

THE ACHIEVER



Photo by Maxine Usdan

Joe Centorino

Leads ethics commission towards more enforcement

Joe Centorino runs Commission on Ethics and Public Trust...

As the new head of the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust, Joe Centorino has big plans to involve area agencies in the fight to stop county corruption.

"I'd like to build on [the ethics commission's] relationships with other agencies in the community," he said. "With police agencies, with the inspector general. There needs to be a stronger, more coordinated effort with the county's inspector general's office to work together on matters of mutual concern."

As the former director of the county's Public Corruption Division within the State Attorney's Office, Mr. Centorino has dedicated his career to the investigation and prosecution of crimes committed by public officials or employees.

He is replacing Robert Meyers, who served as director of the ethics commission since it was created nearly 13 years ago. While Mr. Meyers focused his efforts on educational outreach, Mr. Centorino said that he plans to beef up the body's enforcement arm.

"This agency is the conscience of the government and has to operate that way," he said. "There are always going to be issues. People are going to be in the government who shouldn't be in the government...The idea that we're going to eradicate corruption is not realistic, but without this kind of ethical enforcement things can get out of hand."

Mr. Centorino discussed how he plans to run the ethics commission at the body's downtown offices with Miami Today staff writer Ashley Hopkins.

Q: How did you come to head the ethics commission?

A: I was an elected official many years ago in my home town of Salem, Massachusetts and served eight years on the city council. I practiced law privately and was in the Essex county district attorney's office for several years.

I moved to Florida in 1986. I was privileged to be hired by Janet Reno. I came in as a lateral hire, worked in the felony division and was asked to join what was then called the organized crime and public corruption unit from the state attorney's office.

In 1995 Katherine Rundle had taken over. She made the commitment to form a special public corruption unit devoted to the investigation and prosecution of crimes committed by providers of public service.

I was asked to head that unit. There were resources being put into the investigation and prosecution of corruption that had never before been committed. I was there when the county's commitment toward dealing with ethics and corruption government came to fore.

The state attorney's office made its own commitment to establishing a unit [and] expanding the number of prosecutors in that unit. The county formed an ethics commission and staffed it with competent individuals who shared that commitment.

They created an inspector general's office, which has been successful in ferreting out fraud and waste and corruption in government. The Miami-Dade Police Department made a commitment to putting together a public corruption investigation bureau in the late '90s. I was



Photo by Maxine Usdan

Former elected official Joe Centorino had headed public corruption unit in the state attorney's office, prosecuting public officials "with a fair amount of success," he said.

The Achiever

Joe Centorino

Executive Director
Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust

19 W. Flagler St., Ste. 820

Miami 33130

(305) 579-2594

ethics@miamidadegov

Age: 59

Born: Salem, MA

Education: Tufts University (bachelor's and master's, political science); Boston College (juris doctor).

Personal Philosophy: If you're going to work for the public you need to be committed to the public interest. You have to put your own self interest aside to maximize the welfare of the public.

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involved in discussions about establishing that commission and establishing an OIG [Office of the Inspector General].

I've been the chief of that [public corruption] unit since 1995. I was the supervisor of between 10 and 12 attorneys. We have prosecutors, county commissioners, mayors, city managers, high level administrators, police officers, firefighters, with a fair amount of success. I won't say that every case we've ever handled was a total success, but the record that we've established is pretty good.

The ethics commission and the inspector general's office were formed in the late '90s and at the time there was some skepticism in that maybe this was just an attempt to paper over the problem and make it appear as though the government and the community were serious about corruption.

Both of those agencies have blossomed

and have become an integral part of the fight against corruption and the fight for ethical government. There was a state wide grand jury in panel last year that looked at the problem of corruption state wide. Miami-Dade County's institutions were promoted as a model for other counties to follow because it created institutions that are present in the community and that are effective in dealing with a difficult problem.

Sometimes without being very obvious at the outset you develop practices and habits in certain places in government that can't be tolerated, yet don't ever get exposed. You know, the idea of an administrator, let's say, who could steal a million dollars without ever being detected. Our investigators found activity that might not have been discovered without resources to effectively investigate this kind of activity.

That's been my life calling. I have spent the greater part of my life involved in this area. I would see this position as a continuation of the work I've done. It's certainly not as connected to the criminal justice system as it was, but government corruption needs attention at every level. It needs administrative attention, it needs attention from within the government and it needs attention from without the structure of government.

