

2004

Risk management = preventing lawsuits.

The Zephyr has been under fire for not writing a word about the brouhaha in Knox County States Attorney Paul Mangieri's office several weeks ago. Needless to say, none of the remaining employees in his office want to verify what actually happened. They have learned firsthand how easily they could be fired.

According to other sources, Mangieri's wife, Felicia, barged into his public office yelling obscenities and demanded that he fire one of his employees. The nineteen-year-old woman was subsequently fired on the spot. According to a friend of the Mangieris, the young woman had been a personal friend but was due to be fired anyway.

According to witnesses, she gathered her belongings and left the office immediately, with Felicia following her out into the hall, onto the elevator of the courthouse and to her car. Another employee was upset enough to call her husband during the melee and he told her to quit immediately, which she did.

While county board members are discussing personnel policies, we ought to become familiar with the Fair Employment Practices law of Illinois. Even though this is an office of an elected official, it is covered by State law. How handy it was for me to attend a workshop for county board members last week, given by Bliss-McKnight of Bloomington, the county's liability insurer, on the subject of risk management – or in layman's terms, how to avoid lawsuits against the county. On the subject of hiring and firing, the impressive presenter talked about the importance of a paper trail in cases of firing and sexual harassment complaints, for example. If a person is going to be fired, he or she should receive some kind of warning about poor job performance, either by letter or direct contact. The direct contact session should be taped or accompanied by detailed notes.

The non-union employees of the county are hired "at will," which means they can be hired and fired at the will of the elected officer or department head, but there had better be a darn good reason and legally accepted paper trail.

In addition to our county administrator, five out of fifteen board members were present at the workshop, including the chairman and vice-chairman of the board and the three new board members, Greg Bacon, George Knapp and myself.

If those who were absent thought the meeting would be dull, they were mistaken. It was most interesting and in this sue-happy society, attendance should have been a requirement. The county board's role in personnel issues is to establish a uniform personnel policy, hopefully approved by Bliss-McKnight, and require appointed department heads to follow it and strongly encourage elected county officers with employees to practice risk management procedures.

The States Attorney's office is not a Mom and Pop business, but a public government office in the courthouse. We know that Mr. Mangieri is not the first husband to be put in this untenable position. My advice for Mr. Mangieri has been to hire a strong office manager who has the authority to hire and fire and keep Mrs. Mangieri out of the business of the States Attorney's office. Even though Mr. Mangieri is a good States Attorney, his ability to be a good office administrator has been compromised.

Knox County taxpayers, courthouse employees and patrons don't deserve this kind of upheaval and interruption of business. And the government of Knox County needs better risk management procedures.

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