



**REVOLUTIONARY HR CONSULTING**  
Aligning HR Systems with Business Strategies

## INVESTIGATIVE FINDINGS REPORT

In the Matter Involving Allegations of Professional Misconduct

Prepared for the Town of Parker

June 17, 2021

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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On April 9, 2021, Darla Tilley, Senior Center Director, submitted a letter to Lori Wedemeyer, Town Manager, resigning from her position as Director of the Senior Center. In her resignation letter, Darla stated that she was resigning under duress citing an April 7, 2021 meeting with Lori. Darla alleged that under Lori's leadership she had been subjected to retaliation and a hostile work environment since November 2020. Darla notified the Town of Parker Council of the aforementioned. Following these allegations, an external investigation was commissioned into the matter.

The allegation:

- ⌀ Darla Tilley was forced to resign from her position with the Town of Parker under duress following an April 7, 2021, meeting with Lori Wedemeyer, and Darla has been subjected to a hostile work environment and retaliation under Lori's leadership.

A total of nine individuals were interviewed throughout the course of this investigation and during the period of May 2021 – June 2021.

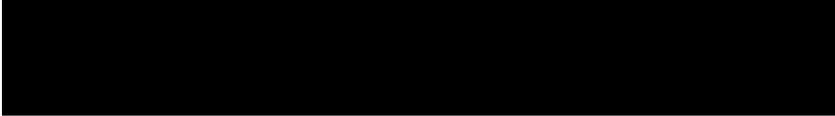
The allegation was not substantiated. However, several notable concerns were relayed that are summarized in the *Summary and Conclusion* portion of this report.

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## INTERVIEWS

The following interviews were conducted by Lead Investigator, Lori Lindseth, telephonically or via video conferencing:

1. Lori Wedemeyer, Town Manager (and de facto HR Manager), May 19, 2021, 2:00pm



5. Darla Tilley, Senior Center Director, May 27, 2021, 3:00pm



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## **RELATED POLICIES**

### Town of Parker Personnel Rules and Regulations, SECTION 2.1. ANTI-HARASSMENT POLICY

“The Town of Parker will not tolerate harassment, whether by actions, word, jokes comments based on an individual’s sex (with or without sexual conduct), race, color, religion, national origin, age, disability, pregnancy, or breast feeding, genetic information, veteran status, or any other legally protected characteristic, or protected activity (i.e., opposition to prohibited discrimination or participation in Town of Parker’s complaint of investigation process). Such conduct has the purpose or effect of interfering with an individual’s work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile of offensive working environment. The Town prohibits any form of retaliation against any employee for filing a complaint under this policy or for assisting in a complaint investigation.”

### Town of Parker Personnel Rules and Regulations, SECTION 13.2. STANDARDS OF CONDUCT

### Town of Parker Personnel Rules and Regulations, SECTION 14.1 – DISCIPLINARY ACTION

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## ALLEGATION AND FINDINGS

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- 1. Darla Tilley, Senior Center Director, alleges that she was forced to resign from her position with the Town of Parker under duress following an April 7, 2021, meeting with Lori Wedemeyer, Town Manager. Darla claims that she has been subjected to a hostile work environment and retaliation by Lori.**

Darla stated that she has been bullied by Lori since November 2020. Prior to this, Darla indicated she and Lori had enjoyed a good relationship for the prior 21 years they worked together. Darla alleges that the hostile treatment which began in November 2020 ensued after Lori told her that she was upset with her because Darla never supported her.

Darla detailed the following incident in which she believes she was bullied and that contributed to a hostile work environment.

- § In January 2020 Darla's assistant tested positive for COVID. Lori directed Darla to close the Senior Center and that everyone would need to be tested. Darla questioned this decision to which Lori responded by getting upset and saying, "do what you want". Darla also asked Lori to call the Health Department, but to her knowledge she did not.
  - After staff tested negative for COVID, Lori directed Darla to reopen the Senior Center. Darla was told that she and the staff member who had previously tested positive could return to work [REDACTED] as relayed to her by Lori. However, Darla received a phone call from the Health Department advising her that both she and the staff member needed to quarantine.
  - Eventually later that evening, Lori advised Darla that she and her assistant could stay home to quarantine. Darla sent Lori an email in response, asking for next steps and indicating that she (Darla) wanted to speak with someone else. Lori told Darla she was overreacting and that she would not "get into a back and forth" with her. Darla stated that she felt "called out for every little thing" that happened in this particular situation as well as other matters. However, when she questioned Lori, she was told that nothing was wrong.

Lori denies creating a hostile environment or retaliating against Darla. Instead, she referenced a long history of problematic interactions Darla has had with staff as well as several complaints regarding Darla's behavior that have been received over the years. Until recently, those complaints remained largely unaddressed.