The state prosecution, the local county ethics and the inspector general's office commit. They come within the sphere of the county government, but they're independent of the political forces that sometimes rule the county. That's what you need to have. You need to have an independent perspective where people are willing to take on powerful interests.

Q: What is the ethics commission's charge?

A: I go back to my perspective as a state prosecutor. Dealing with corruption, there would often be times when things we would discover and investigate didn't rise to the level of criminal prosecution because there wasn't a criminal statute involved. There was no structure to deal with that. When I as a prosecutor, I would refer matters up to the state ethics commission because I thought something was inappropriate [and] couldn't prosecute it as a crime.

The state has an ethics commission and they do the best they can, but that's in Tallahassee. They don't have people on the ground here on a daily basis, in Miami-Dade County, to handle problems that crop up in the biggest local government in the state. You just didn't have that ongoing infrastructure that could work on a daily basis to locate and expose corruption.

Even though we had a county ethics code, which we still do, it's the same as it's been for years. There was no enforcement for that code. There was no ethics commission that could step in and say, "You violated the law, and this is the appropriate outcome."

The people need guidance in this area. This is not an easy area to understand. What we would find in a criminal scenario is that sometimes people would come into government not having a notion of what the rules were. People have questions. [The ethics commission] provides competent council and information in addition to enforcement—filing complaints and bringing disciplinary action. They give elected officials, employees, information that will guide them away from unethical behavior.

This agency is the conscience of the government and has to operate that way. There are always going to be issues. People are going to be in the government who shouldn't be in the government. No government is ever going to be perfect. The idea that we're going to eradicate corruption is not realistic, but without this kind of ethical enforcement things can get out of hand.

[The ethics commission] has accommodated on some significant scandals in the last 20 years. I won't say that they're done with, but the institutions are in place. With support from the public and other civil institutions that we hope will be allies in the fight, in the long run this community would have gotten past the challenges that it has faced, the black eyes. We have an image to the outside world that is compatible with the community we want to be.

Q: What challenges do you anticipate facing as head of the ethics commission?

A: We have a funding crisis right now, and no one is immune from that. That's a challenge for every agency.

People need to understand that the government is not an alien force. The government is not just elected officials and bureaucrats. It's police officers and firefighters and teachers and people that fix sidewalks and sewer systems. Those people are out there on a daily basis doing their jobs.

From time to time somebody is caught doing something they shouldn't be doing, and that gives everybody in public service a bad image. There are people that get cynical and start assuming that government as a whole is corrupt, and you can't trust anybody. I hope that the work we do here is going to reduce the cynicism that seems to affect views about the government. In times such as these, where we have financial challenges, the need to have an effective ethical enforcer is greater than ever.

People might see this as an opportunity to engage in activity that they might not otherwise consider. Ethical challenges increase in a time of fiscal austerity because people are more desperate. They're

...with plans to beef up commission's enforcement activities

concerned about their jobs and doing what they think they have to do to survive. It doesn't lessen the need for a watch dog. It increases the need.

Q: How will your leadership style differ from Robert Meyers, the ethics commission's former head?

A: I have respect for Robert Meyers. Few people in government get a chance to create a new agency that is respected and effective.

I've always had a good working relationship with him. He and I have worked together on joint projects and programs over the years in a mutually respectful way.

I'm not Robert Meyers. He came from an academic perspective; I come from a law enforcement perspective. Just by virtue of my background and involvement over the past 25 years as prosecutor, I'm going to put more emphasis on enforcement activities. That doesn't say that I'm not interested in the education aspect of it.

I'm the son of a college professor and a school librarian, so nothing is more important than the educational process. You can educate people and give them the information they need to ensure that there's a system in place to ensure accountability, which better reduces the need for enforcement, for criminal justice activity.

I've been a midlevel administrator. I've been head of the corruption unit. I have a track record there. I've dealt with a lot of different personalities — police, prosecutors and government officials — for many years. I understand what motivates public officials and the ways in which the public sector needs to perform to generate confidence in the public at large.

Q: Mr. Meyers was said to have resigned after allegedly entering into a questionable relationship with a female subordinate. Has that reduced commission's credibility and, if so, how do you plan to counter that?

