

The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript
October 2026 Episode
Fighting Fires...and Ethics Violations

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 public service comes in many forms. Teachers. Librarians. Public health workers. Police officers. Firefighters. Every day, thousands of public servants quietly and faithfully serve their communities with integrity.

Today's story focuses on one firefighter who made a series of decisions that ultimately became the subject of an ethics investigation. And I just want to say that I absolutely believe that this gentleman's actions are the exception, they're not the rule. The overwhelming majority of firefighters and paramedics perform extraordinarily difficult work with courage, professionalism, and an unwavering commitment to the public they serve.

In fact, I'd like to dedicate today's episode to my favorite firefighter and paramedic, our nephew-in-law, Nathan. Nathan married our beautiful niece three years ago, and I have watched him devote himself not only to his family, but also to serving his community with integrity. So, this episode is a shout-out to Nathan and to all the men and women in Ohio's fire service who answer the call every single day.

With that said, today's case is a fascinating reminder that no profession is immune from ethical challenges. Today, we head to Miami-Dade, Florida, where I spoke with an investigator about a conflict-of-interest investigation involving a firefighter, an outside business, and the importance of protecting the public's trust.

Hey, everybody. I have a really special guest with me today. Would you mind introducing yourself?

Radia:
My name is Radia Turay. I am the advocate over at the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust.

Susan:
So thank you so much for joining us. So all of our listeners, the, the reason I even stumbled across this story is that, as some of you know, I'm pretty involved in an organization we call COGEL, the Council on Governmental Ethics Laws.

So it's ethics and elections and campaign and lobbying agencies from all over the United States and Canada. And I sat in on sort of a learning seminar. And so Radia was the guest speaker, and she told this story that just had me riveted. So I said, "I just have to meet Radia and have her on my podcast!" So Radia, thank you so much for being here today.

Radia:
Thank you for having me.

Susan:
How did this case that you're, we're going to talk about today, how did it even come to the attention of your agency?

Radia:
It was an anonymous complaint that came in. The complaint alleged that this particular employee was using his role within the logistic services department to steer purchases towards a company that was operated by his brother.

The concerns included bypassing, like, competitive bidding requirements and in some cases, he was using a county purchasing card to pay for the items.

Susan:
You begin this investigation, look at the records – this isn't adding up. Could you tell us a little bit now of the story, now that you kind of set it up for us?

Radia:
There was a Lieutenant in the fire department, and years earlier he set up this company, basically, to sell to fire departments different gear.

Susan:
Like fire gear, you mean actually gear that -

Radia:
Like fire gear, like gloves, hoods. He basically, like, created his own brand. Like he contacted a manufacturer overseas to produce these particular gloves. And he placed a fictitious name, like, he just made up a name of a brand, and it became his brand that only his business could provide because it was his specific brand.

Susan:
OK

Radia:
And he had these gloves. He had, like exclusive distribution agreements with certain manufacturers for the state of Florida and for Nevada. And basically right before he got into the logistics position, he then removed his name from the company's public documents. He replaced his name with his brother's name. And the reason why this is so significant is because at the time, there are, of course, restrictions in doing business with the county if you're a county employee. There were also restrictions for your immediate family members, such as your spouse, your child, in doing business with your particular department. But at the time, siblings were not included in that definition of restrictions of doing business in the county. So he replaced it with his brother's name to basically cloud this in in legitimacy. Almost.

Susan:
Right.

Radia:
But he was the one that was still controlling the company.

Susan:
Can you say pre-meditated? Right?

Radia:
Exactly. So we did end up charging this as an intentional violation because we believed that this was

intentional, because even though he removed his name from the public documents, and when the company was applying to become a county vendor, he specifically did not include that he was an owner of this company.

He only had his brother's name on the documents. We were able to, of course, find emails where he still referred to himself as the president of the company. We're also able to get his bank records, which showed that he was the primary account holder during the entire time that this misconduct took place. So we believed that he was, of course, trying to be deceptive in the way he even set up the company, changed the name, and in order for his company to be able to do business with his department.

So after he had done all that and became a county vendor, he then submitted a bid to go into the logistics section of the department, and his bid was accepted. And he became, basically, the person in the logistics section, research and development section, that was responsible for now recommending equipment to the fire department.

Susan:
It's not just that he wanted to sell to his own department. He wanted to be the one to make the decision of who we, sales go through me.

Radia:
Exactly.

Susan:
Got it. Okay. Yeah.

Radia:
Exactly. And that's exactly what he did. So when it came to the gloves that I already indicated he had manufactured overseas, that his company was the only company that produced it because it was their fictitious brand. He introduced the fire department to these particular brand of gloves.

He then even wrote a justification because of course, the fire department had other gloves that it was purchasing at the time. He then wrote a justification in his official position to say that the other gloves were not up to par, and that these gloves were supposedly, like, better suited for the fire department.

So he actually wrote that justification and then we were able -

Susan:
Essentially eliminating any other company from even being able to -

Radia:
Exactly.

Susan:
I see. Yeah.

Radia:
Exactly. And to make matters worse, and what made this investigation really difficult was he didn't necessarily always contract directly through his company.

Because he had placed it in the department as this particular brand gloves were the only gloves that were good enough for the department.

