



OHIO ETHICS COMMISSION
William Green Building
30 West Spring Street, L3
Columbus, Ohio 43215-2256
Telephone: (614) 466-7090
Fax: (614) 466-8368

www.ethics.ohio.gov

Conflicts of Interest: What Should I Know?

What is a conflict of interest?

There are two primary ways that conflicts of interest can occur. One is when a public servant accepts things like expensive gifts or even money. For more information regarding that provision of the law, please visit the [Gift Page](#) on our web site.

The second common conflict of interest involves public officials and employees taking official action or making decisions in matters that definitely and directly affect themselves, their family members, or their business associates.

The term “conflict of interest” is frequently used and often misunderstood. The basic assumption that underlies the Ethics Law is that Ohioans deserve public servants who advance the public interest rather than their personal interests or those of closely related parties.

Are conflicts of interest illegal?

Having a conflict of interest is not illegal. In fact, conflicts are normal because public servants have families and friends, and may have businesses, professions, investments, property interests, and other connections to their communities. Any of these connections could result in a conflict of interest for the official. The issue is how the public servant responds to his or her conflict of interest.

Simply put, a public official has a “conflict of interest” when his or her ability to be an objective decision-maker could be impaired by his or her own interests, or the interests of family members or business associates.

Why is this part of the Ethics Law important?

Taxpayers in Ohio deserve to know that government decisions, whether at the state or local level, are not compromised by a specific public servant’s benefit or personal gain. Every Ohioan has the right to expect that public decisions and public expenditures are objective and made with the public’s best interest at heart, not the interest of individual public officials and employees.

As a result, the Ohio Ethics Law prohibits public officials or employees from participating, in any way, in actions or decisions that definitely and directly involve their own interests, or those of their families or business associates.

What are some examples of conflicts of interest?

Here are just a few examples of potential conflicts of interest in public service:

- A state employee who works as an inspector for the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services conducts an inspection on behalf of her agency at the day care center that is owned by her sister.
- At a board meeting, a state board member discusses and votes on a matter that impacts a client of his firm.
- A city employee who oversees public contracts for the city government is monitoring landscaping work being conducted at a city park. The city employee also works for the landscaping company during on weekends.
- A county prosecutor's office employee investigates someone on behalf of the prosecutor's office. Unfortunately, the "someone" being investigated is also the person who employs the county employee part-time in his private life.
- A public employee applies for a job with the company she regulates on behalf of her public agency.

Once again, please note that having a conflict of interest is not illegal. It is how the public official or employee responds to the conflict that would determine whether a violation has occurred.

How should public officials and employees respond to conflicts of interest?

When someone in public service is confronted with a conflict of interest, he or she must completely abstain from making decisions about or influencing how the matter is resolved.

Such abstention or recusal should include refraining from:

- Voting
- Discussing
- Reviewing
- Recommending
- Inspecting
- Investigating
- Taking any other action on the matter

Remember, public servants may NOT take any action in matters that definitely and directly affect themselves, their family members, or their business associates.

Where can I get additional information?

For more information, please review the [Conflict of Interest](#) page on our website.