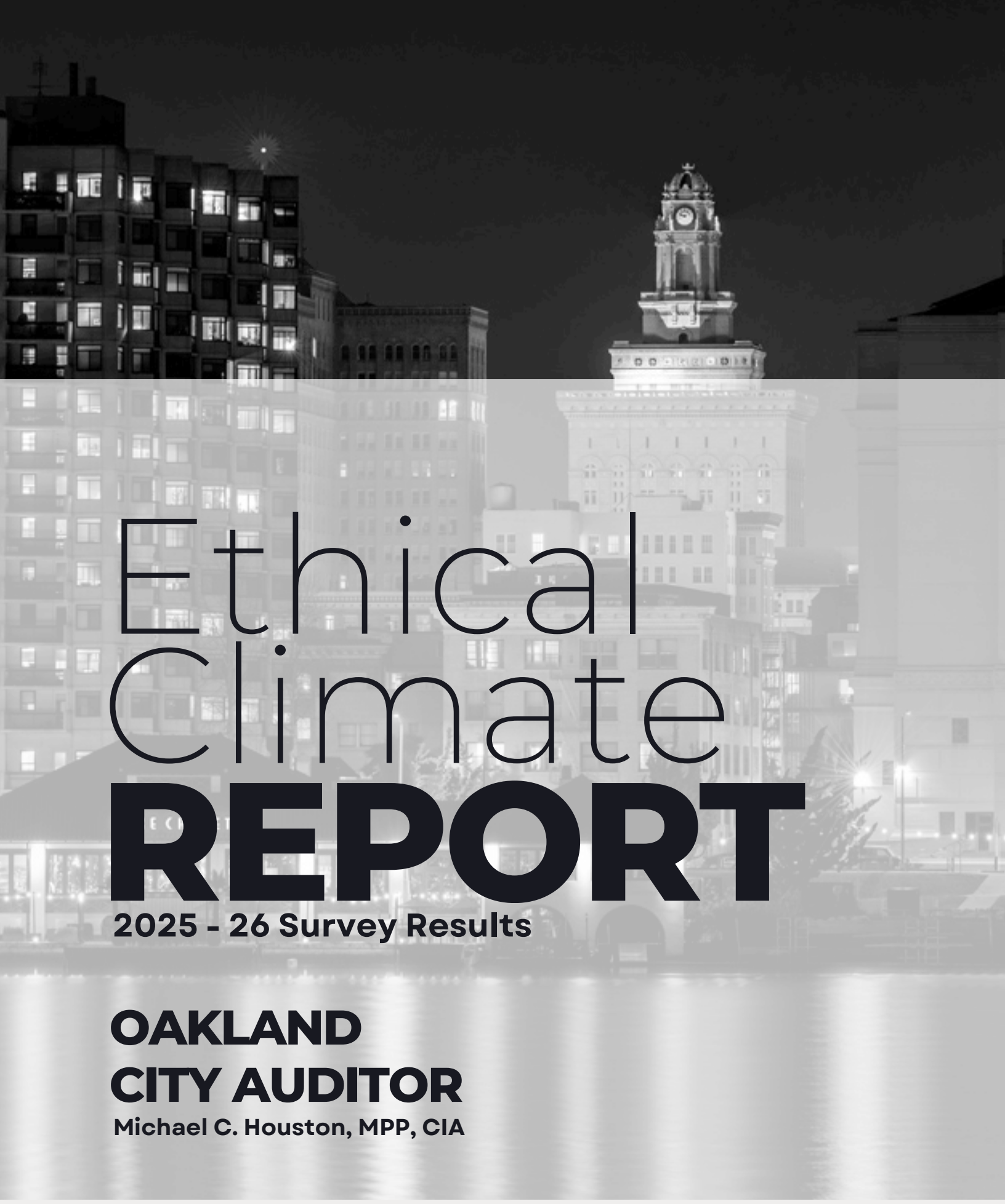


Ethical Climate REPORT

2025 - 26 Survey Results

OAKLAND CITY AUDITOR

Michael C. Houston, MPP, CIA

June 29, 2026

Independent Auditor. Reporting Directly to the Residents.

CITY OF OAKLAND
Office of the City Auditor

CITY OF OAKLAND
Office of the City Auditor

CITY HALL · ONE FRANK H. OGAWA PLAZA 4TH FLOOR · OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA · 94612

Michael C. Houston, MPP, CIA
City Auditor

(510) 238-3378
FAX (510) 238-7640
TDD (510) 238-3254
www.oaklandauditor.com

June 29, 2026

RE: City of Oakland Ethical Climate Survey (2025-26)

Dear Residents of Oakland, Mayor Lee, Honorable Councilmembers, City Attorney Richardson, Acting City Administrator Lake, and Fellow City Employees,

At the end of 2025 and the beginning of 2026, our Office issued an ethical climate survey to gauge City employees' sense of the ethical climate within the City. The Office of the City Auditor previously issued ethical climate survey reports using this same survey instrument in 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014, and 2020.

The survey, developed by the Institute for Local Government, is designed to provide an overview of the health of an agency's ethical climate, including its capacity for ethical decision-making, both by the organization and by individuals within the organization.

