer has taken retaliatory action against the employee in violation of this chapter may file a grievance with the Career Service Review Office in accordance with Section 67-19a-402.5 and subject to Section 67-21-4.
- (2) If the Career Service Review Office determines that retaliatory action is taken in violation of this chapter against the public entity employee, the Career Service Review Office may order:
 - (a) reinstatement of the public entity employee at the same level held by the public entity employee before the retaliatory action;
 - (b) the payment of back wages, in accordance with Subsection 67-19a-406(5)(b);
 - (c) full reinstatement of benefits;
 - (d) full reinstatement of other employment rights; or
 - (e) if the retaliatory action includes failure to promote, as described in Subsection 67-19a-101(11)(d), a pay raise that results in the employee receiving the pay that the employee would have received if the employee had been promoted.
- (3) A public entity employer has the burden to prove by substantial evidence that the public entity employer's action was justified.
- (4) A public entity employee or public entity employer may appeal a determination of the Career Service Review Office as provided in Section 67-19a-402.5.

Amended by Chapter 174, 2022 General Session

67-21-3.6 Administrative review for political subdivision employees.

- (1)

- (a) A political subdivision may adopt an ordinance to establish an independent personnel board to hear and take action on a complaint alleging retaliatory action.
- (b) The ordinance described in Subsection (1)(a) shall include:
 - (i) procedures for filing a complaint and conducting a hearing; and
 - (ii) a burden of proof on the employer to establish by substantial evidence that the employer's action was justified by reasons unrelated to the employee's good faith actions under Section 67-21-3.
- (2) If a political subdivision adopts an ordinance described in Subsection (1), a political subdivision employee may file a complaint with the independent personnel board alleging retaliatory action.
- (3) If an independent personnel board finds that retaliatory action is taken in violation of the ordinance described in Subsection (1)(a), the independent personnel board may order:
 - (a) reinstatement of the employee at the same level as before the retaliatory action;
 - (b) the payment of back wages;
 - (c) full reinstatement of fringe benefits;
 - (d) full reinstatement of seniority rights; or
 - (e) if the retaliatory action includes failure to promote, as described in Subsection 67-19a-101(11)(d), a pay raise that results in the employee receiving the pay that the employee would have received if the person had been promoted.

Amended by Chapter 174, 2022 General Session

67-21-3.7 Administrative review for state institution of higher education employees.

- (1)
 - (a) As used in this section, "independent personnel board" means a board where no member of the board:
 - (i) is in the same department as the complainant;
 - (ii) is a supervisor of the complainant; or
 - (iii) has a conflict of interest in relation to the complainant or an allegation made in the complaint.
 - (b) A state institution of higher education shall adopt a policy to establish an independent personnel board to hear and take action on a complaint alleging retaliatory action.
 - (c) The policy described in Subsection (1)(b) shall include:
 - (i) procedures for filing a complaint and conducting a hearing; and
 - (ii) a burden of proof on the employer to establish by substantial evidence that the employer's action was justified by reasons unrelated to the employee's good faith actions under Section 67-21-3.
- (2)
 - (a) An employee of a state institution of higher education may file a complaint with the independent personnel board described in Subsection (1)(b) alleging retaliatory action.
 - (b) An independent personnel board that receives a complaint under Subsection (2)(a) shall hear the matter, resolve the complaint, and take action under Subsection (3) within the later of:
 - (i) 30 days after the day on which the employee files the complaint; or
 - (ii) a longer period of time, not to exceed 30 additional days, if the employee and the independent personnel board mutually agree on the longer time period.
- (3) If an independent personnel board finds that retaliatory action is taken in violation of the policy described in Subsection (1)(b), the independent personnel board may order, or recommend to a final decision maker:
 - (a) reinstatement of the employee at the same level as before the retaliatory action;

- (b) the payment of back wages;
 - (c) full reinstatement of fringe benefits;
 - (d) full reinstatement of seniority rights; or
 - (e) if the retaliatory action includes failure to promote, as described in Subsection 67-19a-101(11) (d), a pay raise that results in the employee receiving the pay that the employee would have received if the person had been promoted.
- (4) A final decision maker who receives a recommendation under Subsection (3) shall render a decision and enter an order within seven days after the day on which the final decision maker receives the recommendation.

Amended by Chapter 174, 2022 General Session

67-21-4 Choice of forum -- Remedies for employee bringing action -- Proof required.

