

STATE OF ILLINOIS

ISLAMIC CULTURAL SENSITIVITY GUIDE FOR PUBLIC EMPLOYEES

The free exercise of religion is protected by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution and Section 3 of Article I of the Illinois Constitution. Furthermore, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Illinois Human Rights Act, 775 ILCS 5/1-101 et seq., provide that employers may not discriminate on the basis of religion, among other factors, and that employers must accommodate an employee's religious practices unless doing so causes undue hardship to the employer.

Illinois is a multi-faith and multi-cultural State. This guide was prepared by the Muslim American Advisory Council to foster inclusive and equitable workplace environments at State agencies, departments, boards and commissions and to provide culturally appropriate services to Illinois' diverse population. Muslim Americans are the most racially diverse religious group in America, where no race represents a majority. Note that these guidelines outline general Islamic beliefs and practices and that individual application of these observances may vary.

Cross-Gender Interaction

The human body is regarded as a sacred (i.e., a "gift" from God) in Islam; therefore, certain social measures are taken to protect it. Here are select norms:

- Most Muslims do not give hugs to or physically embrace unrelated persons of the opposite sex.
- Some Muslims shake hands with unrelated persons of the opposite sex; others view it as prohibited. [Tip: Wait until a Muslim extends his or her hand to you first. Otherwise, do not shake his or her hand.]

Dress Code

Islam requires women and men to behave and dress modestly. There are a number of ways in which Muslims express such teachings. Here is the most notable attire:

- Muslim women often times wear a headscarf called a hijab.
- Muslim men sometimes wear a small head covering called a kufi.

These articles of clothing should not be prohibited in any dress code policies.

Dietary Restrictions

The Quran prohibits the consumption of alcohol, pork and pork byproducts. Many Muslims follow standards of slaughter and preparation of meat and poultry called halal. (Halal is to Muslims what kosher is to Jews.) [Tip: Choose a vegetarian or fish option when catering to Muslims.]

Prayer

Daily: Muslims are required to pray five times a day – before sunrise, around noon, mid-afternoon, at sunset and at night. Before prayer, Muslims are required to wash their faces, hands and feet with clean water. Each prayer takes about 5-10 minutes to perform. Prayer may be performed in any quiet and clean place. During prayer, Muslims stand, bow and prostrate to God, facing Mecca (generally, in the northeast direction). During prayer, Muslims are fully engaged and cannot respond to telephone rings or conversations (with the exception of emergencies). Others should not walk in front of or interrupt Muslims during prayer. Muslim employees may pray during lunch and/or other breaks.

Weekly: Muslim men are required (optional for Muslim women) to attend Friday congregational prayer called jum’ah. (Friday congregational prayer is to Muslims what Sunday service is to Christians.) It generally takes place at a mosque (or masjid) during the noontime prayer and includes a sermon. Jum’ah lasts a total of 45-90 minutes. Muslim employees may attend jum’ah during an extended lunch break or another arrangement with their employer so long as no work is missed.

Pilgrimage

Muslims are required to make a pilgrimage – called hajj – to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. Performing the rituals of hajj may last 5 days (travel durations vary) during the second week of the twelfth month of the Islamic lunar calendar – called Hijri. Muslim employees may choose to make their pilgrimage using vacation time.

Holidays

Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr: Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar (or Hijri) during which Muslims are required to fast from break-of-dawn to sunset. Fasting is intended to help teach Muslims self-restraint from eating, drinking and smoking, among other activities. It is also a time to empathize with those who are less fortunate and to appreciate what one has. Certain Muslims are exempt from fasting (e.g., travelers, pregnant women and ill persons). Fasting does not mean that Muslims cease to work.

Eid al-Fitr, one of the two Islamic holidays, marks the end of Ramadan. (Eid al-Fitr means “Festival of Breaking the Fast” in English.) Muslim employees may take time off from work to celebrate Eid al-Fitr. There should be no undue penalty for this religious obligation.

Eid al-Adha: Eid al-Adha (i) commemorates Prophet Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son in obedience to God and (ii) marks the end of the annual Islamic pilgrimage (or hajj) to Mecca. (Eid al-Adha means “Feast of the Sacrifice” in English.) Muslim employees may take time off from work to celebrate Eid al-Adha. There should be no undue penalty for this religious obligation.

Social Work Events: Many Muslims are reluctant to take part in social gatherings at which alcohol is served. These employees should not be penalized for not participating in such functions.