Overall, survey respondents rated the City's ethical climate a 'medium' score of 222 out of 300. This score indicates that the City has room for improvement, according to the Institute for Local Government.

The enclosed report provides aggregate results for employees' perceptions of ethical climate at the staff, management, and elected levels, based on the responses of 555 survey respondents. We also received 178 open-ended responses, which give more specific insights into how they see the City's ethical climate, including ways the City can improve it.

I am grateful to the staff that submitted this confidential survey to help us better understand the state of the City's ethical climate. As noted in the report, ethical culture begins at the top and influences all levels of an organization. We each have a role in promoting a culture of transparency and accountability in our local government for our employees, as well as our residents and business owners.

Sincerely,

Michael C. Houston
City Auditor

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION **1**

SURVEY RESULTS **2**

Many Respondents Indicated they Did Not Know About Elected Officials' Ethics 2

New Employees Gave the City's Ethical Climate Higher Ratings than Employees with more Tenure 2

For Medium and Low Scores, the Institute for Local Government Recommends Evaluating Areas of Weakness and Identifying Aspects of the Culture that Foster Problematic Behaviors 3

Survey Respondents Indicated that the City Could Improve Organizational Transparency and Communication, as well as Management and Supervisor Accountability, Among Other Areas 4

SURVEY SECTION 1: EMPLOYEES **8**

SURVEY SECTION 2: MANAGEMENT **9**

SURVEY SECTION 3: ELECTED OFFICIALS **10**

CONCLUSION **11**

METHODOLOGY **12**

Appendix A: Respondent Demographics **14**

Total Participants by Staffing Position 14

Respondents' Tenure with the City Varied 14

Appendix B: Resources for Raising Ethical Concerns and Questions **15**

TABLE OF EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Elected Officials Received the Lowest Scores by All Participant Groups With More than One Year of Tenure 3

Exhibit 2: The Scoring Guide for the Ethical Climate Survey Provides Example Steps to Take Towards Improved Ethical Climate 4

Exhibit 3: In Open-Ended Comments, Respondents Described Opportunities for the City to Enhance Organizational Transparency and Communication and Management and Supervisor Accountability and towards a Better Ethical Climate 6

Exhibit 4: Rating Expectations of Themselves, Employees Indicated Treating Everyone Fairly and Equitably as a Common Expectation, while the Lowest Scoring Indicator of Ethical Climate Related to Feeling Encouraged to Report Questionable Ethical Behavior or Policy 8

Exhibit 5: Considering Management, Respondents Indicated that Managers Are Likely to Refuse Gifts and/or Accept Special Treatment from Those Doing Business with the City of Oakland, but Less Likely to Appoint and Reward People Based on Performance and Contribution to the City's Goals 9

Exhibit 6: Many Respondents Indicated They Don't Know About the Ethical Climate or Actions of Elected Officials; Just Over Half Indicated Elected Officials Treat the Public with Civility and Respect Always or Almost Always, and 20 Percent Felt that Elected Officials Rarely Create an Environment in which Staff Feel Comfortable Raising Ethical Concerns 10

Exhibit 9: The Plurality of Participants have Worked for the City for Ten or More Years 14

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

City of Oakland Ethical Climate Survey (2025-26)

Background

In January 2025, two months after Oakland voters recalled former Mayor Sheng Thao, she was indicted on charges of bribery, mail and wire fraud, and conspiracy. While this case has not yet gone to trial, the allegations call into question the City of Oakland's ethical climate. Elected officials and leadership shape organizational culture, accountability, and trust in government. To gauge employees' sense of the City of Oakland's ethical climate, the Office of the City Auditor issued a survey to City employees at the end of 2025 and the beginning of 2026. The survey instrument, developed by the Institute for Local Government, is divided into three sections: the first gathers opinions on the ethical environments of employees, the second on the ethics of management, and the third on perceptions of the ethics of the City's elected officials. The survey is designed to provide an overview of the health of an agency's ethical climate, including its capacity for ethical decision-making, both by the organization and by individuals within the organization. The Office of the City Auditor previously issued ethical climate survey reports using this same survey instrument in 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014 and 2020.

What We Found

Overall, survey respondents rated the City's ethical climate a 'medium' score of 222 out of 300. According to the Institute for Local Government, this score indicates that the City is in a good place but has room for improvement. Employees ranked their perceptions of frontline employees' and management's ethical environments higher than their perceptions of elected officials' ethical environment. The section on employees scored 78, which is rated high within the Institute for Local Government's scoring rubric. Management employees were rated 77, which is also a high score. Employees' perceptions of elected officials scored 67, which is a medium score indicating room for improvement. This survey is based on participants' perceptions and reflects the employees' views at the time the survey was conducted. Responses should indicate perceived ethics-related risk as opposed to factual determinations.

What We Recommend

This report is informational. It is intended to provide a snapshot of the City's ethical climate. Employees who responded to the survey's open-ended questions provided actionable insights into how the City could improve its ethical culture by enhancing organizational transparency and communication, increasing management and supervisor accountability, and addressing City Council conduct and governance. Respondents also emphasized a desire for consistency in merit-based hiring and advancement, policy enforcement and enforcement of ethics violations, ethics training and awareness, and more robust audit and oversight structures.

