



The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

April 2026 Episode

Earned, Not Gifted: Summer Job Edition

Susan: Hello ethical people! I'm Susan Willeke of the Ohio Ethics Commission, welcoming you to The Voice of Ethics, the podcast where we dive into stories about ethics in government. So we're dropping this episode on April 28th, so I got to say it you guys, it's almost here! The season of picnics and community festivals, sunshine, ice cream – yes, summertime is coming! Yay!

But before you pull out your flip-flops or your beach umbrellas, I do want to mention one of the Ohio Ethics Law issues that can arise during these upcoming dog days of summer. And what is that issue, you ask? It's summer hiring. Yes. It's that time of year when cities start hiring high school and college students to be lifeguards at the city pool. Or maybe counties bring in interns on board for the season, or maybe even a school district hires students to assist with custodial work during the summer break, whatever. The season of seasonal hiring is upon us, and that absolutely and frequently implicates the Ethics Law. So for this podcast, let's dive into that.

Now, in all fairness, in general, if you are a public employee or a public official, your family members can legally pursue summer jobs, during the summer or any time of year. The issue is whether you can recuse from any and every aspect of the hiring process. If you can and do recuse or abstain from, you know, discussions, reviewing, recommending, decision making, I dunno, requesting interviews, or any other aspect of the hiring process, your family member generally can be awarded the public job.

In other words, it's not illegal for your family member to pursue or get that job at your government agency. What's illegal is for you to involve yourself in any aspect of that hiring process. Securing a job or even job related benefits is sometimes referred to as nepotism. And it often comes up in the summertime when, you know, high school and college breaks are happening and students are understandably seeking summer jobs.

Really common. Cities, villages, school districts, all kinds of public agencies can offer those part time jobs, as we've just discussed. And some of those so-called nepotism cases we've had at the Ethics Commission can seem very straightforward, like a city auditor hiring her children to work in her own office. But others can feel a bit more nuanced, like the public school district maintenance supervisor who recommended his daughter for a position at the district.

Not only did this gentleman complete a nomination form recommending his unemancipated daughter for employment at the school, he also submitted the nomination to the superintendent himself. But wait, it gets better. He then conducted all applicant interviews, including for his daughter. He made all hiring recommendations to the superintendent - again, including recommending his daughter. And once his daughter got the job, he supervised her and routinely approved the hourly reports that she submitted.

But in fairness, it's not just the recommendation or approval of family job hires that's problematic under the law, like the story we just heard about. Simply approving timesheets, that was just one part of what that gentleman did, but even if that were alone, that would also be prohibited under this law.

We once had a township trustee that, I grant you, he did not secure the public job for his grandson, but once the grandson had that job, the township trustee routinely approved his grandson's timesheet

included those hours that he worked, and he even made a motion to pay all the bills, which included checks payable to his grandson.

There was a separate township trustee situation who made a motion to pass a resolution that authorized the transfer of \$5,000 to the township's general fund to pay unemployment compensation for his own son. Now, to be fair, that son was entitled to unemployment, so his dad's action did not secure the approval of the unemployment but he shouldn't have even made the motion, or he shouldn't have signed off on payroll checks in the past for his son. Even those kind of "after the fact" acts of participation are enough to potentially trigger an investigation by the Ohio Ethics Commission.

Now, just so you know, these nepotism or public job violations are potentially fourth degree felonies under the Ethics Law. If you're wondering why that penalty feels so severe, stop and reflect on the fact that fair hiring processes are mandatory in government. Public agencies are required to conduct all hiring activity in a fair, open and impartial manner. Giving precedence or advantages to family members - in public hiring, at least - is unfair to other applicants who may be equally or even more qualified.

You know, I would just note again, family hires, they're just simply unfair to the public. All Ohio citizens, including you and me, we have the right to expect that government jobs will be awarded to the most qualified candidate, not merely to the most family connected candidate.

And I should also note that should your family member legally receive the public job, without your involvement, recusal continues even after that family member is hired. For example, things like direct supervision, annual evaluations, participation in discussions of promotion or raises, all of that activity would also be prohibited.

So as summer creeps ever closer, know that if your adult child, first off, is job hunting and they're considering a public position, wish him or her well and then stay away. Don't authorize, recommend, advocate for, or take any action to help secure that seasonal position. Even obtaining an unpaid internship for your relative is problematic under the law if that internship is with your own public agency.

I do want to make a special note here about minor children. It's not uncommon that minor children are also pondering summer public service. We've already mentioned things like custodial work at the school or lifeguards at the city pool. That's that's understandable, but it's important for you and me as people in public service to understand that the Ethics Law generally prohibits your and my minor children from even obtaining a job with the very agency, municipality, office that we work for.

In fact, the only way that minor children of public employees or officials can work for the same agency or public entity as their parent is if four separate things can be demonstrated. The first, pretty clear, the hiring process was fair and open. Secondly, broad opportunity to apply was provided for all qualified and interested applicants. Now, number three, all qualified and interested applicants who are not related to you or to me as public officials, every every other qualified and interested applicant has already been hired. And here's the fourth qualification: vacancies still exist.

So in a nutshell: the hiring process was fair, it was open, provided opportunities for anybody who was interested to apply, and then, even after all of those qualified and interested applicants have been hired, there are still job openings. That's the only way that your or my minor child can work where you and I work. And even then, you and I have to stay away, recuse completely. Stay out of it.

I recognize this is a lot of information to take in in one podcast episode. So again, if you need more information, always please check out our show notes. You're going to find guidance about public jobs and family hiring, including information that I mentioned about the minor children. But there's even more information on our website, so please don't forget to visit our website as well.

But for now, as we all eagerly anticipate the arrival of summer, I do want to thank you for joining us once again on The Voice of Ethics. I hope that you will tune in to our next episode as well. But in the meantime, while we're talking about summer jobs, I have a question for you. Have you ever had a conversation with a lifeguard?

They tend to be pretty shallow. *whistle and splash sound effect* That's it for this week, everybody. Take care. Be ethical. Bye.