



## CODE OF ETHICS FOR THE COURT EMPLOYEES OF CALIFORNIA

A fair and independent court system is essential to the administration of justice in a democratic society. Exemplary conduct by court employees inspires public confidence and trust in the courts, and conveys the values of impartiality, equity, and fairness that bring integrity to the court's work. Further, court employees are expected to adhere to a high standard of ethical behavior. To advance these values and to achieve justice we believe certain ethical principles should govern all that we do. We therefore commit ourselves to:

- Tenet One** Provide impartial and evenhanded treatment of all persons;
- Tenet Two** Demonstrate the highest standards of personal integrity and honesty in all our professional and personal dealings, avoiding the misuse of court time, equipment, supplies, or facilities for personal business;
- Tenet Three** Behave toward all persons with respect, courtesy, patience, and responsiveness, acting always to promote public esteem in the court system;
- Tenet Four** Safeguard confidential information, both written and oral, unless disclosure is authorized by the court, refusing ever to use such information for personal advantage, and abstain at all times from public comment about pending court proceedings, except for strictly procedural matters;
- Tenet Five** Refrain from any actual impropriety, such as:
- violating the law,
  - soliciting funds on the job,
  - receiving gifts or favors related to court employment,
  - accepting outside employment that conflicts with the employee's duties,
  - recommending private legal service providers to the public on the job,
- or
- using position at court to benefit self, friends, or relatives;
- Tenet Six** Avoid any appearance of impropriety that might diminish the integrity and dignity of the court;

- Tenet Seven**      Serve the public by providing accurate information about court processes that is as helpful as possible without taking one side over the other, or appearing to favor one side of a case;
- Tenet Eight**      Provide responsible and accountable stewardship of public resources;
- Tenet Nine**        Provide accurate information as requested in a competent, courteous, and timely manner. Improve personal work skills and performance through continuing professional education and development;
- Tenet Ten**         Guard against and, when necessary, repudiate any act of discrimination or bias based on race, religion, color, national origin, ancestry, physical or mental disability, medical condition, marital status, sex, age, or sexual orientation;
- Tenet Eleven**      Renounce any use of positional or personal power to harass another person sexually or in any other way based on that person’s race, religion, color, national origin, ancestry, physical or mental disability, medical condition, marital status, sex, age, sexual orientation, or other personal choices and characteristics; and
- Tenet Twelve**     Protect the technological property of the court by preserving the integrity of electronically stored information.

A code of ethics cannot possibly anticipate every moral dilemma and ethical choice that may arise in the execution of one’s day-to-day professional responsibilities. Personal discretion in the interpretation of this Code of Ethics is both necessary and desirable. Court employees should cultivate within themselves the ethical judgment that will foster the fair and impartial administration of justice.

# GUIDELINES

The following guidelines are intended to clarify and provide direction for the application of the tenets to which we subscribe:

Guideline for Tenet One  
**IMPARTIALITY**

All persons coming to the court for assistance are entitled to fair and equitable treatment, regardless of their personal behavior or legal situation. Court employees must remember that they are often dealing with people who may be having one of the worst experiences of their lives. They must offer to angry, confused, and sometimes deceitful court users the same level of competent and impartial help that they provide to those who are pleasant and appreciative. While every court employee has the right to freedom of association and political expression, he or she does not have the right to take sides in a legal dispute, interject himself or herself into the legal decision-making process, second-guess a judge's ruling, or give the appearance of partiality on any issue that is likely to come before the court. The procedural integrity of the court must be protected at all times.

Guideline for Tenet Two  
**PERSONAL INTEGRITY**

The fundamental attitudes and work habits of individual court employees are of vital importance. Honesty is paramount. Employees should set an example for others and must not misuse the court's resources, including, but not limited to, the telephone, facsimile machine, copying machine, e-mail, or internet access. Employees must not abuse their privileges, and must contribute to the integrity of the entire court staff by striving to avoid factionalism and inspire mutual support and trust.

Guideline for Tenet Three  
**PROFESSIONALISM**

Employment in the court system is a public trust engendered by the citizens' confidence in the professional knowledge and competency and personal integrity of the officers and employees of the judicial branch. A professional knows every aspect of his or her job and can provide complete, understandable answers to the public's questions. A professional presents a businesslike image of methodical and systematic efficiency and does not abuse the position of power that special knowledge affords. A professional never criticizes a co-worker in public nor denigrates a court user at any time. A professional raises conflict resolution to an art form, always seeking to preserve the dignity of the individuals involved in a dispute, thereby preserving the dignity of the court. The word "respect" is never far from the professional's mind.

Guideline for Tenet Four  
**CONFIDENTIALITY**

Sensitive information acquired by court employees in the course of discharging their official duties must never be revealed until it is made a matter of public record. Sometimes breaches of confidentiality do not involve intentional disclosure of official court records but are the result of

innocent and casual remarks about pending or closed cases, about participants in litigation, or about juries, any of which could give attorneys, litigants, and reporters confidential information. Such remarks can seriously compromise a case or a person's standing in the community. Court staff should discuss cases only for legitimate court reasons and must handle sensational or sensitive cases with great care.