INTRODUCTION

Ethical culture begins at the top and influences all levels of an organization. Leadership may establish ethical culture through "demonstrating a commitment to act fairly, transparently, and in a trustworthy manner, [and] treating people within the organization, as well as the public, with respect and compassion."[1] Research has found that ethical leadership "is crucial for employee perceptions in organizations recovering from corruption."[2]

Our Office issued a survey to City employees at the end of 2025 and the beginning of 2026 to gauge employees' sense of the City of Oakland's ethical climate.

The survey tool, developed by the Institute for Local Government, measures the degree to which ethical standards influence organizational and individual decision-making and helps to identify potential "ethical blind spots."[3] The survey is divided into three sections: the first section gauges opinions about the ethical environments of individual employees, the second asks for opinions on the ethics of management, and the third asks about perceptions of the ethics of the City's elected officials. The survey was distributed to all employees via the City's electronic mailing list.

Each section has ten statements with five possible responses, ranging from rarely to always, and an option for "don't know."[4] We weighed the responses based on the Institute for Local Government's methodology, as outlined in the Methodology section at the end of the report. Ethical climate scores for each survey section and the survey overall are explained in a scoring guide issued by the Institute for Local Government which can be found in Exhibit 2.

Throughout the report, we have included select quotes from participants' open-ended responses. These quotes appear in boxes like the one below.

> **Quote:** *I think most people believe in making ethical decisions until that decision is difficult to make based on extenuating factors such as political expediency, convenience, or public perception as to what is important. Then, the higher they are [within the organization], or more politically motivated their work is, the harder it is for them to adhere to ethical standards.*

[1] JoAnne Speers. "Leading by Example: Building an Ethical Culture from the Top Down." icma.org. March 1, 2026. Accessed April 30, 2026. https://icma.org/articles/pm-magazine/leading-example-building-ethical-culture-top-down.

[2] Tansu Demir, Christoper G. Reddick, and Bruce J. Perlman, "In Search of Ethics Infrastructure in U.S. Local Governments: Building Blocks or Dead End?," *Administration & Society* 55, no. 10 (2023): 1866-1892. https://doi.org/10.1177/00953997231190571

[3] https://www.ca-ilg.org/post/beyond-compliance-assessing-your-agencys-ethics-culture-0

[4] Statements that did not receive an answer (i.e., were left blank) and statements that received a "don't know" answer were not considered in this analysis. This methodology varies from past ethical climate surveys, so we did not compare scores against previous years.

SURVEY RESULTS

The results of the survey show a diverse range of opinions and feelings about the ethical climate of the City.

- **The City of Oakland has room to improve.** Participants gave Oakland an overall score of 222 out of 300. The Institute for Local Government categorizes scores between 150 and 224 as a medium score. According to the Institute for Local Government, this means the City's ethical climate is in a good place but has room to improve.
- **Employees rank their perception of frontline and management employees higher than their perception of the ethics of elected officials.** The section on employees scored 78, the section on management scored 77, both of which are rated high within the Institute for Local Government scoring rubric. Elected officials scored 67, which is a medium score.
- **Employees identified numerous ways the City of Oakland can improve its ethical culture.** Of the 555 participants, 178 or 32 percent of all participants provided open-ended thoughts and comments. Over half of open-ended responses were negative in sentiment. Common themes for improving the City's ethical culture include increasing management and supervisor accountability, enhancing organizational transparency and communication, and addressing City Council conduct and governance. Respondents also described merit-based hiring and advancement, consistent policy enforcement, ethics training and awareness, stronger enforcement of ethics violations, more robust audit and oversight structures. Several comments related insufficient staffing and resources to lower employee morale and ethical climate.

Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. A total of 555 participants completed the survey, which represents about 17 percent of the total positions filled in the City.[5] (See Appendix A for descriptive data on respondents.)

Many Respondents Indicated they Did Not Know About Elected Officials' Ethics

Respondents were given the option to answer "don't know" for each of the questions which indicates the question does not apply to the participant. The elected officials section received significantly more "don't knows" than the staff or management sections. Thirty-four percent of the answers in the elected official section were "don't know" compared to 5 and 11 percent of the questions in the staff and management sections, respectively. This indicates greater knowledge of, or confidence in, staff and management's ethical behavior than that of elected officials.

New Employees Gave the City's Ethical Climate Higher Ratings than Employees with more Tenure

Employees with less than one year of service rated employees, management, and elected officials with higher scores than did employees who have worked for the City for more than one year.

[5] Per the March 2026 City Staffing Report, there were 3,255 filled positions as of February 1, 2026.

Regardless of tenure, employees perceive ethical environments of employees (Section 1) to be relatively high. Ethical culture among elected officials received the lowest overall ratings (see Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1: Elected Officials Received the Lowest Scores by All Participant Groups With More than One Year of Tenure

Years of Service	Section 1 Employees	Section 2 Management	Section 3 Elected	Totals Combined
Less than a Year (<1)	83 High	87 High	84 High	254 High
One to Five Years (1-5)	80 High	81 High	66 Medium	227 High
Five to Ten Years (5-10)	78 High	75 High	69 Medium	222 Medium
Over Ten Years (10+)	75 High	73 Medium	62 Medium	210 Medium
Unknown	78 High	77 High	64 Medium	218 Medium

Source: Auditor analysis of the survey results.