On April 2, 2021, Lori received formal letters of complaint regarding Darla's conduct from four separate employees: [REDACTED]. The letters detailed behaviors the employees described as bullying and hostile. Lori updated Mayor Karen Bonds about the complaints. Lori had also held prior discussions with the Mayor regarding

Darla's conduct [REDACTED]. Darla was not placed on administrative leave though Lori later met with her on April 7, 2021 to discuss Darla's future and requested that she submit a succession plan. In attendance at that meeting was the Chief of Police, Michael Bailey, [REDACTED].

Darla referenced the April 7, 2021 meeting in which she claimed Lori asked for her "exit plan". During this meeting, Lori informed Darla that she had received complaints regarding Darla's conduct and bullying behavior. Lori wanted to know what Darla's succession plan was and her timeline for vacating her position with the Town. Lori advised her that she would be reassigning Darla's job duties in the meantime. Lori stated that the Town could not continue to allow Darla's behavior. Lori also asked Darla to prepare a work transition plan and advised her that there would be a gradual transition of her duties. Lori asserted that she never told Darla to submit an exit plan. Though Lori did request a succession plan during the April 7, 2021 meeting, all managers had been previously asked to submit such a plan in January 2021.

Darla's understanding was that Lori was telling her to submit her resignation and implying that Darla had to do so or be involuntarily terminated. Lori attempted to clarify via email that she expected Darla to come up with a plan going forward that included transitioning her responsibilities to other staff. Lori also indicated there were serious issues regarding Darla's conduct that would no longer be tolerated by the Town. Lori believes that discussion of a succession plan and submission of a work transition plan during the April 7, 2021 meeting was interpreted by Darla as a request for an exit plan although Lori did not use those exact terms. Chief Bailey affirmed Lori's account of the meeting.

Out of all other individuals interviewed, one person aside from Darla referenced conduct by Lori that he perceived as hostile. [REDACTED] provided examples in which he described Lori's behavior as hostile or negative, including:

- ⊗ Denying [REDACTED] request to meet with the Mayor about how an employee was allegedly being treated by Lori.
- ⊗ Not providing [REDACTED] with "further documentation" when he was counseled in writing regarding his performance.
- ⊗ Sending [REDACTED] an email admonishing him and copying several other employees.
- ⊗ Allowing [REDACTED] subordinate to bypass the chain of command to speak directly with Lori rather than go through him first.

All other individuals interviewed described incidents of Darla's behavior as inappropriate, hostile, and disruptive. None of them indicated witnessing or being subjected to behavior that was hostile, negative, or retaliatory from Lori. Instead, Darla's behavior was thematically mentioned as problematic. Additionally, at least two employees interviewed have placed restrictions on their interactions with Darla as a result of prior experiences. [REDACTED] refuses to meet with Darla

behind closed doors while [REDACTED] refuses to interact with Darla unless it is in writing, recorded, or witnessed.

Darla's behavior was described as:

- ⊗ Frequently yelling at, demeaning, and berating others and using profanity profusely.
- ⊗ Complaining about the work of others and harshly pointing out what she believed they had done incorrectly.
- ⊗ Being "short" with people and making snide comments.
- ⊗ Appearing at Council meetings under the influence of alcohol, drinking during work hours and smelling of alcohol.

Darla denies all accusations. Instead, she stated that any allegations regarding bullying levied against her came from the hostile environment created by Lori.

**THE ALLEGATION THAT DARLA TILLEY WAS FORCED TO RESIGN FROM HER POSITION WITH THE TOWN OF PARKER UNDER DURESS FOLLOWING AN APRIL 7, 2021, MEETING WITH LORI WEDEMEYER AND THAT SHE HAS BEEN SUBJECTED TO A HOSTILE WORK ENVIRONMENT AND RETALIATION BY LORI WEDEMEYER IS: NOT SUBSTANTIATED.**

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## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

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This investigation did not support the claim that Lori engaged in behavior that created a hostile work environment. A hostile work environment involves behaviors that are pervasive, severe, persistent, and disruptive to the alleged victim's work. While the investigation finds that Lori's interactions were at times abrupt or reactionary, they were neither bullying nor did they create a hostile work environment. While Darla believes any allegations made against her have come from Lori, none of the individuals interviewed or who submitted complaints about Darla's behavior indicated that they were coerced or directed to submit such complaints. Though ██████ did complain about a few of his interactions with Lori, they did not indicate a pattern of behavior from Lori; and when examined in isolation were not severe or disruptive. Additionally, they were not corroborated by others.

