

# THE VOICE OF ETHICS

A Publication of the Ohio Ethics Commission

2022 Quarter 2

2021 at the Ohio Ethics Commission:  
Impact and Achievement

A photograph of two yellow-rumped robins perched on a branch of a bush with green leaves and clusters of small pink berries. The background is a soft-focus view of a body of water and trees.

## 2021 Annual Report is Available!

The Ohio Ethics Commission is pleased to announce the digital publication of our [2021 Annual Report](#)! Despite the many complications and obstacles the past two years have presented, the Commission continues to power on with a vigorous workload to fulfill our mission to ensure impartiality and integrity in government.

The annual report contains a synopsis of the efforts and accomplishments of the Ohio Ethics Commission in 2021, including:

- Responding to thousands of requests for advice and guidance
- Providing virtual and in-person training sessions
- Conducting professional and confidential investigations
- Administering a highly-effective online financial disclosure program.

We welcome you to review the hard work of the Ohio Ethics Commission in the past year and visit our website or reach out to us with any questions or requests for additional information.

[Click here to read the 2021 Annual Report of the Ohio Ethics Commission](#)



# 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 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.

## 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.

# The 2022 Ohio Ethics Law E-Course: A Conversation with Technology-Based Training Developer Nick Rohrbaugh

## The Ohio Ethics Law hasn't changed much in recent years, so why does the Commission create a new e-course every year?

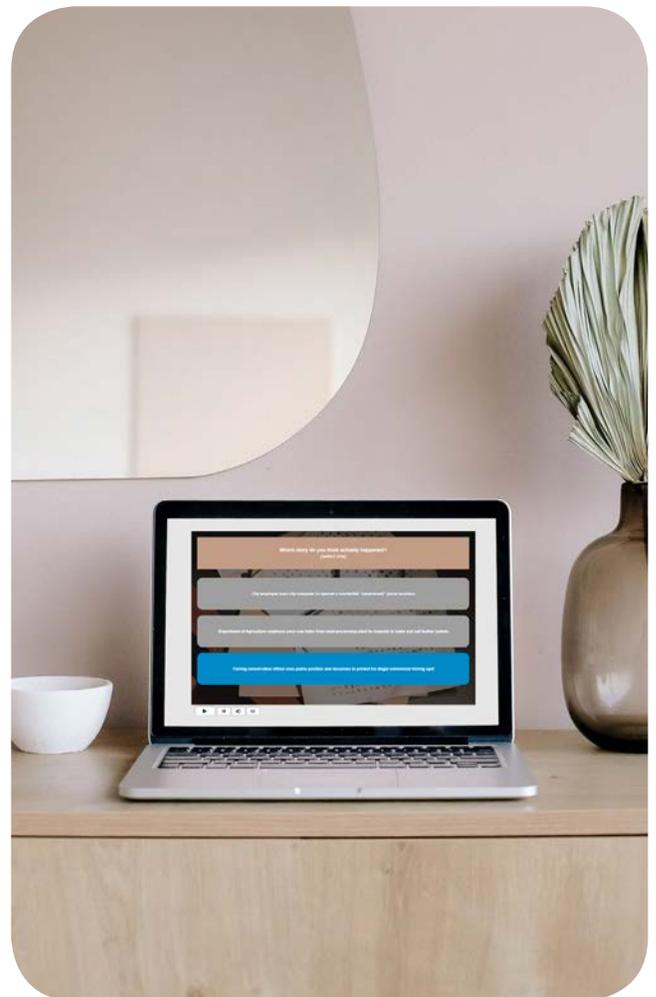
We firmly believe that providing a fresh new approach each year makes learning more effective and enjoyable, thereby increasing retention of the material. Annual training doesn't just have to be "check it off the list" process, but rather an opportunity to acquire new information and skills regarding an important statute that directly translate to ethical public service.

## What is the approach to this year's e-course?

We used actual ethics investigations from across the United States to demonstrate potential ethical dilemmas that could occur under the Ohio Ethics Law. The course studies our statute to examine how it could have been implicated had that investigation occurred in our state. It's sort of like watching an Ethics "Law and Order" episode; it draws in the learner to learn new information in a fun way!

## You have stated that this year's e-course was one of the most enjoyable you have worked on; why is that?

These real stories are so jaw-dropping that I have even shared them with friends and family; they were a big hit at Thanksgiving! It is such a boon to have a network of ethics professionals sharing these memorable cases, they give the course great variety and entertainment value.



## What kind of information can learners expect to obtain in the e-course?

Even though the course is time-efficient at just one hour, it provides an excellent overview of the major provisions of the Ohio Ethics Law: conflicts of interest, gift restrictions, public contract prohibitions and even post-employment information.

## Any other notes of interest for those taking this year's e-course?

Yes! As it does every year, the 2022 e-course fulfills the Ohio Ethics Law training requirement under Executive Order 2019-11D for state officials and employees including financial disclosure filers. The course is equally relevant and helpful for public officials and employees in local government who are also subject to the Ohio Ethics Law. And as an added bonus for public practice attorneys, the e-course has been approved for one hour of general Continuing Legal Education credit.

### Nick, you joined the Ethics Commission's Training and Communication team in 2017. What is it about the job and the mission that intrigues you and keeps you there?

The Ethics Commission ensures that government business in Ohio is conducted with impartiality and integrity, and that's so important to me - not just as a staff member of the Commission, but as an Ohioan and a taxpayer! I truly believe that the vast majority of Ohio's public servants want to do the right thing. Being proactive, spreading the word on the Ethics Law to stop violations BEFORE they happen, is incredibly rewarding.



Click here for the e-course  
The Ohio Ethics Law 2022:  
Just the Facts (of Jaw-Dropping Investigations)



Ohio Ethics Commission  
William Green Building  
30 West Spring Street, L3  
Columbus, Ohio 43215-2256  
(614) 466-7090

[www.ethics.ohio.gov](http://www.ethics.ohio.gov)