December 2019

To Whom It May Concern:

The Ombudsman’s Office has received an unusual number of complaints from current and former employees of Community & Civic Life over the last few months alleging serious problems with the bureau’s work environment. The individuals we heard from defy categorization. They include: people who work(ed) for many years at the bureau and others who came on more recently; both genders; white and people of color; administrative, programmatic and management-level employees; and employees in various divisions across the bureau.

Some common themes we heard:

- Poor leadership from Director Suk Rhee, lack of regard for people
- Problematic and unqualified managers/supervisors
- Lack of effective change management, constant turmoil
- High rate of employee turnover, including employees leaving on own volition
- Unethical hiring and contracting practices
- Lack of internal communication and guidance
- Bullying, harassing, and retaliatory behaviors
- Inability of HR investigations and grievances to resolve problems
- Inability or unwillingness of leadership to address problems

The concerns we heard are well beyond ordinary workplace tribulations or expected growing pains associated with change. Many are (were) excited about changes to Civic Life, but subsequently became disturbed by the Director’s methods for achieving that change and the collateral damage to peoples’ lives, the work environment, and ultimately the ability of the Bureau to live up to its mission.

Employees expressed being at their wit’s end, going on medication, experiencing mental and physical health problems, needing to go on leave, hiring lawyers, dreading going to work and looking for other jobs. At a leadership retreat, staff were asked to draw pictures of their work environment. They reportedly drew pictures of disorder, discomfort, confusion, and a lack of safety and support.

Employees have sought external help but found no relief. We understand the assigned Human Resources Business Partner sought to conduct an employee morale survey, but that Director Rhee terminated his efforts. Civic Life employees also reportedly reached out to the Commissioner’s Office, but we were told the office declined to intervene.
Left unaddressed, we are concerned that the apparent internal disfunction will persist, employees will continue to suffer adverse work environments, and those who can will continue to leave. Further, the longer the problems go on, the more the City’s potential liability grows.

The Ombudsman’s Office has not fully investigated the complaints. But the sheer breadth and scope would seem to create an obligation on the part of the City to address the workplace environment at Civic Life. Internal mechanisms and solutions involving the buy-in of the Director do not appear to be viable. We therefore recommend the City enter into a contract with an experienced third-party workplace consultant to conduct an environmental scan, evaluate the propriety of hires and procurements, engage in neutral fact-finding, provide management coaching, etc. The consultant should also be empowered to make recommendations to the City about any actions it needs to take to restore Civic Life to a safe and productive work environment.