

American Society of Association Executives

9 Tips for an Effective Grievance Policy

https://www.asaecenter.org/resources/articles/an_plus/2012/january/9-tips-for-an-effective-grievance-policy

By: Jeff Waddle

When your association handles complaints about members openly and fairly, you build public trust. Here's what two organizations in the chimney-sweeping industry learned about keeping their profession ethical and consumer friendly.

Although facing questions about unethical conduct by members is difficult for any association, a well-designed and effectively administered grievance policy can boost public awareness and confidence in an industry or profession. That's what the National Chimney Sweep Guild (NCSG) and its affiliated organization, the Chimney Safety Institute of America (CFIA), found after establishing formal [ethics violations complaint procedures](#) that enable both colleagues and homeowners to file a grievance against an NCSG-member company or individual certified chimney sweep that could result in violators losing membership or certification in certain cases.

The chimney-sweeping profession is largely unregulated, and many homeowners know little about it, so the NCSG and CFIA work to educate the public on how to hire a qualified "sweep." More homeowners are researching chimney-care companies and certified sweeps via the organizations' websites, and they increasingly turn to the associations if they are unhappy with services provided.

"It helps us tremendously to say to the public, 'We do have standards, we do enforce those standards, and we have a very concise, clear, and consistent policy for doing so,'" says NCSG Executive Director Mark McSweeney, CAE. "The challenge is we've got to be careful as a trade association that we're not harassing our members, so we make sure we have our ducks in a row before we pursue [a complaint]."

[NCSG's Code of Ethics](#) was adopted almost 30 years ago, and its grievance investigation procedures have evolved significantly during that time. Each organization has its own five-person volunteer ethics committee to review complaints about members; they operate independently but follow the same policies and procedures. Highlights of current NCSG and CFIA procedures and lessons learned include:

- The complaint must be written (no phone calls or emails). McSweeney says one advantage of requiring written complaints is that it tends to weed out people who simply want to vent.
- No anonymous complaints are accepted. It's not uncommon for a sweep to reach out to the homeowner who complained in an attempt to rectify the situation, McSweeney says, especially if a legitimate operator made an honest mistake.

- A "sweep versus sweep" complaint requires a \$100 filing fee to discourage frivolous or harassing complaints; homeowner grievances require no fee.
- To ensure that a complaint merits further review, McSweeney and the chair of the relevant organization's ethics committee review all complaints before the full committee receives them.
- NCSG does not investigate pricing disputes. Homeowners with pricing complaints are typically referred to their local Better Business Bureau.
- Both ethics committees are composed of chimney sweeps. McSweeney says the organizations believe that judgments against sweeps should be made by a group of peers.
- The committees have adopted an informal "three-strikes" rule but will revoke membership or certification on the first or second strike if the individual case warrants it. "We'd much rather turn them around and make them a better company than just slap some sort of punishment on them, but it depends on what it is," says McSweeney.
- No board members from either organization serve on its ethics committee, because the boards rule on appeals stemming from committee decisions. Appeals require a \$50 filing fee.
- The committees try to include wide geographic representation among members, because professional requirements and practices vary by region.

McSweeney advises associations seeking to establish their own grievance policies to involve legal counsel in drafting procedures for resolving complaints.

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