

A PUBLIC SERVICE HONOR CODE FOR MIAMI-DADE

The Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust last year endorsed a resolution that recommended the adoption of a public service honor code by Miami-Dade County government. An Implementing Order for the code, together with an accompanying resolution and enabling ordinance, all sponsored by District 6 Commissioner Rebeca Sosa, are now before the County Commission.

If adopted by the Commission and implemented by the Mayor, county officials and employees would be obliged to follow an honor code of conduct that revives a long-ignored requirement from a 1964 County Administrative Order that they report criminal government misconduct to appropriate authorities when they know about it. It adds directives that employees monitor their workplaces for misconduct, place the public interest ahead of personal loyalties, and cooperate truthfully with investigations. Failure to abide by the code may result in disciplinary action.

Honor codes are familiar to many of those from whom the highest degree of personal integrity is required. Military personnel as well as students attending some of our most elite educational institutions agree to act with honesty and not to tolerate less from others

It is time to bring a public service honor code into all levels of Miami-Dade County government. No one whose primary duty is to serve and protect the public may be said to perform that duty adequately by remaining a bystander after becoming aware of corrupt practices by a colleague or supervisor.

But simply telling public servants the rules against criminal or ethical misconduct is not enough. Too many times we have seen scandals erupt in local government that could have, should have, been brought to light by those closest to the action. We need a game-changer.

Our armed forces, police, firefighters, and other public safety personnel are admired for their willingness to confront the most dangerous physical threats to our safety. Should we consider corruption within government to be less of a threat? Isn't the safety of our roads, buildings, drinking water, schools, and park facilities undermined by corrupt or unethical practices that feed on weak oversight of government projects and facilities?

I refer here to criminal corruption or grossly unethical practices, not about failures to comply with minor or technical requirements. A public service honor code should not be a forum for petty infractions or personal grievances. A public servant running a private business on the public's time or taking a bribe would qualify. Discourteous behavior or failure to file a form would not.

There is reason to ask whether three things-- natural human loyalty to co-workers, concern over job security, and the stigma of being considered a "snitch"--would prevent such a policy from succeeding.

The first two of these issues--loyalty and security-- are easily addressed. In the public sector, loyalty to the public must always trump personal loyalties. Anyone who cannot abide by that tenet does not belong in public service.

Job security is a common obstacle to the willingness of individuals in both private and public sectors to report corrupt practices. But protecting corrupt supervisors or co-workers is not an acceptable role for public servants. Skittish reporters of wrongdoing may be permitted alternate ways to expose corruption, including sending anonymous letters and using government hotlines, though these latter methods would require some form of corroboration.

The “snitch” problem is more difficult. Consider the former mayor of Sweetwater, who last year pled guilty to corruption crimes and went to prison. Showing a false sense of righteousness after he was caught, he declared to his loyal followers that at least he had not acted as a “snitch” against other wrongdoers.

Understandably, many in South Florida who have suffered under corrupt regimes that relied on their own snitches to persecute innocent people, might hesitate to sign up for that role. But we do not live under a dictatorial regime. We have enough control over our public institutions to impose reasonable requirements on those who lead and serve us.

Public oversight of government is important through civic involvement and elections, but we cannot realistically expect the public to thoroughly oversee the day-to-day conduct of more than 20,000 county officials and employees. Neither can law enforcement or county administrators.

Public servants collectively have the lion’s share of knowledge about the inner workings of local government. They must shoulder a share of the oversight that any democratic government must have to succeed.

It is vital that public servants supply the conscience that responds to public concern about the integrity of government. A realistic honor code requiring them to report corrupt activity would be an important step toward making that happen.

Cynics may expect that many public employees will lack the moral courage needed to report wrongdoing. But I am confident that, with appropriate training and reinforcement, we can rise to the challenge of creating a more ethical organizational culture within county government.

Public servants don’t need to be perfect, just focused on the most essential part of their jobs—protecting those they serve.