So every time the fire department would put out a quote for these particular gloves, all the different companies, third party companies out there would now have to reach out to his company in order for

them to get these particular gloves. And none of them knew that the company, you know, manufactured or had any connection to, to the Lieutenant.

So when we were doing the investigation, that's what made it difficult, because it appeared as if FireTech didn't receive all the different contracts, right? That it was these third party companies that received the contract. So how can you say, you know, that, that they were benefiting?

But when we got the bank records from Fire Tech back, we saw that these companies were basically paying FireTech in order for FireTech to give them the gloves. And FireTech was actually the one delivering the gloves to the logistics department.

In addition to that, this Lieutenant was the one signing to receive the gloves from his own company at the logistics department.

Susan:
There's just no way that he could try to claim it was inadvertent. I didn't know the rules. I mean, this is deception upon deception.

Radia:
It was absolutely deception upon deception.

But it wasn't just the gloves. It was anything that his company had an exclusive distributorship contract for, whether it was hoods to clean out gear, or at one point, he even changed the product code in the system for one of the items that the fire department had purchased. And he inserted the product code, which specifically, every time you Googled it, would take you directly to his company's website because they were the only one that had that product code.

So even though the product was available elsewhere because he changed the product code, people specifically had to get the product from his company. So it was definitely intentional.

Susan:
He was strategic in his deception.

Radia:
He was very strategic about it. He was very strategic about it and he went to great lengths in using his position to get the special benefit for himself and his company.

Susan:
Other than being transferred out of the department, what were, if any, legal ramifications for the former Lieutenant for this behavior?

Radia:
Through our ethics case, he received substantial fines, like double fines, because we believed that this was intentional. So he ended up paying upwards of like $16,000 in fines, which for us is pretty significant. And the office of the Inspector General was trying to get the company completely disbarred or prevent the company from ever doing business with Miami-Dade County again.

He ended up retiring from the county soon thereafter, but he wanted the company to continue doing business with the county, and I believe he was fighting the disbarment of the company.

Susan:
If you could give one piece of advice to those listeners that they have this second job, they do consulting, their own business - what would you advise those folks in public service?

Radia:
Outside employment isn't the problem.

Susan:
Right.

Radia:
Using your public position to steer government contracts or any government monies to your private company is.

Susan:
Right.

Radia:
That's where the conflicts arise. My advice would really be simple: avoid doing business with your own agency altogether. Steer clear of any situation where your private interests intersect with your public duties.

Here in Miami-Dade County, our Ethics Commission gives opinions to government employees that are looking to do business in the county or any other ethical issues that they have. If you ever have a question, get an ethics opinion first. Don't do what this employee did where you try to just find ways around the rules. That doesn't help you. It undermines trust in government. And in the end, you might have some serious consequences that you have to deal with.

Susan:
Yeah, and that's a really insightful thing that you said a minute or two ago that this isn't, laws like this or the advice that different agencies like ours can render, it's not just for the really bad actors. I mean, this guy, obviously, had his mind made up that he was going to somehow make hundreds of thousands of dollars through his public job. The laws aren't just for that, or the advice. It's for good people in public service, too, like you referenced, that, yeah, it's not illegal to have a business in your private life. Just do it correctly.

Radia:
Right.

Susan:
So that's a really good point you made, that, come get advice if you want to do the right thing in government as well.

Radia:
Yeah.

Susan:
So thank you so much, a huge thank you to Radia for joining us on this podcast today. Please join us again the next time you have a great story Radia!

Radia:
I would love to. Thank you. Thank you for having me!

Susan:
I am hugely grateful to Radia for sharing her time and experience on this investigation with us. And it warrants noting once again that we fully recognize that most people in public service will never be this

blatant in attempting to take advantage of their public positions and then attempt to be deceptive about their actions. So, while this case may be an outlier, it does offer lessons that apply to every public servant.

For everyone in public service in Ohio, please hear me when I say this: if – in your private life – you own or co-own a business, if you sell widgets or services or consulting, whatever, please conclude right here right not that you will NEVER be a vendor to the agency or governmental agency or entity that you serve.

Even without the overt attempts to cover up ethics violations like in the story we heard today, in general public employees and officials simply cannot sell goods or services to their own public entity in Ohio. Just keep those two parts of your life – your public role and your outside business – completely separate. As the author Ruyard Kipling once said, “Never the twain shall meet.”

Now, because this is such an important matter for all of us in public service to be aware of, I have attached several documents and links in our show notes. Please review them, please check with your legal counsel, please read our website, please call us. And ultimately, please don’t sell anything to your own public employer or entity – firefighting supplies, t-shirts, consulting, landscaping, construction, whatever! At the Ohio Ethics Commission, we always like to say, “We’d much rather advise and educate then ever have to investigate.”

And that’s our show for today! A huge “thank you” once again to Radia for joining me on the podcast today and thanks, as always to Nick Rohrbaugh, our editor and my co-producer.

Join us again in two weeks for a behind the curtains peek at the investigative process at the Ethics Commission. We'll be spending time with Executive Director Paul Nick and professional Investigator Connie McDonald, and we'll take a behind the scenes look at all things investigations at the Ohio Ethics Commission. You will not want to miss that episode.

Until then, do you happen to know what happened to the firefighter who wasn’t very good at his job?

He got fired, of course!

Get it? Fired? Fire? Firefighter? OK, that’s enough.

Take care everybody! Be ethical! Buh-Bye!