

The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript
November 2026 Episode
Investigating Investigations

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 usually on this podcast, we start with a story. You know - someone makes a questionable decision, a gift gets a little too generous, maybe a government employee finds themselves in a situation they probably should have thought twice about, and so on and so forth. And then we dig into what happened and what we can learn from it.

But today we're doing something a little different. Instead of looking back at one particular ethics story, we're pulling back the curtains on what happens when a story, or more specifically, an allegation, comes to the Ohio Ethics Commission. What do the investigators look for? What happens after someone contacts the Commission? How do we sort through the facts? And what can someone expect if they're the person making the allegation - or the person being asked some questions?

Now, in fairness, the words investigation and criminal law can sound pretty serious. And they are. And to be fair, our investigators do serious work. But our goal isn't to make the process sound scary or mysterious. In fact, we want people to feel comfortable contacting us when they have a question or a concern.

So today we are keeping things a little lighter, even though we're talking about investigations, and we're giving you a behind the scenes look at how the process works with two people who know it particularly well, our executive director, Paul Nick, and one of our professional investigators, Connie McDonald. They do such a great job talking about what they do that I need no further introduction. Let's take a listen together.

So many of you who have been so kind to listen to this podcast and you've listened to all these stories about all of these really interesting investigations have actually asked about: how does this whole investigation process work? So I invited two people from our office to talk about investigations today.

I have asked our executive director, Paul Nick, to join me here today, as well as one of my favorite investigators, Connie McDonald, just to talk about investigations, maybe some of your favorite stories, maybe some tips and tricks and wisdom and lessons that you've both learned. Is that cool?

Paul: All right.

Connie: Yep.

Susan: All right. So Paul, you're an attorney, you have a background as a prosecutor, you were head of investigations here for how long?

Paul: A little over 15 years.

Susan: And then you became our Executive Director in 2011?

Paul: Correct.

Susan: Yes, yes, yes. Okay. And, Connie?

Connie: I was an investigator with a county public defender's office.

Susan: Okay. So you have a long term background, too, of, like, kind of getting into the nitty gritty and that sort of thing.

Connie: Yes.

Susan: Okay. And how long you been with us at the Ethics Commission?

Connie: Since 2013.

Susan: Oh, great. So you're well, past your ten year anniversary with us, yay!

Connie: I am.

Susan: Okay. Do you mind if I start with you, Connie, actually, because one of your roles and the other investigators is that you take calls, people will call unsolicited and say, hey, I want to make an allegation, I think this went awry, etc.. Can you tell me just a little bit when you get one of those calls, what are you looking for? What does an investigator kind of need to begin to process what an investigation could look like?

Connie: Basically, we look for what the behavior is or was of the public official and employee, and it has to be a past act. We look at what they did and whether or not there was a benefit to them, like a financial benefit to them, or a family member or a business associate.

Susan: Do you need anything from a caller? Like we don't ask them to prove, I mean, that would be a lot to put on them, but what do we kind of need to even begin to process the possibility that this could be an investigation?

Connie: We do ask for supporting documentation. Because these are public entities, everything's public record. So generally that would be meeting minutes, something like that. Maybe a personnel file. Something showing that the public official or employee did participate, that we could show our Commission because they have to approve an investigation.

Susan: Yeah, because Paul, not to be flip, but Connie or other investigators, they couldn't walk into a jury trial and say, “Well, everybody knew what he did was wrong!” You still have to have evidence, things like that.

Paul: Exactly. It's one thing to have an allegation or an assertion that somebody may have engaged in misconduct, but you have to be able to prove it because at the end of the day, these are criminal statutes, and you have to have proof and evidence beyond a reasonable doubt for a conviction if that's the direction that the investigation goes.

But I think it's important too, that, whenever somebody files an allegation, there are certain directions in these cases can go. They don't all necessarily end up in a criminal violation. It could be that there are some mitigating circumstances. It could be that the facts that we are presented with are not actually what occurred.

Susan: Right. So, Connie, what can be some of the challenges of being an investigator at the Ethics Commission?