> **Quote:** *I'm still kind of new, but my co-workers and management team are great, and everyone seems to want to help the residents of the city of Oakland.*

> **Quote:** *The City Council is blatantly corrupt.*

For Medium and Low Scores, the Institute for Local Government Recommends Evaluating Areas of Weakness and Identifying Aspects of the Culture that Foster Problematic Behaviors

For medium ratings, the Institute for Local Government recommends identifying areas of improvement by evaluating the areas of weakness indicated by the questionnaire and considering targeted remedial actions, as shown in Exhibit 2.

Similarly, for low ratings, the guide recommends identifying aspects of the agency's culture that need remediating. None of the three sections in the survey received a low score.

Exhibit 2: The Scoring Guide for the Ethical Climate Survey Provides Example Steps to Take Towards Improved Ethical Climate

Score	Rating	What it Means/Steps to Take
75-100 per part or 225-300 for the entire survey	High Green light	Your agency has a strong ethical environment. Keep up the good work, including such steps as: • Incorporating ethics into the hiring and evaluation process for staff • Conducting regular ethics-related learning opportunities, including examples of ethical dilemmas and how to resolve them • Going through specific items on the assessment to identify further opportunities for positive change • Reinforcing the importance of ethical considerations in agency behaviors and decisions
50-74 per part or 150-224 for the entire survey	Medium Caution	Your agency is in a good place but has room to improve by doing the following: • Evaluating the areas of weakness indicated by the questionnaire and considering targeted remedial actions • Analyzing the messages that staff and others receive and send about ethics • Reviewing the agency's policies, including the criteria by which staff are evaluated • Considering whether having a code of ethics would be helpful for the agency • Following the best practices indicated in the box above
0-49 per part or 0-149 for the entire survey	Low Stop	Your agency's culture needs significant change. Suggested activities include: • Identifying the aspects of the agency's culture that foster the problematic behaviors and analyze how to remediate them • Consulting with your agency's attorney about potential violations of laws and agency regulations • Following the best practices indicated in the boxes above

Source: Auditor adaptation of scoring guide in "Assessing Your Agency's Ethical Culture," issued by the Institute for Local Government, September 2006.

Survey Respondents Indicated that the City Could Improve Organizational Transparency and Communication, as well as Management and Supervisor Accountability, Among Other Areas

The survey gave respondents an opportunity to provide open-ended feedback on how the City could enhance its ethical climate. One hundred and seventy-eight respondents provided comments in their own words. We reviewed these comments based on sentiment and content,

and grouped them to identify actionable insights.[6] Exhibit 3 shows a count of themes that came up within open-ended answers to the prompt, “Please feel free to add your comments and/or ideas on how to enhance the City of Oakland's ethical climate and culture in the text box below.” Select quotes from this open-ended question are included throughout the report.

