



Office of the
Inspector General
Commonwealth of Massachusetts

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Advisory to Local Officials:
Telephone Usage Policies

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Advisory for Local Officials: Telephone Usage Policies

The Office of the Inspector General has prepared this advisory to help local officials understand the importance of usage policies for government owned land line and cellular telephones. All local jurisdictions should have a telephone usage policy. The Inspector General's office is charged with preventing and detecting fraud, waste, and abuse in state and local government. Whenever possible, we emphasize prevention. This advisory should be used by public officials to create their own telephone usage policies or to update current policies.

Introduction to Telephone Usage Policies

Public employees rely on government telephone systems and cellular telephones to conduct daily business and to better serve the public. It is important that managers be proactive in educating employees in the appropriate usage of telephone systems. The lack of a specific telephone usage policy leaves a jurisdiction vulnerable to waste and abuse, such as unauthorized long distance calls and excessive personal calls made by employees. Without a clear policy, jurisdictions may not be able to hold employees accountable for system abuses.

Local Calls

Telephone usage policies should clearly state that all government owned or operated telephone systems should be used only to conduct official business. Employees should limit personal telephone calls, in frequency and duration, to the greatest extent possible. This includes incoming as well as outgoing telephone calls. Personal calls should not interfere with an employee's duties or with the duties of others in an agency and should not impact an employee's productivity.

Certain personal phone calls may be allowed by a jurisdiction including:

- Calls to notify or contact family members and/or physician in the case of an emergency;

- Calls to notify family members of a scheduling change or travel delay that is a result of government business including calls to make alternate child care or transportation arrangements;
- Brief calls to an employee's residence or family members, and
- Brief calls to local businesses (including government agencies, physicians, auto or home repair) that can only be reached during working hours.

These calls should always be kept to a minimum and only be made on government owned telephones **if** they could not be reasonably made on a non-government owned telephone, for example, personal cell phones or pay telephones.

Long Distance Calls

Long distance telephone calls using government owned telephones or government issued telephone credit cards should only be made for official government business and these calls should be approved by a supervisor prior to making the call.

Long distance calls should not be made for personal reasons unless they are made for an appropriate reason as discussed above, are approved by a supervisor, and the employee:

- charges the call to a third number (such as the employee's home phone number); or
- makes the call collect; or
- charges the call to a personal prepaid calling card or to a personal credit or debit card; or
- places the call to a toll free (800, 877, 888) number.

Only under limited circumstances should long distance calls be allowed without employee pre-payment. However, a reimbursement policy should be established. As a general rule, taxpayers should not pay for employee's personal telephone calls.

Government Owned Cellular Telephones

Some government employees are provided with cellular phones to conduct business when not in the office. The policies listed above should apply to cellular phones owned

by the government. Cellular phones should only be used to conduct official business. Personal calls should be limited to the greatest possible extent.

In addition, public employees that use cellular phones to conduct business should be aware of the laws and regulations that pertain to the use of cellular devices while operating a motor vehicle. These laws and regulations differ among states. Public employees should act in a manner that is in accordance with these laws and regulations while operating a motor vehicle. Usage policies may define when and where cellular telephones may be used. For example, confidential business should not be discussed on a cellular phone in a public place where the business could be overheard.

Employees receiving cellular telephones should be required to sign that they have received the equipment and understand the usage policies. Employees should be responsible for recharging the equipment. Employees should report service and maintenance issues, including the need for new batteries, to the jurisdiction's designated staff member as soon as possible.

Reimbursement

Government Owned Equipment:

The telephone usage policy should include a section that clearly defines when an employee is expected to provide reimbursement for any personal calls made using government owned equipment. Monthly invoices can be used to identify calls that should be reimbursed by the employee. Reimbursement for personal calls may be made through a payroll deduction or through a direct payment from the employee.

Employee Owned Equipment:

Reimbursement should be made to employees for business calls that are made on an employee's personal equipment. Reimbursement should be made to the employee in accordance with an established reimbursement policy for expenses incurred while conducting official government business.

Employee Responsibility

It is the responsibility of public employees to familiarize themselves with their jurisdiction's telephone usage policy. Employees should be required by their jurisdiction to sign a form acknowledging that they have read and understand the jurisdiction's telephone policy. It should then be the employee's responsibility to make sure that they follow these policies

Management Responsibilities

Local managers should be responsible for establishing a telephone usage policy for their jurisdiction and for making all employees aware of their jurisdiction's policies. Managers should also be responsible for:

- ensuring employee compliance with the policy;
- reviewing telephone bills for irregular calls or unusual usage;
- collecting reimbursements from employees for personal calls;
- distributing reimbursements to employees for business calls made on personally owned equipment;
- reviewing and evaluating requests for telephone services and equipment such as cellular phones, and
- keeping track of employee certifications if the jurisdiction requires employees to sign one.