Guideline for Tenet  
Five  
**IMPROPRIETY**

Improprieties can take many forms. A court employee who uses his or her title, badge, court affiliation, or other special access to the judicial system for personal gain or to avoid personal legal consequences is engaged in improper conduct. Examples of improper behaviors include seeking any favor, soliciting any gift, or actually receiving, directly or indirectly, any gift or the promise of one, whether it be money, services, travel, food, entertainment, or hospitality that could be construed as intending to influence the employee in performing his or her duties or as a reward for past or future services; or accepting outside employment that interferes with the employee's effectiveness or conflicts with the proper discharge of official court duties. A court employee must not, for example, seek special consideration for his or her traffic citations, jury duty, or parking violations. In addition, any conduct that casts doubt upon the integrity and impartiality of the legal system is forbidden. For example, a court employee must not improperly intervene in expediting administrative processes, facilitate a favorable disposition to a case, or provide access to confidential case information to benefit self, friends, or family members. Moreover, while on the job an employee must not recommend private legal counsel to a member of the public. While court employees cannot regulate the conduct of others, they can conduct themselves in a manner that inspires public confidence in the role they play in the pursuit of justice. Proper conduct involves daily and scrupulous affirmation of moral principles and observance of all laws, rules, policies, and procedures.

Guideline for Tenet  
Six  
**APPEARANCE OF  
IMPROPRIETY**

Court employees are expected to refrain from engaging not only in improper behavior but also in behavior that others might perceive to be improper. Any activity that gives the impression that court employees can be improperly influenced in the performance of their official duties is prohibited. A court employee must not, for example, openly discuss the merits of cases pending before the court or be overly solicitous to litigants or counsel, which could give the appearance of preferential treatment. Moreover, a court employee must not be involved in the hiring decision of a relative or close friend, as such involvement may give the appearance of an unfair advantage in the hiring process. To gauge the propriety of an action, consider how it would be viewed by the community if the action were made public.

Guideline for Tenet  
Seven  
**PROHIBITION  
AGAINST GIVING  
LEGAL ADVICE**

Given the experience and visibility of court employees, it is natural for those who deal with the court, including attorneys and litigants as well as the general public, to ask questions such as: “Should I fight this?” “How do I fight this?” “To whom should I go for legal assistance?” “What does the law say?” Court employees can and should provide information that is within their own level of professional training and experience, so long as the information does not compromise the neutrality of the court or the court’s appearance of neutrality. For example, court employees can and should patiently explain how to file forms and pay fines, and should clarify legal language and the court’s policies attendant to procedural due process and assist self-represented litigants in court self-help centers. They should provide litigants with information about non-profit legal services agencies, certified lawyer referral service programs and court-based self-help assistance. They must not, however, cross the line separating court employees, whether licensed attorneys or not, from attorneys practicing law in the community. Court employees must not give any legal or procedural information that tends to favor one side of a case. Court employees should cite this tenet when pressed by those seeking legal advice.

Guideline for Tenet  
Eight  
**PUBLIC  
RESOURCES**

Court resources must be used for the benefit of the citizens of our state. These resources include staff time, equipment, facilities, information systems, and the money allocated to the court. Court employees must ensure proper accountability of the court’s resources. Use of these resources must be transparent to the public and beyond reproach. Resources must not be expended simply for the direct benefit of individual employees or judicial officers. Physical resources must be safeguarded to avoid unnecessary damage or wear. Equipment must be properly maintained and replaced when appropriate. All court employees should constantly look for improved efficiency in job processes. Deficiencies and safety hazards must be reported and addressed in a timely manner. Sound business practices must be employed in managing contracts to avoid waste of court resources.

Guideline for Tenet  
Nine  
**SERVICE AND  
COMPETENCY**

A major responsibility of all court employees is to provide accurate and timely information. When providing information, whether orally or in writing, present it in as easily understandable a format as the inquiry allows, and avoid legal jargon whenever possible. The laws and rules under which the courts operate are continually changing as a result of legislative actions, higher court decisions, and evolving values and technologies. Court employees are encouraged to participate in professional activities and associations. Court employees must participate in educational programs to stay abreast of changes and to improve their personal and professional skills. Court managers at all levels of the

California court system should initiate and oversee ongoing professional growth programs for all court employees, including study of ethics-related issues.

Guideline for Tenet  
Ten  
**DISCRIMINATION**

Each day court employees assist users of court services of many races, religions, national origins, languages, sexual orientations, and varieties of personal abilities and appearance. They may deal with accused felons, child abusers, participants in painful dissolutions, those grieving from an injury or loss of a loved one, or people experiencing any one of numerous kinds of human pain or dysfunction. Court employees are expected to treat each other and each user of court services equally and with compassion. Equal access to the court system and equal treatment for all are the cornerstones of the administration of justice. Court employees must expose and discourage discrimination wherever it exists.

Guideline for Tenet  
Eleven  
**HARASSMENT**

All court employees must conduct themselves in a professional manner at all times. Court employees must not engage in inappropriate, offensive, or unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature, or inappropriate or offensive conduct based upon a person's race, religion, color, national origin, ancestry, physical or mental disability, medical condition, marital status, sex, age, sexual orientation, or other personal characteristic, regardless whether it rises to the level of harassment. Court employees are expected to treat all persons with dignity and respect and, by doing so, will foster a work environment that is free from harassment. Court employees should follow their appropriate local reporting procedures in reporting their concerns about inappropriate behavior so that their issues can be addressed.

Guideline for Tenet  
Twelve  
**TECHNOLOGY**

Information retained in electronic files must be safeguarded like any other official court document. Its confidentiality should be assumed unless otherwise specified. To preserve the integrity of electronic systems, court employees must monitor court electronic information and take appropriate steps to ensure that the information is accurate. Great care should be taken in the transmission of electronic data and communications so as not to embarrass the court or the sender if read by an unintended recipient. Court employees may not install personal software or equipment without prior approval, nor may they take copyrighted software outside the court for personal use.