

Date: November 3, 2015

To: HR Directors
Equal Opportunity Directors
Affirmative Action Officers

From: Ann O'Brien, Assistant Commissioner, Enterprise Human Resources



Subject: Guidelines for Holiday Decorations and Celebrations

During the fall and winter months, a number of cultural and religious days of significance are observed. While it is a time of celebration, it is also a time to be mindful and respectful of the rich and diverse cultures that are ever present in our workplace and the communities we serve. The following recommendations are guidelines consistent with federal and state laws with regards to holiday decorations and celebrations in the government workplace.

Holiday Decorations:

In accordance with federal guidelines, display of holiday décor is dependent upon whether the space is public or whether it is a shared or private workspace. In all cases, holiday decorations should be respectful and sensitive of employees and the public.

Public Work Space: A public work space is any space by which the public has physical or visual access that is not private workspace. For example, lobbies, reception areas, front counters, conference rooms, community centers, hallways, or exteriors of buildings.

In a public work space, only secular holiday decorations may be displayed. Secular holiday decorations include things like tinsel or garland, snowmen, candy canes, reindeer, etc. Religious symbols or holiday decorations with religious content may not be displayed.

Private Work Space: A workspace that is assigned exclusively to one employee, such as a cubicle, desk or office that may be seen occasionally by coworkers but not by clients, customers, or the general public.

In a private work space, an employee may display holiday decorations with religious content or secular decorations.

Shared Work Space: A shared workspace is used or shared by employees, such as copy rooms, conference rooms, shared offices, bathrooms or break areas.

In a shared work space, only secular holiday decorations may be displayed. Holiday decorations with religious content cannot be displayed.

Holiday Celebrations or Activities:

Holiday activities, such as luncheons, potlucks or gift exchanges should be voluntary. Every employee may not feel comfortable participating in the activities or their religious beliefs may prevent their participation. An employee's decision not to participate should be respected. To create a more inclusive work environment, plan a means to share and learn about different cultural traditions during the holiday season. Supervisors or managers should not be perceived as endorsing or supporting religion generally or one religion over another.

Safety

The most important consideration regarding holiday decorations is SAFETY. Unfortunately every year during the holiday season, fires claim lives and destroy property. Many of these fires could have been prevented. Please carefully consider the flammability and potential fire risk of any decorations you may use and follow your agency's guidelines with respect to use of electrical devices or candles.

Common Questions:

May my agency display a tree in the lobby or other public area?

Yes. Trees or wreaths can be displayed in public areas. The Supreme Court determined in *County of Allegheny v. ACLU Greater Pittsburgh Chapter*, 492 U.S. 573 (1989) that trees and wreaths are secular symbols. Tree and wreath decorations should be secular in nature.

May an employee display a nativity scene or a menorah in their cubicle?

It depends. If the employee's cubicle is assigned exclusively to them and is not shared with another employee, nor is the cubicle generally viewable by the public, then yes; the employee may decorate their own cubicle with holiday decorations containing religious content, such as a nativity scene or menorah.

Guiding Principles for an Inclusive Workplace:

1. Identify a period of time before and after holidays for decorations to be put up and taken down.
2. Designate a common area to share various holidays and cultures, by displaying educational materials on occasions of significance during the winter.
3. Use a multicultural calendar to assist in planning events.

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4. Invite staff to participate and share information or items at holiday gatherings that reflect their personal cultural traditions or beliefs.
5. Respect an employee's decision not to participate in a holiday luncheon or other celebration.

Contact:

If you have questions about these guidelines, please contact your agency's affirmative action officer.