



# HOLIDAY ETHICS GUIDANCE

*This is the time of year for parties, receptions, and exchanging gifts. Without dampening the holiday spirit, please remember the ethics rules still apply during the holidays. Here are a few reminders to keep in mind as you enjoy this festive time.*

## GIFTS

### **1. May employees exchange holiday gifts?**

Generally, you may exchange gifts with colleagues. However please keep in mind:

- Supervisors and managers may not accept gifts valued more than \$10 from subordinates. Therefore, holiday gift exchanges must have a maximum value for gifts of \$10.
- You may not accept gifts valued at more than \$10 from another federal employee who receives less pay than you unless there is no supervisor-subordinate relationship and there is a personal relationship justifying the gift.
- Any gifts supervisors accept from subordinates must be “non-cash.” Gift cards valued at \$10 from a specific vendor (such as a coffee shop or similar card) are acceptable, but prepaid charge/debit cards (e.g., Visa or MasterCard) are not.
- Subordinates may not pool their contributions to buy a supervisor a holiday gift worth more than \$10.
- There is no limit on the value of a gift a supervisor may give to a subordinate, however, supervisors should be cautious to avoid perceptions of favoritism.
- You may accept personal hospitality at the home of a subordinate or someone who earns less money than you. If invited to a subordinate/colleague/supervisor/manager’s home, you may bring a gift appropriate in type and price to the occasion.

*Best Practice: Limit gift items to a value of \$10 or less, including gift exchanges to avoid inadvertently violating these rules.*

### **2. May contractor employees participate in office gift exchanges?**

You may not solicit contractor employees to participate in holiday gift exchanges. In general, contractor employees may voluntarily participate in holiday gift exchanges if they personally pay for the gift (i.e., the company for whom they work is not paying). Contractor employees may be subject to their company’s gift rules which may impact their ability to participate in office gift exchanges, so always make sure they check their rules first. We recommend consulting with an [\*ethics official\*](#) prior to giving gifts to contractors.

*Best Practice: Check with an appropriate Contracting Officer before including contractors in holiday activities.*

### 3. May I accept a gift from a DOC contractor or other “prohibited source?”

Generally, you may **not** accept gifts from contractors or other “prohibited sources.” A “prohibited source” is a person (or an organization made up of a majority persons) who: is seeking official action by, is doing business with, or is regulated by DOC; or has interests that may be substantially affected by performance or nonperformance of the employee’s official duties. Some exceptions to the prohibition on accepting gifts include:

- De Minimis Gift. You may accept gifts valued at \$20 or less per occasion from a prohibited source but remember there is a \$50 cap on what you can accept from that source in the calendar year.
- Personal Relationship. Gifts received based solely on a family relationship or personal friendship are allowable when it is clear that such gifts have not been offered because of your official position. Qualifying personal relationships would be those developed prior to a working relationship or based on friendships developed outside of the work setting.
- Employee or Spouse Outside Business. Gifts based on an employee’s or their spouse’s outside business or employment relationships are allowable when it is clear that such a gift is not offered or enhanced because of the employee's official position.
- Lobbyist Gift Ban. Except in very limited instances, **political appointees** may **not** accept gifts from registered lobbyists or lobbying organizations.

*Best Practice: These exceptions are very fact specific. Consult an [ethics official](#) to determine if your situation meets one of these exceptions.*

### 4. Do I have to report gifts from non-Federal sources?

Yes, if you file a financial disclosure report. You must aggregate all gifts that you receive from the same donor that are valued above \$166, and if the total value exceeds \$415 in a calendar year, you must report the gift(s) on your next financial disclosure, unless the gifts are from a family member.

### 5. May I accept a gift from a foreign government representative?

While the U.S. Constitution generally prohibits officers and employees from accepting gifts from foreign governments, the Foreign Gifts and Decorations Act provides an exception. The Act allows an employee to accept a gift from a foreign government, tendered and received as a souvenir or mark of courtesy, on behalf of the U.S. Government. Those gifts may require reporting using [CD-342](#). If the gift is of minimal value, it may be personally retained with DOC approval (seek ethics guidance for the approval process). The current minimal gift value limit is \$415. You may also accept free attendance to an event hosted solely by a foreign government representative valued at \$415 or less. Keep in mind that events hosted at embassies may not always be hosted solely by a foreign government.

