



Date: January 30, 2020

To: Joint Commission on Ethics and Lobbying Reform

From: CHANGE Illinois

Dear Chairperson Harris, Chairperson Sims and commission members,

My name is Madeleine Doubek. I am the Executive Director of CHANGE Illinois, a nonpartisan nonprofit focused on achieving ethical, efficient government and elections. Thank you for inviting us to participate in a thoughtful conversation on how to move our state forward and begin to restore Illinoisans' trust in politics and government.

In the wake of a guilty plea from a former state senator this week, it was welcome and refreshing to hear Gov. J.B. Pritzker call for ethics reforms and we'd like to underscore our support for the changes he outlined. The governor spoke of corruption as a scourge infecting our bloodstream. The infection enters our bloodstream when politicians start drawing their own district maps. That is the foundation of it all. Perhaps the people who engage in under-the-table deals never would have the chance to win and do that if we had equitable and competitive districts and elections. So, we believe firmly that in order to end the scourge, ethics reform ought to begin with ending gerrymandering.

We know from history and this week's events that work to improve ethics in Illinois is needed more than ever. We have an opportunity to make real, long-lasting change that can begin to transform Illinoisans views of their government and elected officials.

It is reinforced over and over again in public discourse that nothing will change. That until there are new people at the helm, corruption will continue because there is no genuine desire from the lawmakers in control in Springfield to change the system. We are here today because we reject that narrative. We agree wholeheartedly with (state Revenue) Director (David) Harris that most public officials are honestly working for good, but perceptions remain. We believe in the power of people, inside and outside of government, to improve Illinois. We hope all of you will find the fortitude to move us forward in a new ethical direction and we hope our recommendations will help us get there.

Beyond redistricting reform, there long has been a need to revamp the annual statements of economic interest that are required for lawmakers and government employees. It's time for Illinois to rise from the pack and lead. The annual statements of economic interest lawmakers must file have been vague and wanting for decades. They fall short of the level of detail and specifics that many local governments hold their elected officials to. They are less detailed than those required of federal lawmakers. Several years ago, for example, it was reported Cook County Chief Judge Tim Evans reported nothing on his state form, but revealed more than a dozen holdings and sources of income when he was required to complete a more thorough judicial disclosure.

The current statements of economic interest do not require lawmakers to disclose income or ownership interest in a company if it amounts to less than \$5,000 in certain cases, and \$1,200 in others. These amounts are arbitrary. The public ought to know about any and all financial interests elected officials have and understand where all their income comes from so that they can determine for themselves whether an official has a conflict of interest when policy proposals are brought forward. Again, the governor led the way yesterday by calling for an increase in the punishment for breaching disclosure rules. Illinois could start by taking a similar approach toward transparency by requiring more detail and strengthening disclosure.

Additionally, elected officials should disclose whether they have any clients who have contracts with any unit of government in Illinois. If a lawmaker has ownership in a company that has a state contract, that relationship should be disclosed, the lawmaker should abstain from any decisions regarding that company's public work and that company should not be allowed to take on any additional state contracts while that lawmaker is in office.

As has been noted by others here, technology needs to be updated to increase transparency as well. The statements of economic interest should be available in a searchable database online. The current system is outdated and not easily found or navigated by the general public.

After strengthening the annual economic interest statements, we can then look to improve laws to address conflicts of interest. The Illinois Governmental Ethics Act doesn't address the types of outside jobs or income public officials can have. While a complete ban on outside employment isn't workable for part-time lawmakers, Illinois law should have clear, matter-of-fact guidelines about when lawmakers have conflicts and when they need to abstain from involvement in policy development and votes. It should clearly be stated that lawmakers cannot have a direct or indirect financial involvement with clients or firms whose interests conflict with any of the state's financial interests, proposed laws or activities.

Illinois largely leaves it up to elected officials to make a moral decision about declaring a conflict, abstaining or removing themselves from issues without setting a minimum standard. The current conflict of interest laws don't require that lawmakers abstain from votes. We can strengthen this statute by requiring lawmakers to abstain from votes where there are direct conflicts and penalize anyone who knowingly votes on bills that could benefit or hurt their private clients or interests.

These recommendations are made in addition to those CHANGE Illinois gave at a previous commission hearing to ban lawmakers from lobbying other governments for private clients, institute revolving-door policies to prevent lawmakers from immediately lobbying their former colleagues, and to increase disclosure requirements for lobbyists.

And since it was raised earlier, we also believe that the Legislative Inspector General must be fully empowered to launch investigations, issue subpoenas and publish founded reports.

We agree with the governor that restoring the public's trust is paramount and hope the commissioners will adopt our recommendations. Thank you for your work and your time today. I welcome any questions.

Madeleine Doubek  
Executive Director  
CHANGE Illinois