A MATTER OF PUBLIC TRUST

A quarterly newsletter of the Pennsylvania State Ethics Commission

Summer, 2026

Any order resulting from a finding that a public official or public employee has obtained a financial gain in violation of this chapter may require the payment of restitution plus interest of that gain to the appropriate governmental body.

Any person who obtains financial gain from violating any provision of this chapter, in addition to any other penalty provided by law, shall pay a sum of money equal to three times the amount of the financial gain resulting from such violation into the State Treasury or the treasury of the political subvidision.

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What are the penalties for violating the Ethics Act?

When we train public officials and public employees about the Ethics Act, we are often asked about possible penalties for violating the Act. Complainants also sometimes ask whether the Commission can arrest a public official or public employee, or remove them from public office.

The Pennsylvania State Ethics Commission is an administrative body with the ability to impose limited administrative penalties. The Commission cannot charge an individual with a crime, impose criminal penalties, or remove violators from public office. However, the Commission can still impose serious and significant penalties in order to penalize those who violate the Ethics Act.

In many instances, the reputational damage resulting from an order finding that a public official or public employee violated the Act is the biggest penalty and most concerning to the person who is the subject of the Order. These individuals are often leaders in their communities who value their character and good name.

The Commission can also, and frequently does, require the public official or public employee who received the financial gain to make restitution to their governmental body. In more egregious cases, the Commission can require the payment of treble damages (although treble damages cannot be assessed against a person who acted in good faith reliance on the advice of legal counsel). The Commission can also order a public official or public employee to cease and desist from a particular activity that is contrary to the Act and order them to take specific action to bring themselves in compliance with the Act. Finally, the Commission can refer the matter to law enforcement, regulatory, or other authorities with jurisdiction over the matter.

A few cases where the Commission ordered significant financial penalties include Wanson, Order No. 1820, where a PennDOT Surveyor was required to pay $62,000 in restitution for using PennDOT survey equipment for his personal business; Bechdel, Order No. 1713, where a Township Supervisor was ordered to pay a treble penalty in the amount of $103,109.76 for using his office to make purchases from the Federal Surplus Supply program and then sell those items to his brother; and Tarlecki, Order No. 1763, where a Township Supervisor/Secretary Treasurer was ordered to pay restitution of $141,137.44 to the Township for issuing payments to herself from Township funds which she used, in part, to purchase thousands of dollars of lottery tickets.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM RECENT COMMISSION CASES

Don’t use the authority of your office to drop code enforcement charges in exchange for the owners transferring ownership of the property to you at no cost.

A Constable and Code Enforcement Officer violated the Conflict of Interest provision of the Ethics Act when he: (1) reported to the Township his personal observation of potential ordinance violations at a Property and submitted pictures to the Township of the Property' s condition; (2) filed citations against the Property owners with the Magisterial District Court that alleged ordinance violations at the Property; (3) discouraged one of the Property owners from pleading guilty to the alleged ordinance violations and paying the fine; (4) offered to drop the citations against the owners in exchange for them transferring the Property to him; and (5) withdrew the citations after the Property was conveyed to him at no cost.

He subsequently entered into a contract to sell the Property, received $29,300, and then filed a Complaint in Ejectment against the new residents. The Commission found that the $29,300 constituted pure financial gain to the Constable/Code Enforcement Officer.

Due to the egregious, blatant, and intentional conduct of the Constable/Code Enforcement Officer, the Commission imposed a treble penalty of $87,900, payable to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The Commission also imposed a penalty of $1,000 for his deficient and delinquent Statements of Financial Interests for calendar years 2021 through 2024, and required that the Constable/Code Enforcement Officer file complete and accurate Statements of Financial Interests.

Finally, the Commission referred the matter to the County District Attorney and the Pennsylvania Office of the Attorney General with the recommendation that criminal prosecutions be instituted against the Constable/Code Enforcement Officer. Young, Order No. 1857.

Don't use Township employees to perform work at your personal residence and on your personal vehicles.

