

Subject: Formal Grievance Submission Regarding Conflict of Interest and Voting Procedures – April 3, 2025

Date of Alleged Violation: April 3, 2025

Name of Complainant: Rene Cotto-Lewis, Planning Council Member

Date Submitted: April 17, 2025

Dear Planning Council Support,

I am submitting this letter as a formal grievance regarding procedural violations that occurred during the Service Systems & Quality Committee meeting on April 3, 2025, during the review and discussion of the Early Intervention Services (EIS) standard of care.

Brief Description of Alleged Violation:

At this meeting:

- Several members with real or perceived conflicts of interest who properly disclosed them, actively participated in the discussion on a standard directly tied to agencies with which they are affiliated.
- An “All in favor say aye” voice vote was used to move the recommendation forward, a method not permitted by the bylaws.
- No abstentions were recorded, despite clear conflicts, and those same members helped shape the direction of the discussion.

These actions are inconsistent with the Planning Council's own governing documents and compromise both process integrity and the trust of participating members, jeopardizing the decision-making processes.

Relevant Bylaws and Policies Violated:

1. Bylaws – Article VIII, Section 8.1 (Conflict of Interest):

“A member may not participate in discussions or vote on issues on which the member or an immediate family member has a real or perceived conflict of interest.”

2. Bylaws – Article IX, Section 9.4 (Voting Procedures):

Voting shall be in accordance with the Florida Sunshine Law and as follows:

1. Show of hands for parliamentary actions.
2. Roll Call vote for action items and recommendations.

3. Written ballot during elections...
4. E-voting... in emergency circumstances.”

3. Bylaws – Article IX, Section 9.2:

“Each member must vote yes or no on each issue with which the member has no conflict of interest.”

There is no exception in these sections for "subject matter experts" or relaxed rules at the committee level.

Why This Matters:

It is important to remember that we serve on the Planning Council not for organizational benefit, but to do the work that our mission requires to improve the care and quality of life for those infected and affected by HIV. Our mission, vision, and core values guide everything we do:

Mission: To improve the quality of life for individuals with HIV by responding to their existing and emerging needs and to provide educational and behavioral strategies to reduce and prevent the spread of HIV.

Vision: To ensure a quality continuum of care for all individuals and families infected with, affected by, and at risk for HIV.

Core Values: Empowerment, Commitment, Quality, and Integrity.

A Deeper Concern:

To be clear, this grievance is not about any individual, but rather about protecting the integrity of the process and creating a space that invites new ideas and encourages innovation, instead of perpetuating a status quo that can stifle progress.

Failure to adapt to changing circumstances results in outdated systems and practices that are no longer effective. The comfort of familiarity should never override the necessity of progress.

When we allow conflicted members to steer discussions or shape outcomes, even with the best of intentions, we send the message, especially to new or less experienced members that transparency and accountability are optional. This deters engagement, suppresses input, and creates disillusionment within the very communities we are supposed to represent and ultimately weakens the very foundation of the Council's work.

Embracing change, even when it's uncomfortable, is not only essential for our growth but critical to advancing HIV care and prevention in our communities. Let's remember, "innovation is the unrelenting drive to break the status quo and develop anew where few have dared to go."

We cannot drive innovation in HIV services if we continue to allow the same patterns to dominate conversations and decisions.

Requested Resolution:

- I respectfully request a formal review of the April 3rd vote and discussion to determine whether it should be nullified and retaken in accordance with the bylaws, given the procedural violations and participation of conflicted members.
- I request that training and written clarification be issued to all members regarding conflict of interest, abstention, and voting protocols at both committee and Planning Council levels.
- I ask that this concern be placed on record and discussed transparently at the Executive Committee, the Planning Council Business meeting and the Community meeting to reinforce our shared responsibility to uphold ethical standards.
- Lastly, I propose forming a subcommittee to promptly review and update the bylaws and procedural policies to ensure they are inclusive, current, and clearly defined. One of the goals of this subcommittee can be to establish a clear process for how members with conflicts can appropriately engage so that their expertise is honored, decision-making remains ethical, and all voices; those of the community, the Planning Council, and the grantees, are treated as equally valuable.

Thank you for your time, and for your commitment to doing this work with integrity and heart. I am available to meet or speak further as needed.

Sincerely,
Rene Cotto-Lewis
council@authenticraw.com

Note: I have submitted this formal grievance using the Planning Council's official grievance form on the website. I have also emailed a copy to Planning Council Support to ensure full documentation and transparency.