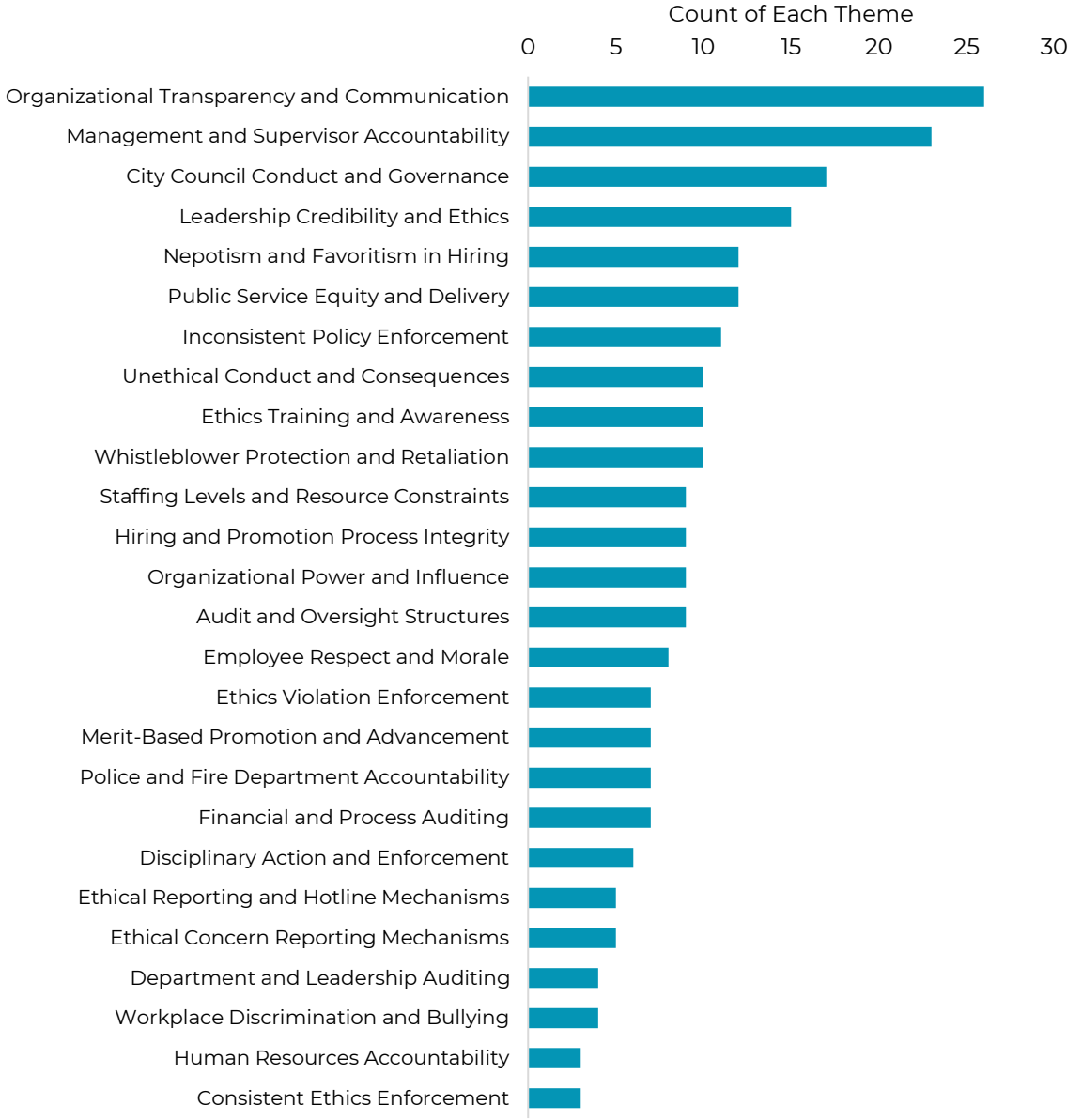
Over half of open-ended responses were negative in sentiment.[7] Common themes for improving the City’s ethical culture include enhancing organizational transparency and communication, increasing management and supervisor accountability, and addressing City Council conduct and governance. Respondents also described merit-based hiring and advancement, consistent policy enforcement, ethics training and awareness, stronger enforcement of ethics violations, and more robust audit and oversight structures. Several comments related insufficient staffing and resources to lower employee morale and ethical climate.

> “ ***Quote:*** *There is a lot of talk about how we should improve the ethical climate, but when it comes to action there is not a lot of action.*

[6] We did not collect any personally identifiable information within the survey. We used generative artificial intelligence (AI) within the online survey tool to thematically code anonymous open-ended survey responses. The survey data is not used to train AI models or otherwise made public. We manually reviewed coded themes against the raw data for accuracy and relevance. We also manually reviewed and identified themes within the data.

[7] Each open-ended statement made by participants was assigned a sentiment: “negative,” “neutral,” “positive,” or, for responses that did not fit these classifications, “unknown.” Fifty-six percent were negative in sentiment, 29 percent neutral, 11 percent positive, and 5 percent unknown. Unknown comments generally stated “N/A” or similar.

Exhibit 3: In Open-Ended Comments, Respondents Described Opportunities for the City to Enhance Organizational Transparency and Communication and Management and Supervisor Accountability towards a Better Ethical Climate



Source: Auditor analysis of responses to the Ethical Climate Survey/Integrity Assessment sent to staff Citywide in 2025 and 2026. Note that each comment could have more than one theme identified, so the number exceeds the number of answers. Additionally, 48 comments had 'no applied theme.' These comments included items such as "thank you," "none," "nothing to add," and comments on the survey's construction. We used generative artificial intelligence (AI) within the online survey tool to thematically code anonymous open-ended survey responses. The survey data is not used to train AI models and no personally identifiable information was collected in the survey.

Within these themes, City staff provided actionable insights into how the City can improve its ethical climate. Staff identified opportunities for improved transparency and communication through:

- Making policies and decisions clearer to staff, through improved and consistent communications from leadership.
- Implementing standards for responsiveness to communications and clear policies for reporting ethical concerns.

> **Quote:** *Revise old policies and procedures. Set clear expectations and guidelines. Help and hold meetings for awareness.*

Staff described the need for accountability at the staff and leadership levels, recommending:

- Consistent performance appraisal processes, potentially with opportunities for employees to inform their managers' reviews,
- Employee recognition,
- Addressing issues related to City Council conduct and governance, emphasizing ethical leadership, and the prohibition of interference, and
- Strengthening leadership credibility through visible commitment, consistent actions, policy enforcement, and disciplinary action when ethical violations occur.

> **Quote:** *Enforce policy and accountability. Monitor productivity and performance. Recognize excellence with promotions.*

Additionally, staff described organizational disconnects—between the Mayor's Office, City Administrator's Office, and within and across departments—that contribute to lack of transparency in decision-making and direction.

> **Quote:** *Total lack of transparency and collaboration between departments and often within…*

Staff also identified uneven workloads, stemming from budget constraints and uneven performance appraisals, as contributing to negative ethical pressures and impacts on employee morale. These represent areas where awareness may improve City leadership's ability to address employee concerns. Additionally, awareness can support improved staffing levels and resource allocations to reduce pressures that may lead to unethical practices.