A: I don't think it has an effect on anything that I'm going to do. My plan is to build on the work that he's done and establish a first rate public agency. The basis of that is already here.

Every agency goes through periods when problems occur. There'll be good and bad days for us. My focus is maintaining a transparent and open operation. Whatever has happened in the past is not any impediment to the future of this agency.

Q: How does Miami-Dade compare to other counties in terms of the number of ethical issues that are brought to light, and does that have more to do with county corruption or the commission's ability to target ethical issues?

A: Miami-Dade has its own challenges. We don't have the longstanding institutional arrangements and stability of population that you have in small communities, where corruption isn't an issue.

You tend to get more corruption in large, diverse communities, where a number of groups are fighting to get their piece of the pie, as opposed to homogeneous populations where everybody knows everybody else. We have a diverse population. That very diversity, which is the strength of this community, also provides for corrupt activity. We have to be more vigilant, more willing to put resources [into] enforcement.

People come here from other countries where there's oppression or a political system that doesn't provide the openness and the opportunities that ours does. We need to establish the credibility of our government with people that come here, because that's not the way the American system works. People have to be given a chance to understand that there are consequences to engaging in [unethical] behavior.

Q: Critics have argued that the ethics commission does not have large enough enforcement arms and that legislators determine laws and punishment while people get trapped in long-term investigations. How do you intend to counter this criticism?

A: Those are valid concerns. We are dependent on, in terms of legal enforcement, what statutes and ordinances are in effect.

There came a time when there was a strong push to toughen up the state laws on

corruption. In 2003 the state legislator passed the Paul Mendelson bill. That resulted in significant penalties for state bribery and a law for compensation and official misconduct. We've seen what can happen if you toughen up those statutes. Ethical enforcement is different from that.

We don't put people in jail for ethical violations unless they rise to a level where they're a criminal violation. Ethics investigators have developed evidence that has led to criminal prosecution of significant officials. That will send a message that this agency is serious about enforcement. I've got the background to work on that.

We have to be very measured here. The last thing we need is a prosecutor or an enforcement agency that gets involved in the political witch hunts that you see in other countries. You have to be able to defend every decision that you make so that public understands that this is not for political purposes.

We're here to protect the public against unscrupulous public officials or people that prey off public institutions for their own private benefit. To the extent that anybody perceives enforcement as part of a political or personal agenda we lose credibility and effectiveness as a long-term, ethical enforcement agency.

Q: The commission has faced a number of high profile cases in recent years. How have these issues affected the county, and what do you do to keep issues from arising?

A: Whenever you have a highly placed public official involved in any type of ethical problem, it creates publicity. A lot of things that get done in this area, that involves mundane or routine violations or outreach and educational efforts, doesn't get anywhere near that kind of attention.

Those kinds of cases are sexier than covering a seminar for new candidates, but a lot of our effectiveness has to do with the message that's delivered to the people that come into public service. The ethics commission needs to ensure that people that decide [to run] for office for the first time are exposed to rigorous training programs. With that kind of effort

you might see fewer people running afoul of ethics requirements at a later time.

Q: What are the first issues you plan to tackle in your new post?

A: The overall issue is to try to restore a sense of honor in government.

I have some thoughts about working with the county and municipalities to develop programs that will develop a sense of honor among employees to the point where it's understood that your responsibility as a public employee is not just to do your job, but to make sure that the public is protected. You have an obligation to report illegal or unethical activity.

That message needs to be delivered effectively in the business community. You just don't pay a bribe; you need to report a demand for a bribe. That's a tough thing, to implicate that sense of honor. I'd like to think that's a direction that we can move in that will help them police themselves.

You can't depend on whatever limited resources we have in terms of ethical or criminal investigation to change the hearts and minds of public employees. There needs to be a much stronger effort at the outset of people's careers to bring back that sense of honor.

I would like to build on partnerships with other agencies.

I like to think that I was part of the reason why the Commission on Ethics has a strong relationship with the state attorney's office in doing joint investigations. I see no reason why that can't continue. I'd like to build on it's relationships with other agencies in the community, with police agencies, with the inspector general.

There needs to be a stronger, more coordinated effort with the county's inspector general's office to work together on matters of mutual concern. I want to start getting involved with that outreach to develop better partnerships with these agencies. I want to work with the county government itself. I want programs that will help train and inculcate the kinds of values that we need to have in our public service.