



---

# HAWAI‘I STATE ETHICS COMMISSION

State of Hawai‘i · Bishop Square, 1001 Bishop Street, ASB Tower 970 · Honolulu, Hawai‘i 96813

## **Resolution of Investigation** **2024-1**

**(COMPL-24-00214)**

### **House of Representative Employee’s Violation of the Fair Treatment law**

**June 26, 2024**

---

The Hawai‘i State Ethics Commission (“Commission”) has resolved the investigation of Kris Coffield (“Respondent Coffield”), Office Manager, Office of Representative Jeanne Kapela, House of Representatives, Hawai‘i State Legislature, for alleged violations of the State Ethics Code, Hawai‘i Revised Statutes (“HRS”) chapter 84.

#### **I. Facts**

Respondent Coffield admitted and declared, under penalty of perjury, that the following facts are true and correct:<sup>1</sup>

- a) At all times relevant herein, Respondent Coffield was employed as Office Manager for Representative Jeanne Kapela, House of Representatives, Hawai‘i State Legislature, and was required to comply with the State Ethics Code, Hawai‘i Revised Statutes (“HRS”) chapter 84.
- b) At all times relevant herein, Respondent Coffield’s state working hours were Monday through Friday, from 7:45 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., excluding breaks.
- c) At all times relevant herein, Respondent Coffield also served as the Co-Chair of the Legislative Committee of the Democratic Party of Hawai‘i, a private non-profit organization.

---

<sup>1</sup> This Resolution does not make formal findings; instead, the Commission relies on the facts admitted by Respondent Coffield.

- d) On or around March 21, 2024, Respondent Coffield, in his capacity as Co-Chair of the Legislative Committee of the Democratic Party of Hawai'i, sent an email titled, "Democratic Party of Hawai'i Requests Your Support for Gaza Resolutions," to multiple individuals. The email sought support for several legislative resolutions pertaining to Gaza.
- e) On or around that same day, March 21, 2024, in apparent response to the email, Respondent Coffield received a text message from the Chair of the Democratic Party of Hawai'i, Adrian Tam ("Chair Tam"), requesting that future correspondence first be sent to him for review and approval. This text message was then followed by an email from Chair Tam to Respondent Coffield, informing Respondent Coffield that Chair Tam was appointing four individuals to the Legislative Committee.
- f) On or around March 21, 2024, at 3:25 p.m., in response to Chair Tam's text message and email, Respondent Coffield sent an email to various members of the Democratic Party of Hawai'i. The email objected to Chair Tam's text message and email. It was sent during state work hours. Respondent Coffield explained that he was so distressed by Chair Tam's text message and email that he left work, went to a coffee shop, and then drafted and sent the email from the coffee shop. Respondent Coffield did not return to work that day and neglected to take leave.

## II. The State Ethics Code, HRS Chapter 84

### A. Constitutional Mandate and Statutory Purpose

The State Ethics Code arises from the declaration contained in the State Constitution that "[t]he people of Hawai'i believe that public officers and employees must exhibit the highest standards of ethical conduct and that these standards come from the personal integrity of each individual in government."<sup>2</sup> To this end, the Hawai'i Constitution further directs that the Legislature enact a code of ethics that applies to all appointed and elected state officers and employees.

In accordance with this constitutional mandate, the Legislature enacted the State Ethics Code and charged the Commission with administering and enforcing the law "so that public confidence in public servants will be preserved."<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the Legislature explicitly directed that the State Ethics Code be liberally construed to promote high standards of ethical conduct in state government. HRS § 84-1. It is in this context that the Commission examines every employee's actions.

---

<sup>2</sup> Hawai'i State Constitution, Art. XIV.

<sup>3</sup> HRS Chapter 84, Preamble.

B. Application of the State Ethics Code to Respondent Coffield

At all times relevant herein, Respondent Coffield was a state employee<sup>4</sup> and was bound by the State Ethics Code's Fair Treatment law, HRS § 84-13(a), which prohibits a state employee from using the employee's state position to obtain unwarranted privileges, advantages, or benefits for the employee or others. The Fair Treatment Law also contains a provision that explicitly prohibits a state employee from using state resources for private business purposes. In relevant part, the Fair Treatment law states:

**§84-13 Fair treatment.** (a) No . . . employee shall use or attempt to use the . . . employee's official position to secure or grant unwarranted privileges, exemptions, advantages, contracts, or treatment, for oneself or others; including but not limited to the following:

. . .

- (3) Using state time, equipment or other facilities for private business purposes.

Non-profit organizations, such as the Democratic Party of Hawai'i, are private businesses for purposes of the Ethics Code.<sup>5</sup>

Respondent Coffield admits that he violated the Fair Treatment law, HRS § 84-13(a), by writing and sending the email on behalf of the Democratic Party of Hawai'i. Specifically, by using state time to send the email at 3:25 p.m. on March 21, 2024, in violation of HRS § 84-13(a)(3).

III. Resolution of Investigation

Respondent Coffield fully cooperated with the Commission's investigation and has not previously been the subject of a Commission charge. After learning of the Commission's investigation, Respondent Coffield voluntarily resigned from the position of Co-Chair of the Legislative Committee of the Democratic Party of Hawai'i.

Given the violation of the State Ethics Code, the Commission believes it is reasonable, fair, and in the public interest to resolve this investigation by (1) issuing this Resolution of Investigation, (2) requiring Respondent Coffield to pay an administrative penalty of \$100.00 to the State of Hawai'i, and (3) referring this matter to the House of Representatives for any further action if necessary.

---

<sup>4</sup> HRS § 84-3.

<sup>5</sup> HRS § 84-3.