SURVEY SECTION 1: EMPLOYEES

The first section of the survey focused on how employees perceive the ethical climate they work in (see Exhibit 4). This section received a score of 78 out of 100. Per the Institute for Local Government this is a high score. This score shows the ethical expectations the City of Oakland expects of employees is relatively clear to them.

Exhibit 4: Rating Expectations of Themselves, Employees Indicated Treating Everyone Fairly and Equitably as a Common Expectation, while the Lowest Scoring Indicator of Ethical Climate Related to Feeling Encouraged to Report Questionable Ethical Behavior or Policy

In my local government, I AM…	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Don't Know	Weighted Score	Rating
Encouraged to speak up about any organizational or departmental practices and policies that are ethically questionable.	31%	16%	20%	27%	7%	**6.34**	**Medium**
Expected to report questionable ethical behaviors of others.	45%	13%	16%	20%	7%	**7.22**	**Medium**
Clear about where to turn to for advice about ethical issues.	31%	19%	21%	18%	10%	**6.75**	**Medium**
Expected to follow the spirit as well as letter of the law in my work for the organization/department.	57%	19%	11%	7%	6%	**8.35**	**High**
Expected to use ethical behaviors in getting results.	68%	12%	9%	7%	4%	**8.68**	**High**
Expected to tell the complete truth in my work for the organization/department.	70%	14%	7%	5%	4%	**8.85**	**High**
Expected to treat everyone fairly and equitably, regardless of personal or political connections.	77%	10%	6%	6%	1%	**9.01**	**High**
Expected to follow stated policy of the organization/department and not the desires of individual elected or appointed officials.	59%	16%	14%	6%	5%	**8.39**	**High**
Surrounded by coworkers who know the difference between ethical and unethical behaviors, and seem to care about the difference.	35%	28%	21%	14%	2%	**7.16**	**Medium**
Working with one or more trusted confidantes with whom I can discuss ethical dilemmas at work.	41%	18%	20%	14%	6%	**7.30**	**Medium**

Source: Auditor analysis of the survey results.
Note: High = 7.5 - 10, Medium = 5.0 - 7.4, Low = 0 - 4.9

SURVEY SECTION 2: MANAGEMENT

The second section of the survey focused on how employees perceive the ethics of management (see Exhibit 5). This section received a score of 77 out of 100. Per the Institute for Local Government this is a high score. This score shows employees have confidence in the ethical practices of management in the City of Oakland.

Exhibit 5: Considering Management, Respondents Indicated that Managers Are Likely to Refuse Gifts and/or Accept Special Treatment from Those Doing Business with the City of Oakland, but Less Likely to Appoint and Reward People Based on Performance and Contribution to the City's Goals

In my local government, MANAGEMENT…	**Always**	**Almost Always**	**Sometimes**	**Rarely**	**Don't Know**	**Weighted Score**	**Rating**
Create an environment in which staff is comfortable raising ethical concerns.	36%	20%	19%	22%	3%	**6.78**	**Medium**
Appreciate staff bringing forward bad news and don't "shoot the messenger" for doing so.	36%	20%	19%	19%	6%	**6.94**	**Medium**
Expect staff to use ethical practices in getting results – not "whatever it takes."	51%	20%	13%	12%	4%	**7.87**	**High**
Gear their decisions to the spirit as well as letter of the law.	42%	23%	15%	12%	8%	**7.58**	**High**
Treat the public with civility and respect.	63%	21%	11%	3%	2%	**8.70**	**High**
Use public resources only for organizational/departmental purposes and not for their own personal or political uses (such as agency supplies, staff time and equipment).	56%	18%	9%	5%	12%	**8.55**	**High**
Appoint and reward people on the basis of performance and contribution to the organization's goals and services.	29%	17%	21%	21%	11%	**6.52**	**Medium**
Treat all members of the public equitably and with fairness and equality regardless of who has people or political connections.	51%	19%	15%	8%	7%	**8.04**	**High**
Help elected officials work within their policy role and stay out of day-to-day work of the department.	29%	16%	16%	8%	31%	**7.37**	**Medium**
Refuse to accept gifts and/or special treatment from those with who do business with the organization/department.	57%	8%	6%	3%	26%	**9.03**	**High**

Source: Auditor analysis of the survey results.

Note: High = 7.5 - 10, Medium = 5.0 - 7.4, Low = 0 - 4.9

SURVEY SECTION 3: ELECTED OFFICIALS

The third section of the survey focused on how employees perceive the ethics of elected officials (see Exhibit 6). This section received a score of 67 out of 100. Per the Institute for Local Government this is a medium score. This score shows employees perceive the ethical climate of elected officials has room for improvement.

