

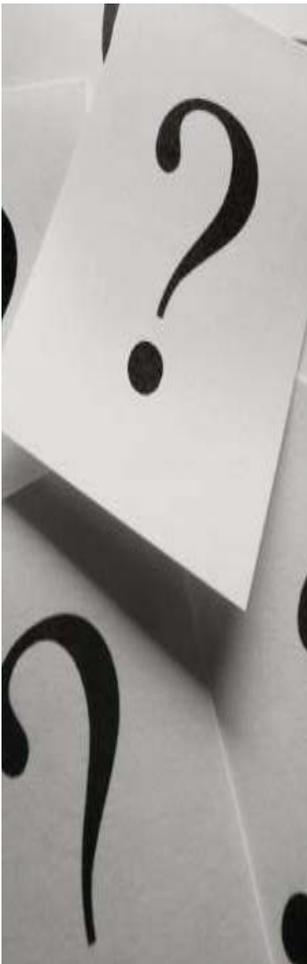
Ethically Speaking

Volume 5, Issue 1

August 2015

Milwaukee County Ethics Board

Promoting Milwaukee County
Government Integrity



Government Ethics What You Didn't Learn in Kindergarten

Ethics: we already know about ethics, right? From a young age, we all learned about ethics, didn't we? Well, yes and no.

The ethics we learn from those around us are usually personal ethics: positive character traits and habits for individuals.

But the ethics of working in government is another story, one that we don't generally learn as a child. The Ethics Board helps Milwaukee County employees and officials with **government ethics**.

What does that mean?

Government officials and employees need to work in the best interests of the public, rather than the best interests of themselves or other individuals. But government officials and employees are people with families, friends, personal goals, etc. How do we make sure that we are

working in the public interest and not our personal interests? And, perhaps more importantly, how do we make sure the public trusts we are working in their interest rather than our own?

Government ethics principles and rules help government officials and employees manage times when their private interests could be or could appear to be influencing their public roles, for example where an employee has a conflict of interest.

So how is this different from personal ethics?

The public can't read minds, so government ethics are concerned more about **appearances** than motivation. For example, your sister might be great as your new executive assistant. But to the public, it looks like you just hired her because she is a family member.

This example also shows that ethical private sector activities such as helping a family member get a job, can be unethical for government employees. Gifts are another example that we discuss on the next page. For government employees and officials, these activities can look like **unfair advantages** for certain people.

You will almost certainly encounter ethics issues on the job. The Ethics Board and its staff are here to help you navigate these potential conflicts. Please contact us about any government ethics or conflicts concerns you might have.



We're Back! A Note from the Executive Director

Greetings, Milwaukee County Employees and Officials!

We have been on a bit of a hiatus with the newsletter, but we are back and will have regular updates. We are currently working to get Ethics Training started again and issue more guidance documents for employees and officials.

The Ethics Board and its staff are here to help you professionally and responsibly deal with potential conflicts between your public and private roles. Please contact us with any questions or concerns about government ethics that you might have. You can call us at (414) 278-5332, email at

mcethicsboard@milwcnty.com, or stop by our office in Room 212-E of the Courthouse. You will need to be buzzed in, but just let us know you're here to talk to the Ethics Board staff.

We hope you find these newsletters to be informative and useful. Please let us know if there are any ethics-related topics you'd like us to address in the future.

Rebecca M. Janz,
Executive Director



Who Is the Milwaukee County Ethics Board?

The Milwaukee County Ethics Board is six citizen members, each nominated by a community organization, appointed by the County Executive, and approved by the County Board. The Ethics Board interprets the Ethics Code; issues formal and advisory opinions; and investigates potential violations of the Code.

We encourage you to be proactive about contacting the Ethics Board with potential ethics issues. Even if an action is not prohibited by the Code, you should consider whether an action could still look like a conflict of interest. If so, you should contact the Ethics Board to discuss the matter. The Ethics Board meets at least four times

per year, and the Ethics Board staff are available Monday to Friday to help you with questions or concerns about whether certain actions might raise ethical issues under the Code.

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“The question is not if the gift will influence you, but if someone else might reasonably think that it could influence you.”

Ethics Code Focus: Gifts

The Code addresses gifts in two sections. One concerns gifts from anyone; the other concerns gifts between County employees and officials.

Gifts from Anyone

A County official or employee cannot accept any item, gift, or service worth more than \$25 when it is offered due to his or her public position or if it *could* be seen as an attempt to influence or reward.

How do you know if you can accept a gift?

First, ask yourself, “Would I be offered this gift if I were not working for the County?” If the answer is no, then the gift is offered because of your public position, and you cannot accept it.

Second, ask “Could someone who didn’t know me think the gift was to influence or reward me?” Things to consider: is the giver a contractor or potential contractor with Milwaukee County? Is the giver a client, representative, or other individual or organization that uses your department’s services? The question is *not* if the gift *will* influence you, but

if someone else might reasonably think that it could influence you. If so, you should not accept the gift.

Third, when in doubt, thank the giver and decline the gift. Explain that as a County employee or official, the Ethics Code prevents you from accepting gifts that could cause an appearance of impropriety or a misunderstanding.

Gifts from Other County Employees and Officials

The Code also forbids public officials from giving County employees or members any gifts worth more than \$25. Also, County employees and members cannot give gifts to each other worth more than \$25.

Exceptions

There are some exceptions to the gift provisions: compensation and expenses paid by the County; fees and expenses reported and permitted by Chapter 9.14 of the code; certain reported political contributions; and hospitality that is unrelated to County business and that is given by an individual or a government.

The last is likely the most common. If you have a party or are invited to one, it would not be considered a gift under the code (even if it’s an amazing, ritzy party), **so long as** (1) the hospitality is based on something other than County business: a pre-existing friendship, family, etc., and (2) the hospitality is not from an organization.

Other Considerations

1. If you are required to file a statement of economic interests, an allowable gift may still need to be reported.
2. Even an acceptable gift may create other ethical issues: a mug with the name of a contractor may be an acceptable gift due to its low value, but you should not use it in your office if it might create an appearance of bias.

If you have any questions about what gifts are allowed or not allowed under the Ethics Code, please contact our office.