

## Ethics: The Spouse Is a Volunteer Firefighter

**Q.** The small town has a volunteer fire department with just one paid employee, the fire chief. The chief recently approached the town manager to ask him if his wife would be able to serve as an emergency medical technician (EMT) for the day shift. He has not been able to find enough personnel to respond to daytime calls. Two members of the town council also serve as volunteer firefighters.

The town's policy is to pay a fee to volunteers only when they respond to an emergency, and the town council sets this fee. While the town manager recognizes the challenges of staffing a volunteer fire department and wants to be helpful, he also wants to avoid potential ethics problems. Can his wife serve as an EMT for the town?

**A.** What is most important in such situations is for the manager to openly disclose his wife's work for the town and to recuse himself from making any recommendations on issues that could benefit his wife. Specifically, the manager should avoid any potential conflict of interest, such as would arise in making recommendations on the compensation or benefits offered to the volunteer firefighters or EMTs.

A guideline for Tenet 12 of the ICMA Code of Ethics deals with personal relationships: "Members should disclose any personal relationship to the governing body in any instance where there could be the appearance of a conflict of interest. For example, if the manager's spouse works for a developer doing business with the local government, that fact should be disclosed."

Ethics advice is a popular service provided to ICMA members. The inquiries and advice are reviewed by the Committee on Professional Conduct, the ethics committee of the ICMA Executive Board. Some of the inquiries are revised and published as a regular feature in PM, to give guidance to members in the big and little ethical decisions they make daily. If you have a question about your obligations under the ICMA Code of Ethics, call Elizabeth Kellar at 202/962-3611; e-mail, [ekellar@icma.org](mailto:ekellar@icma.org); or Martha Perego at 202/962-3668; e-mail, [mperego@icma.org](mailto:mperego@icma.org).