Exhibit 6: Many Respondents Indicated They Don't Know About the Ethical Climate or Actions of Elected Officials; Just Over Half Indicated Elected Officials Treat the Public with Civility and Respect Always or Almost Always, and 20 Percent Felt that Elected Officials Rarely Create an Environment in which Staff Feel Comfortable Raising Ethical Concerns

In my local government, ELECTED OFFICIALS…	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Don't Know	Weighted Score	Rating
Create an environment in which staff is comfortable raising ethical concerns.	16%	13%	21%	20%	30%	**5.90**	**Medium**
Appreciate staff bringing forward bad news and don't "shoot the messenger" for doing so.	19%	11%	18%	17%	35%	**6.21**	**Medium**
Expect staff to use ethical practices in getting results – not "whatever it takes."	25%	16%	16%	14%	29%	**6.84**	**Medium**
Gear their decisions to the spirit as well as letter of the law.	17%	17%	19%	14%	33%	**6.40**	**Medium**
Treat the public with civility and respect.	29%	22%	23%	5%	22%	**7.39**	**Medium**
Use public resources only for agency purposes and not for their own personal or political uses (such as organizational/departmental supplies, staff time and equipment).	22%	14%	15%	8%	42%	**7.13**	**Medium**
Allow the staff to handle day-to-day management issues and don't try to get involved.	15%	18%	26%	11%	30%	**6.31**	**Medium**
Treat all members of the public equitably and with fairness and equality regardless of who has people or political connections.	22%	14%	22%	11%	31%	**6.71**	**Medium**
Exclude themselves from decisions when reasonable members of the public might question their ability to make a fair decision.	12%	12%	20%	12%	43%	**6.04**	**Medium**
Refuse to accept gifts and/or special treatment from those who are doing business with the City.	26%	8%	10%	7%	49%	**7.61**	**High**

Source: Auditor analysis of the survey results.

Note: High = 7.5 - 10, Medium = 5.0 - 7.4, Low = 0 - 4.9

CONCLUSION

Research supports the application of strong ethics programs in reducing pressure for unethical behavior, retaliation, and misconduct.[8] Based on the results of this survey, the City has room to improve its ethical climate. City leadership can set a positive tone at the top by demonstrating a commitment to ethical conduct through consistent actions, open and transparent communication, and addressing ethical concerns consistently. Leadership can also take specific actions to promote an ethical culture through updates to Citywide administrative instructions or policies and procedures, reviewing opportunities to incorporate ethics and management accountability within the performance appraisal process, and providing training to management and leadership on creating and maintaining ethical culture.

> ***Quote:*** *Support for ethical behavior must start at the top, setting a clear example for all staff. By promoting a culture of integrity, accountability, and open communication, we can enhance the City's ethical climate and strengthen public trust.*

[8] Demir, Reddick, and Perlman, "In Search of Ethics Infrastructure in U.S. Local Governments," 1870.

METHODOLOGY

The Office of the City Auditor collected the data through a web-based survey tool distributed via the City's electronic mailing list. All City employees were invited to take the survey in November 2025 and again in February 2026 due to a low initial response rate. A total of 555 surveys were completed.

Survey Design

This survey was developed to gauge employees' perceptions of ethics, accountability, and the organizational culture of the City.

The survey consisted of thirty statements which were broken into three sections of ten statements. The survey asked participants to answer statements about the ethical climate of employees in section one, of management in section two, and of elected officials in section three.

This survey used a 5-point Likert scale. Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement in the survey using the response options "Always," "Almost Always," "Sometimes," "Rarely," or "Don't Know."

Based on the Institute for Local Government's weighting scheme, responses were weighed on a scale of zero to ten after the number of responses to each statement was calculated. The higher the number, the stronger the agreement with each statement.

Response Choice	Weighted Score
Always	10
Almost Always	7.5
Sometimes	5
Rarely	2.5

After weighting each statement, the climate rating score was calculated by dividing the total weighted score by the total number of responses to the statement. Blank and don't know responses were excluded from this analysis.[9]

[9] Past ethical climate surveys weighted "don't know" responses as 0. For this survey, we excluded "don't know" from the weighting scheme. As a result, the weighted scores of this survey are not comparable to previous surveys. We excluded counts of "don't know" from the weighted scores because "don't know" reflects uncertainty and a weight of 0 may not be consistent with employees' views, as it effectively scores "don't know" lower than "rarely," an affirmative low score. The Institute for Local Government does not specify the weighting of "don't know" in the survey instrument. (See https://www.ca-ilg.org/post/beyond-compliance-assessing-your-agencys-ethics-culture-0.) We reached out to the Institute for Local Government for clarification, but they did not respond before publication.

Exhibit 7: Ethical Climate Survey Graduated Scoring Methodology for Each Statement

Response	Points	Scoring Effect	Meaning of the Score
Always	10	High	Your agency has a strong ethical environment
Almost Always	7.5	High	Your agency has a strong ethical environment
Sometimes	5	Medium	Your agency is in a good place, but has room for improvement
Rarely	2.5	Low	Your agency's culture needs significant change

Source: Auditor summary of the scale used the Institute for Local Government.