Connie: Paul just touched on it that sometimes things probably did happen, but we don't have any supporting documentation.

Susan: Right.

Connie: And sometimes things happen behind closed doors. And then when it gets into the official voting of something that that person isn't involved, but they're involved in the background of it. And sometimes those things just can't be proven. There's no written documentation of that.

Susan: Right.

Paul: I think that really most people want to do the right thing.

Susan: Yeah.

Paul: I've been with the Commission for over 30 years, and I can tell you that that day in and day out is what I see and find out, and we want to help those people. But there are some people who do take actions that violate the law, and maybe not purposefully, but they certainly should have known that they should not engage in it.

And I think it's important for us to hold those people accountable.

Susan: Why?

Paul: In most criminal offenses you have a very identifiable victim, like an assault or a theft, you know, you have somebody that has been victimized by that behavior. And sometimes we hear people saying that when there's a conflict of interest there really is no victim. And I dispute that because really, the victims are the taxpayers.

Susan: Right, right. When is this job the most rewarding to you, Connie?

Connie: When we're successful in holding public officials and employees accountable for their behavior, they work for the people.

Susan: You are helping to protect the public's trust, like Paul said, through the Ethics Law, by holding those who do make poor decisions accountable to the law. So.

Okay, lightheartedness here, you each have to pull out of your memory banks your favorite or craziest ethics story, investigation, the one that either made you laugh out loud or scratch your head or bang your head against a wall.

What's the story that you want to share with our listeners about the craziest investigation you've ever been part of?

Connie: One that was most interesting involved a remote village that was kind of hard to get to, and it was challenging during the time of year as well.

Susan: You love winter in Ohio don't you Connie? Yeah?

Connie: Yeah! That was probably my most I guess I would say it was most interesting because of the remote location, and it involved a mayor and council members, they were related and family members.

Susan: Do you ever find, Connie, that sometimes, whether it was that investigation or any, do you ever find that sometimes people do kind of circle the wagons and they don't want to cooperate because they know the people, everybody knows everybody, “Oh, he's a good guy or she's a good gal” kind of thing. Does that ever happen in investigations?

Connie: Oh, yeah. When you're dealing with small communities, most are afraid of some type of retaliation, potentially, or just because they live in the community and it's very small and they just don't want to get involved, because if they do, then everybody in the community knows.

Susan: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay. Paul, have you decided on your favorite, craziest story?

Paul: I'm not gonna say it's a favorite, but I think it illustrates the problem and how actions of a public official can affect others, not just themselves. We had an investigation and prosecution of a county sheriff. And part of the conduct of the sheriff was that to support a drug habit, he would take the law enforcement trust fund monies. And he got his deputies to come in and provide false information to conceal his conduct.

And we were forced, through law enforcement actions to charge some of these officers. You know, they charged them with perjury. So by virtue of trying to be supportive within that organization, his actions affected the careers and lives of these other officers as well.

Susan: Wow.

Paul: Which I thought was tragic.

Susan: Yes!

Paul: So I wouldn't say it's a favorite, but I would say it was one of the more demonstrative situations where somebody's actions really victimize other folks.

Susan: Absolutely! Wow, that is a sad story. Yeah. That's unfortunate. Yeah.

Paul, could you also just do a quick shout out for folks like the Advisory Attorneys and the investigators? You know, Nick and I are out in the public, people know us. Could you just say a word about these hardworking folks at the Ethics Commission who are not face forward, the people don't know them, but that do so much to protect the good of these people who are listening that may not ever meet them.

Paul: I think it's important to know that we have staff here who care about the work that we do here. A lot of them have served here for a long time because we're passionate about this. We want to help people. We want to hold people accountable, but we also want to prevent people from engaging in misconduct. So our attorneys, for example, the staff attorneys are available to answer your questions, to answer your emails, will provide you with guidance, will provide you with written opinions. But on the investigative side, just know that if we are conducting an investigation, it's a factual inquiry. We're going to tear it apart. We're going to make sure that the facts support a violation before we go forward in saying, hey, somebody's engaged in a wrongful act.