A Township Supervisor violated the Conflict of Interest provision of the Ethics Act when he used Township employees, equipment, and materials to: (1) frame and construct walls in the garage at his property; (2) paint the first floor of his house; (3) install two ceiling fans in his house; (4) remove carpet and install tile at his house; (5) paint the garage at his property; (6) pump the septic tank at his property; (7) repair a door of his pickup truck; and (8) repair his backhoe. In addition, the Township Supervisor received compensation from the Township for performing Roadmaster duties when he instead was attending to Supervisor duties.

As part of a negotiated settlement, the Township Supervisor agreed to pay $6,888.04 to the Township. In addition, he agreed to file complete and accurate Statements of Financial Interests for calendar years 2021 and 2022. Slezak, Order No. 1853.

Don’t hire your daughter for an employment position at the governmental body where you serve.

A Township Supervisor violated the Conflict of Interest provision of the Ethics Act when she participated in actions, including voting, which resulted in the hiring of her daughter as the Planning Commission Clerk, Zoning Hearing Board Secretary, and Codes/ Zoning Officer, and a raise for her daughter.

Per a negotiated settlement, the Township Supervisor agreed to make payment in the amount of $1,919.80 to the Township, representing a portion of costs paid by her daughter for a residence shared by the Supervisor and her daughter. In addition, she agreed to file complete and accurate Statements of Financial Interests for calendar years 2020 through 2024 and pay a penalty of $750.00 to the Commonwealth for those deficient Statements of Financial Interests. Ebright, Order No. 1855.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM RECENT COMMISSION CASES

Don’t take action to award a contract to a business that your child owns or that employs your child.

A Member of a Borough Council violated the Conflict of Interest provision of the Ethics Act when he lobbied for and/or voted to award a contract to install security cameras at the Borough building to a communications business with which his son is associated.

As part of a negotiated settlement, the Council Member agreed to file complete and accurate Statements of Financial Interests for calendar years 2023 and 2024 and pay a penalty of $500.00 to the Commonwealth for those deficient Statements of Financial Interests. Neely, Order No. 1854.

A Township Supervisor violated the Conflict of Interest provision of the Ethics Act when he participated in discussions about and voted to accept a bid from a window company, a business with which his daughter is associated.

As part of a negotiated settlement, the Township Supervisor agreed to file complete and accurate Statements of Financial Interests for calendar years 2020 through 2022 and pay a penalty of $750.00 to the Commonwealth for those deficient Statements of Financial Interests. Nazarenko, Order No. 1856.

Based upon the Pennsylvania Supreme Court' s decision in Sivick v. State Ethics Commission, 662 Pa. 283, 238 A.3d 1250 (2020), the Commission did not impose restitution in either of these cases as there was no private pecuniary benefit received by the public official.

- July 23, 2026, 9:00 a.m. - Commission Meeting at 613 North Street, Room 307, Harrisburg

- October 15, 2026, 10:00 a.m. - Commission Meeting at Mayor’s Reception Room, Room 202, Philadelphia City Hall, Philadelphia

GET TO KNOW US:

Ronald N. Jumper, Commissioner

Ronald N. Jumper was appointed to the Commission on May 27, 2026, by the Honorable Jay Costa, Minority Leader of the Pennsylvania Senate.

The Pennsylvania Ethics Commission was one of the first such bodies in the nation, created by the Pennsylvania General Assembly in the wake of the Watergate scandal in the early 1970's. It is my honor to be appointed by Senator Jay Costa to the Commission after serving for more than thirty years in the Pennsylvania Senate. During that time, it was my privilege to work with countless individuals who were called to government service and performed their work with high ethical standards. I was also fortunate to have worked closely with many attorneys in the General Assembly who made ethical conduct the foundation of their legal service to the Commonwealth. I am honored to be selected as a member of the Commission that is charged with the responsibility to ensure that public officials and public employees perform their duties in furtherance of the public trust.