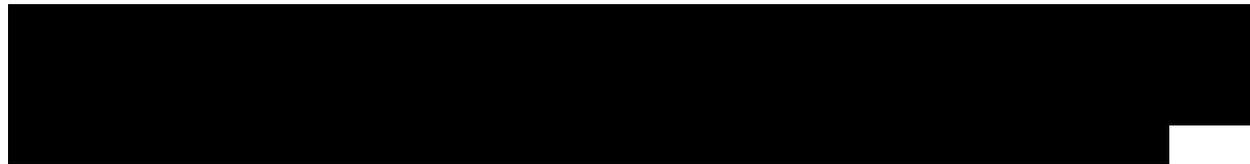
Findings also did not support the allegation that Lori engaged in behavior that was retaliatory toward Darla. Retaliation occurs when employers treat applicants, employees or former employees, or people closely associated with these individuals, less favorably for reporting discrimination; participating in a discrimination investigation or lawsuit, or opposing discrimination (for example, threatening to file a charge or complaint of discrimination). Retaliation may also occur when an employer takes an adverse action against an employee for engaging in those activities, which are protected under the law. Darla did not engage in such activity and as such there was no action that was taken "in response".

Based on the number of employee complaints, the nature of the interactions and comments described by multiple interviewees, and despite Darla's denial, it is more likely true than untrue that Darla's behavior and comments were bullying in nature and created a very poor working environment for others. As such, it was appropriate for Lori, on behalf of the Town in her capacity as Town Manager and head of HR, to take action that would address the conduct.

As both Town Manager and de facto HR Manager, Lori was responsible for addressing concerns about Darla's behavior within the context of the Town Personnel Rules and Regulations. It does not appear that any action was taken until April 2021 when the issues that had reportedly been occurring for years came to a head. Given the strong indication that Darla's behavior toward staff was bullying (and in violation of the personnel rules governing standards of conduct for Town employees) Lori was correct in her attempt to take action in response to the rise in complaints. However, the approach taken was not fully consistent with the guidelines for addressing conduct violations as described in the Town Personnel Rules and Regulations, Section 14 – Disciplinary Action. This section of the policy indicates disciplinary actions may include a verbal reprimand, written reprimand, disciplinary probation, reduction of pay up to 5%, suspension, demotion and dismissal. Dismissals require "good cause as described in the standards of conduct" and a pre-termination hearing for non-probationary status employees as a matter of due process.

Town Personnel Rules and Regulations, Section 13 – Standards of Conduct lists the inappropriate and unacceptable behaviors for Town employees, including “abusiveness in attitude, language or conduct to the public, or fellow employees.” Per this policy, engaging in such behavior would most likely result in coaching, feedback, or disciplinary action up to and including termination.

While Darla’s conduct had very likely risen to the level of termination, that process was not initiated. If it was the intent for Darla to begin her transition plan to exit the organization due to her conduct as conveyed during the April 7, 2021 meeting, the Town’s Personnel Rules and Regulations, Section 14 – Disciplinary Action should have been followed either by engaging in the progressive steps outlined in the policy or initiating the pre-termination hearing. These progressive steps were not taken to address Darla’s historically reported poor behavior, or to notify her that complaints had been filed prior to the April 7, 2021 meeting. Despite Lori not using the term “exit plan” during that meeting, the combination of asking her for a succession plan, advising her that her duties would be redistributed or transitioned to others, and conveying that the Town would no longer tolerate her behavior led to Darla’s reasonable interpretation that she would be terminated from her employment either voluntarily or involuntarily.



The absence of an expert HR resource in this matter; or a resource with expertise in handling sensitive HR issues or employee relations matters places the Town at a disadvantage in its ability to expeditiously and correctly address situations that arise within the workforce. The lack of a clear separation of duties between the Town Manager role and the HR Manager role does a disservice to both Town employees and the Manager. Both should be properly supported with the professional HR expertise critical to most effectively address and resolve issues that will undoubtedly arise.

#### Additional Items of Note Outside of Investigative Scope

In addition to the complaints regarding Darla’s conduct and behavior toward other employees, two individuals interviewed described Darla’s questionable financial management activities, including unsubmitted invoices and purchase orders. This was reported to Council in one of the letters of complaint submitted in early April 2021. It was also reported that Darla received a small mobile home from a client of the Senior Center after the client passed away and that Darla later sold the mobile home. If true, this would be in violation of the Town’s gifting policy – Section 2., Improper Conduct (j) Gifts and Favors, which indicates that it is improper to accept any “money or gift in addition to regular compensation due an employee, whether in the form of service, loan, thing or promise, from any person who to his/her knowledge is interested directly or indirectly in any manner whatsoever in business dealings with the Town or granting in the termination of his/her duties any improper favor, services or thing of value.”

Two final themes surfaced throughout the course of the investigative process. They are:

- ⌘ The manner in which employees communicate with and interact among themselves and with the Town Council is divisive. Specifically, yelling, screaming, and the use of profanity was described regularly as a typical or routine form of communication within the Town. This style of communication has reportedly led to distrust and morale issues among Town employees and Town Council members.
- ⌘ Numerous specific complaints surfaced regarding [REDACTED] conduct including negative public comments and inferences to and about Town employees both verbally and via social media (Facebook).



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