It's really important to make sure that it's a factual inquiry, it's not based upon personality conflicts, not based upon political considerations. We always follow the facts, and our staff are very diligent, very skilled and very experienced in that.

Susan: This episode is airing during election season and I think it's a fair question that people may have, of, are our investigations, the ones that you, Connie, and your colleagues conduct, Paul, that you oversee, they ever partisan in nature?

Does it matter who's in what office or who's in power, etc. when it comes to whether or not investigations are pursued or the outcome of them at the Ethics Commission in Ohio?

Paul: I think that one of the things that we have a lot of experience with is filtering out the partisan and political aspects of a matter and again, focusing on the facts.

I know that can be sometimes frustrating for people who come with us because they think somebody has done something wrong and something immediately should happen, but it's important for the integrity of

the process to make sure that we are diligent, that we offer the people who are accused an opportunity to explain conduct.

And that's an interesting experience that I had coming to the Commission over the years. When I was a prosecutor, before, most defense attorneys would tell people, “Don't talk to the investigators, don't provide them with the story. Only bad things will happen to you.” Not true with our investigations here, maybe three fourths, if not more of the people will come forward and talk to us. I think one, because we have a reputation for being factual and objective, and two, they know we’ll, listen, but we'll also test whatever they have and they provide us and make sure that, you know, we'll look at the facts and circumstances and make an assessment based upon that, not upon the personalities, not upon the partisanship. Those are factors that are not material to whether a violation occurred. Because really, at the end of the day, ethics laws are not partisan.

Susan: So, Connie, as someone that's done this for a long time, what is a piece of advice that you would give to somebody that may have questions, that may be concerned, that are wondering if something's gone awry? What's the advice that you would give after all these years of being an investigator?

Connie: A lot of people are apologetic about calling. Many times they'll say, “I don't want to bother you with this.” And I always say, “That's what we're here for!” Call us and run it by us. We are always ready to talk to anyone calling in.

Susan: Yeah. And Paul, the Executive Director, I give you the final words of wisdom, but it’s also because he's my boss everybody, so, you know, we have to give him the last word, you know?

Seriously, after all these years of decades and decades of public service. What are your words of wisdom, guidance for investigations on the Ethics Law and Commission as a whole?

Paul: Listen to Susan and our educational section.

Susan: I love that. Could you call my husband and say your final words of wisdom is to listen to Susan. That is a great life lesson.

Paul: Well, and let me explain what I mean by that. I mean the Ethics Laws, as you say in your education section, is, and I think we all as a staff here do, they protect the public, of course, but they also exist to help public officials and employees to avoid conflicts of interest.

So if you ever have a question about whether an action is permissible, just ask us. Ask us before you act. It's much easier to do that. It's much more beneficial and we’ll guide you to the right decision. And the other thing, finally, is that if you have to ask sometimes, maybe you've already answered your question.

Susan: Mmmm good word!

Paul: I think for a lot of people that, if you're uncomfortable enough to pick up the phone and want to call us, then maybe whether the action is legal, illegal or whatever is just not an action you should take.

Susan: Yeah, yeah.

Connie: Might be the reason to call too.

Paul: Right.

Susan: Right? Right. Good word, good word to end on.

It would be hard to top those words of wisdom from Paul and Connie. So instead, I'll just thank them both for taking time from their crazy busy schedules to spend this time with me on this episode.

I hope it comes through how dedicated they both are, and how much they, and our entire team at the Ethics Commission, believe in the work we do, and I hope you enjoyed hearing their insight, their experience, and their stories as much as I did.

So one more huge thank you to Paul and Connie, and as always, my deepest thanks to super employee Nick Rohrbaugh, who makes these podcasts technically possible, accessible, and even fun for our listeners. So with that, please join us again in two weeks for our next episode when we return to our normal format of diving into a jaw dropping, head shaking and sometimes chuckle inducing investigations.

But until then, I leave you with this question:

What did Ohio Ethics Commission investigator Connie McDonald say when she dropped her phone on the pavement?

I think I cracked the case.

Ha! Take care everyone. Be ethical. Bye.