



*This article presents general guidelines for Georgia nonprofit organizations as of the date written and should not be construed as legal advice. Always consult an attorney to address your particular situation.*

## **Tips and Tools for Handling Client Grievances**

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Occasionally, your nonprofit may have a client or participant who is unhappy with your nonprofit's services. Grievances can include complaints regarding quality of care, services provided, program policies, program procedures, staff, or facilities. Ideally, your nonprofit has formal grievance policies and procedures to ensure there is a process for clients to express grievances and for personnel to follow to resolve the grievance uniformly and effectively. In the event your organization does not have a written grievance policy, this article outlines steps to guide a nonprofit through a client grievance. Notably, this article seeks to address general grievances, not whistleblowing or wrongdoing such as harassment, that would need to be addressed differently. We recommend obtaining counsel to assist addressing such wrongdoings, or to assist with the development of a basic client grievance policies.

### **General Recommendations for Handling a Grievance:**

When handling client grievances, and in an attempt to de-escalate any tensions, staff should ensure that clients have the opportunity to express themselves regarding problems they are having with the program without being subject to adverse action. The submission of a grievance in good faith should not interfere with the client's status in the program or with other aspects of the program.

Staff members should be attentive and respectful to any grievance registered by a client and should not discourage, intimidate, or seek retribution against clients who seek to exercise their rights or file other grievances. In addition to ensuring that no retaliation is taken against customers or clients who have a grievance, such grievances, and the details surrounding them, should also be confidential.

Once a grievance has been handled and a final determination has been made as to the outcome, clients should be timely and promptly notified of the resolution and receive an explanation of any further appeal, rights or recourse.

Staff should ensure that all clients, especially those with limited reading and writing skills, are assisted in the process by offering to read and write materials as well as arranging for typing or copying, if needed.

### **Procedure Recommendations:**

#### *Initial Notices & Submission of Grievances*

In general, the first step to resolving client concerns or grievances should be to seek informal resolution within the program when a grievance or dispute arises. This process may begin with the client's direct service worker or staff member. If a client grievance involves their direct

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service worker or staff member, clients should have the option to bypass the initial informal resolution step and proceed directly to a supervisor. Informal efforts to resolve grievances should be documented in the client's case record, progress notes, and/or tracking logs, as applicable. If a satisfactory resolution is not achieved at this level, staff should suggest the client submit a formal grievance.

#### *Formal Supervisor Grievance & Appeals Processes:*

In the event the grievance is not resolved by the client's direct service worker or staff member to the client's satisfaction or if the cause of the client's grievance is with their direct staff contact, the client should be given the opportunity to submit the grievance in writing to the appropriate supervisor. If any documentation was created during the initial review, the client's grievances should be transmitted without alteration, interference or delay to the supervisor.

The supervisor should meet with the client as soon as practicable upon receipt of the grievance and should review all aspects of the problem(s) outlined by the client. As soon as possible after receiving a written or verbal grievance from a client, the supervisor should try to specify the time-frame upon which a supervisor will meet with the client, basing this time-frame on factors, including, but not limited to, how often programming occurs and how much capacity employees or volunteers have.

If the appropriate supervisor is unable to resolve the grievance to the client's satisfaction, the client should be allowed to discuss their grievance with a program director or the executive director, depending on the structure of the organization. The program director, or designee, should collect all relevant information to be presented in writing during an in-person meeting with the client.

The program director or executive director should issue a final decision in writing on the merits of any portion of a grievance as soon as practicable following the initial filing of the grievance. This written decision should be provided to the client. To the extent that an outside agency licenses or funds the agency's programs, the clients/families should be notified of any rights they may have to initiate grievances with said agencies. To the extent a client wishes to forward a grievance to an outside agency or authority, staff should be encouraged to provide the client with assistance including pens, paper, postage and access to a telephone, if needed.

#### **Creating and Maintaining a Grievance Policy**

As mentioned previously, having a grievance policy and procedure allows clients experiencing problems with a program/nonprofit and/or staff to seek resolution in an equitable, non-punitive manner. A quarterly and annual summary of grievances submitted should be compiled and prepared for review by supervisors and staff as a tool to assist in avoiding future grievances, to reflect possible trends, and to help provide recommendations moving forward.

In order to ensure that policies and procedures are uniformly and correctly implemented, they should be communicated, whether in writing or verbally, with all staff members upon hiring or implementation of the policy.

A notice informing clients of their right to file or raise a grievance should be posted in an obvious location and on any websites associated with the program or nonprofit. During a client's initial intake or assessment, clients should be informed in writing of their right to file a grievance, the process by which to do so, and how the response will be communicated. A copy of the grievance policy should be provided to the client and they should be asked to sign an acknowledgment of receipt.

Crafting an operational grievance policy does not need to be burdensome or overwhelming. Instead, implementing a few critical and effective guidelines and processes can help a nonprofit quickly and successfully handle grievances in a uniform manner, while ensuring that clients feel supported, heard, and cared for. PBPA clients can reach out to their staff attorney for assistance with crafting a grievance policy.