Limitations

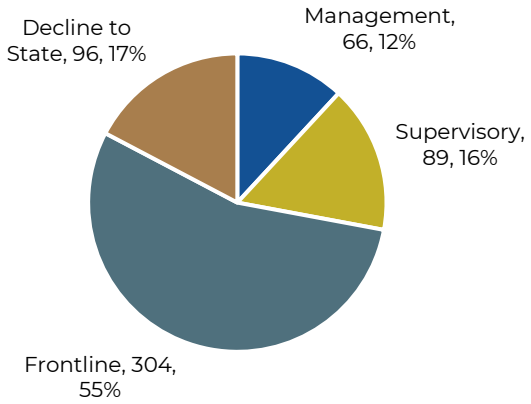
This survey is based on participants' self-reported perceptions and reflects the employees' views at the time the survey was conducted. Responses should indicate perceived ethics-related risk as opposed to factual determinations.

Appendix A: Respondent Demographics

Total Participants by Staffing Position

Frontline employees made up 55 percent of all participants, while managers and supervisors represented 12 percent and 16 percent, respectively. The remaining 17 percent of respondents declined to provide their rank (frontline, supervisory, and management).

Exhibit 8: Those in Management and Supervisory Roles Made Up 28 Percent of All Participants

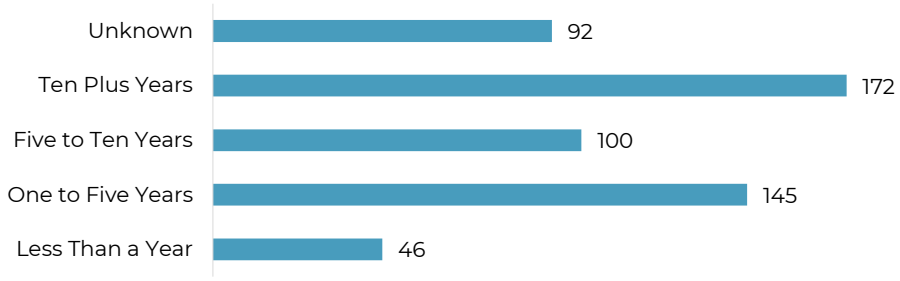


Source: Auditor analysis of survey results from 2025 and 2026.

Respondents' Tenure with the City Varied

Participation in the survey included employees with less than one year of service to more than 20 years. Exhibit 8 below shows the number of participants by their years of service.

Exhibit 9: The Plurality of Participants have Worked for the City for Ten or More Years



Source: Auditor analysis of survey results from 2025 and 2026.
Note: The 92 unknown answers represent participants who chose not to answer the question.

Appendix B: Resources for Raising Ethical Concerns and Questions

The following is a resource for City employees to report ethical concerns and behavior. The open-ended section of the survey contained comments alleging sexual harassment, workplace discrimination and bullying, nepotism, and preferential hiring outside civil service rules. The Office of the City Auditor conducts performance audits and investigates allegations of fraud, waste, and abuse of power. In reviewing the open-ended survey responses, we flagged concerns that merit audit or investigation. To report other ethical concerns and behavior outside the regular duties conducted by the Office of the City Auditor, refer to the following resources:

- If you would like to report a **conflict of interest**, a **campaign finance** or a **Sunshine Ordinance** violation, file a complaint with the Public Ethics Commission (PEC) HERE. You may also contact PEC staff for guidance on questions relating to ethics and transparency rules by emailing ethicscommission@oaklandca.gov or calling 510-238-3593. Additional PEC resources and contact information is listed online HERE.
- If you experience **discrimination**, **sexual harassment**, and/or **retaliation against a protected class,** contact Employment Investigations and Civil Rights Compliance HERE or call 510-238-3500.
- If you need assistance with a **labor/management grievance,** contact your labor union representative HERE.
- If you need to report a **crime/file a criminal incident** report, contact the Oakland Police Department HERE under "Services" and "Resources." For immediate emergencies (risk to life, health, property, or public safety) call 911. Non-emergencies can be reported by calling the Oakland Police Department's non-emergency hotline: 510-777-3333.
- If you need to report **City Council interference,** contact your department director, the City Attorney HERE, or the Public Ethics Commission HERE to file a complaint.
- If you need to report **equal employment opportunity violations** or a **discriminatory work environment,** contact your Equal Opportunity Representative or file an Equal Employment Opportunity complaint HERE
- If you need to report **workplace violence** or **threats of violence,** report to your supervisor or manager or department director. If they are not available, contact the Threat Assessment Team or Risk Manager (510) 986-2898.
- If you need to report **government fraud, waste, or abuse** in the City of Oakland, submit a complaint to the Whistleblower Hotline HERE, or call 888-329-6390.

CITY OF
OAKLAND
Office of the City Auditor

CITY AUDITOR

Michael C. Houston, MPP, CIA

WHISTLEBLOWER HOTLINE
1-888-329-6390 (Interpreter available)

SUBMIT A REPORT ONLINE
www.OaklandAuditor.com/Whistleblower

Office of the City Auditor
1 Frank H. Ogawa Plaza · 4th Floor, City Hall · Oakland, CA 94612
(510) 238-3378
CityAuditor@OaklandCA.gov

Contact Us!
We'd love to hear from you.

联系我们!
我们非常乐意听到您的反馈。

¡Contáctenos!
Nos encantaría saber de ti.

SCAN ME! | 扫描我 | ESCANÉAME
SCAN ME! | 扫描我 | ESCANÉAME