- (1)
- (a) Except as provided in Subsection (1)(b) or (d), and subject to Subsections (1)(d) through (e), an employee who alleges a violation of this chapter may bring a civil action for appropriate injunctive relief, damages, or both, within 180 days after the occurrence of the alleged violation of this chapter.
 - (b) Except as provided in Subsection (1)(d):
 - (i) an employee of a political subdivision that has adopted an ordinance described in Section 67-21-3.6:
 - (A) may bring a civil action described in Subsection (1)(a) within 180 days after the day on which the employee has exhausted administrative remedies; and
 - (B) may not bring a civil action described in Subsection (1)(a) until the employee has exhausted administrative remedies; and
 - (ii) an employee of a state institution of higher education:
 - (A) may bring a civil action described in Subsection (1)(a) within 180 days after the day on which the employee has exhausted administrative remedies; and
 - (B) may not bring a civil action described in Subsection (1)(a) until the employee has exhausted administrative remedies.
 - (c) Except as provided in Subsection (1)(d), a public entity employee who is not a legislative employee or a judicial employee may bring a claim of retaliatory action by selecting one of the following methods:
 - (i) filing a grievance with the Career Service Review Office in accordance with Section 67-19a-402.5; or
 - (ii) bringing a civil action for appropriate injunctive relief, damages, or both, within 180 days after the occurrence of the alleged violation of this chapter.
 - (d)
 - (i) A claimant may bring an action after the 180-day limit described in this Subsection (1) if:
 - (A) the claimant originally brought the action within the 180-day time limit;
 - (B) the action described in Subsection (1)(d)(i)(A) failed or was dismissed for a reason other than on the merits; and
 - (C) the claimant brings the new action within 180 days after the day on which the claimant originally brought the action under Subsection (1)(d)(i)(A).
 - (ii) A claimant may commence a new action under this Subsection (1)(d) only once.
 - (e) A public entity employee who files a grievance under Subsection (1)(d)(i):
 - (i) may not, at any time, bring a civil action in relation to the subject matter of the grievance;
 - (ii) may seek a remedy described in Subsection 67-21-3.5(2); and

- (iii) waives the right to seek a remedy or a type of damages not included in Subsection 67-21-3.5(2).
- (f) A public entity employee who files a civil action under Subsection (1)(d)(ii) may not, at any time, file a grievance with the Career Service Review Office in relation to the subject matter of the civil action.
- (2) An employee who brings a civil action under this section shall bring the action in the district court for the county where the alleged violation occurred, the county where the complainant resides, or the county where the person against whom the civil complaint is filed resides or has the person's principal place of business.
- (3)
 - (a) An employee who brings an action under this section has the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence that the employee, in good faith, engaged in protected reporting and suffered a retaliatory action.
 - (b) If the employee satisfies the burden described in Subsection (3)(a), the employer has the burden of proving by substantial evidence that the employer's action was justified.
 - (c) If the employer satisfies the burden described in Subsection (3)(b), the employee has the burden of proving by a preponderance of the evidence that the employer's justification is pretextual.

Amended by Chapter 174, 2022 General Session

67-21-5 Court orders for violation of chapter.

- (1) A court, in rendering a judgment in an action brought under this chapter, may order reinstatement of the employee at the same level, the payment of back wages, full reinstatement of fringe benefits and seniority rights, damages, or any combination of these remedies.
- (2) A court shall award the complainant all or a portion of the costs of litigation, which are defined to include reasonable attorney fees and witness fees, if the court determines that the complainant prevails.

Amended by Chapter 427, 2013 General Session

67-21-6 Civil fine.

- (1)
 - (a) A person who violates this chapter is liable for a civil fine of not more than \$500.
 - (b) The person who takes a retaliatory action against an employee in violation of this chapter, and not the public body that employs the employee, shall, after receiving notice and an opportunity to be heard, pay the civil fine under this Subsection (1).
 - (c) If a person is ordered to pay a civil fine under this Subsection (1), the employer may dismiss the person who took the retaliatory action in violation of this chapter.
- (2) A civil fine ordered under this chapter shall be submitted to the state treasurer for deposit in the General Fund.
- (3) The civil fine described in this section may be imposed if a violation of this chapter is found by:
 - (a) an independent personnel board described in Subsection 67-21-3.6(1)(a) or 67-21-3.7(1)(a);
 - (b) the Career Service Review Office; or
 - (c) a court.

Amended by Chapter 174, 2022 General Session

67-21-7 No impairment of employee rights under collective bargaining agreement.

This chapter shall not be construed to diminish or impair the rights of an employee under any collective bargaining agreement.

Enacted by Chapter 216, 1985 General Session

67-21-8 No compensation when participation in public inquiry.

This chapter shall not be construed to require an employer to compensate an employee for participation in an investigation, hearing, or inquiry held by a public body in accordance with Section 67-21-3.

Enacted by Chapter 216, 1985 General Session

67-21-9 Notice of contents of this chapter -- Posting.

- (1) An employer shall post notices and use other appropriate means to keep employees informed of their protections and obligations under this chapter.
- (2) An employer shall provide an employee with a copy of this chapter:
 - (a) when the employee is hired;
 - (b) upon a request by the employee; and
 - (c) when the employee files a grievance under this chapter.

Amended by Chapter 178, 2018 General Session

67-21-10 False accusations.

- (1) An employee violates this chapter if the employee knowingly makes a false accusation against an employer under this chapter.
- (2) An employee who violates Subsection (1), is subject to:
 - (a) a fine not to exceed \$5,000; and
 - (b) dismissal from employment.

Enacted by Chapter 427, 2013 General Session