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OIG INVESTIGATION FINDS ABUSES OF AUTHORITY BY DHR COMMISSIONER

ATLANTA, GA – The Compliance Division of the City of Atlanta Office of the Inspector General (OIG) has released a report detailing abuses of authority by the commissioner of the Department of Human Resources (DHR), Tarlesha W. Smith, Esq. After receiving a complaint in April 2023, OIG initiated an investigation that found Smith used her position with the City of Atlanta (City) to create a position for her daughter and took adverse personnel actions against her daughter’s former supervisor within the Office of the City Solicitor (OCS) when the supervisor tried to hold the daughter to accountability standards. In its investigation, OIG also found unprofessionalism and deviation from human resources standards by DHR leadership. In addition, OIG encountered significant issues throughout the course of this investigation as it attempted to access City records.

In connection with the hiring of Smith’s daughter, OIG found:

- The daughter received an offer letter on December 20, 2022, before the position was publicly advertised.
- The daughter was shepherded through the hiring and onboarding process, skipping steps in the City’s protocol for such a position.
 - The daughter was not interviewed for the position.
 - No employment or education verification was performed in connection with the daughter’s background check.
- The daughter did not meet the minimum experience qualifications for the position.
- The daughter’s candidate profiles appeared to contain false information regarding education and employment.
- City staff noted the daughter’s relationship with Smith throughout the hiring and onboarding process.

In connection with the attempted termination of the daughter’s supervisor, OIG found:

- Based on a misinterpretation of her training manual, the daughter expected to telework after four weeks of onsite training. When after the fourth week of training, the supervisor informed her that her training would continue onsite, the daughter then engaged in absenteeism and tardiness and displayed a poor attitude.

- When the supervisor—a 25+ year City employee with an unblemished record—tried to terminate the daughter for job abandonment, Smith and one of her deputies retaliated against the supervisor.
- Smith and her deputy launched an investigation against the supervisor with a prescribed outcome to terminate her employment.
- Before its investigation was concluded, DHR placed Johnson on administrative leave based on undisclosed/unsubstantiated allegations, and attempted to terminate her. These employment actions were taken absent communications with and against the express wishes of the OCS department head.
- When asked by the OCS department head for records pertaining to the DHR investigation, DHR refused.

OIG received multiple reported accounts of unprofessionalism by Smith. Through Smith’s conduct, the investigation revealed a deviation in DHR from its mission statement, stated core functions, and industry standards.

During its investigation, OIG encountered delayed and obstructed access to the DHR records it required to complete its work. OIG was told that the DHR commissioner was aware of the OCS investigation. In this matter, DHR protocol forced OIG to seek personnel records from a records custodian who was involved in the investigation and who had a close relationship with the subjects of the investigation. OIG issued the following policy and procedure recommendations, asking that the City:

1. Provide OIG with direct access to all DHR hard copy personnel records.
2. Provide OIG with direct access to all Office of Labor and Employee Relations (OLER) investigative records, including those on electronic databases.
3. Provide OIG with superuser sensitive read only access to the DHR component of Oracle.

In response to OIG’s investigative findings, the Office of the Mayor placed Smith on administrative leave and assigned the matter to the Law Department for further investigation.

“Nepotism and retaliation have no place in City of Atlanta government,” said Inspector General Shannon K. Manigault. “Atlanta citizens and City of Atlanta employees expect and deserve more of its leaders.”

OIG thanks OCS and members of DHR for their assistance with this investigation.

This investigation was conducted by Assistant Inspector General Perrish Brown of the OIG Compliance Division, under the supervision of Deputy Inspector General Shelby J. Williams.

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