*Best Practice: Gifts from foreign governments present several legal issues. Consult an [ethics official](#) to determine if your gift from a foreign government may be accepted.*

## **PARTIES**

### **6. May I accept invitations to holiday parties from non-government entities or persons?**

It depends. You may only accept free attendance to an event offered because of your government position or by a “prohibited source” (i.e., regulated entities, or entities that seek or do business with DOC) if an exception applies. Exceptions include:

- Events that qualify as a “widely attended gathering,” if you receive advance written approval from your supervisor based on a determination that your attendance is in the interest of the Department (after consulting an ethics official). To receive approval, please complete the [Invitation Questionnaire](#) and submit it to [EthicsDivision@doc.gov](mailto:EthicsDivision@doc.gov).
- The invitation is motivated by a family or personal friendship, rather than your position.
- The invitation results from business or employment activities of you or your spouse when it is clear that this relationship is the motivation for the offer and it is not enhanced because of your official position.
- The invitation is open to the public or to all government officers and employees.
- The fair market value for admission to or attendance at the event is \$20 or less.

NOTE: If the donor is a registered lobbyist, *political appointees* have additional restrictions to consider (see next question).

*Best Practice: Consult an [ethics official](#) to determine if your situation meets one of these exceptions and whether written authorization is required.*

### **7. May political appointees accept gifts or invitations to holiday parties from non-Federal entities or persons?**

It depends on who is making the offer. In addition to gift rules applicable to all employees, political appointees have further restrictions. Political appointees may not accept gifts or invitations to holiday parties from registered lobbyists or registered lobbyist organizations, unless: 1) the gift is motivated by a *bona fide* personal relationship; 2) the lobbyist organization is a charitable organization exempt from taxation under §501(c)(3) of the IRS Code; or, 3) the organization is a media organization.

*Best Practice: Most gift exceptions available to employees do not apply to gifts offered to political appointees from registered lobbyists or lobbyist organizations. Please consult with your [ethics official](#) for further guidance.*

### **8. May contractors participate in office holiday parties?**

Contractors may participate in office parties if on their own time and the contractor does not charge the time to the government contract. Many contractors have business practices similar to our Government ethics rules. Take these rules into consideration before offering contractors gifts or opportunities they may not be able to accept. If a contractor expresses an interest in attending, consult the appropriate contracting officer for guidance.

**9. May we collect money for holiday parties in the office?**

Yes, federal employees may be asked to contribute, but all contributions must be strictly voluntary and should represent their *pro rata* share of the expenses. Employees may also bring in-kind donations, such as food items, beverages, plates, and plastic utensils. You may not solicit contributions of funds, food, locations, or other items from sources outside DOC.

*Best Practice: Supervisors should not personally solicit contributions or collect donations for holiday events, in order to preserve the voluntary nature of the collection. Lists of contributors should not be shared. Employees who are not supervisors may volunteer to carry out these functions.*

**10. May we use appropriated funds to pay for a party?**

Generally, office parties are unofficial events and you may not use appropriated funds to pay for them. You also may not use appropriated funds to purchase or send holiday greeting cards.

**11. May our office serve alcohol or host raffles at our holiday party in a government space?**

Alcohol consumption in government space is generally prohibited; however, GSA permits agency heads to authorize the use of alcohol under certain circumstances. Check with facilities for the approval process. Door prizes or drawings have the potential to involve gambling. Gambling may violate Department policy, regulations, and state or municipal laws. Additionally, GSA regulations ban gambling in buildings that are operated under, or subject to, GSA authorities (e.g., GSA-owned or -controlled buildings). Please consult an ethics official before including these types of activities in your holiday plans. In every instance, participation must be voluntary and may not require a cash donation.

**12. May we host virtual festivities like contests in lieu of a holiday party?**

Yes, contests and competitions are permissible and are subject to the same ethics rules as traditional festivities. However, please be sure the prizes for any contest do not exceed the \$10 value for non-cash gifts (if supervisors participate). Other permissible awards can be items of little intrinsic value that are intended for presentation only, bragging rights, HR-authorized flexibilities (e.g., an hour of administrative excused absence), or other recognition like lunch with the boss.

*This handout is for information purposes only and is not a substitute for advice from an [ethics official](#). Please check our [website](#) for additional ethics guidance and materials.*