

No Dodgy Deals: Meet Jose Arrojo, Miami-Dade's New Ethics Commission Director

People pay attention when a mayor does a strange transaction or a politician gets caught lobbying without a license. But what they often don't see, according to former state prosecutor and private defense attorney Jose J. Arrojo, are the unethical transactions that could have happened—but didn't, thanks to the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust.

By [Raychel Lean](#) | November 20, 2018 at 02:11 PM



Jose Arrojo, executive director of the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust. (Courtesy photo)

For former state prosecutor and private defense attorney Jose J. Arrojo, there's a novelty to addressing crime before it happens.

"Someone who's about to commit a crime doesn't call the prosecutor's office and say, 'Hey, I'm thinking about doing this. Is that a crime? Should I do it?'" Arrojo said.

But that's exactly what happens at the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust, where the focus is on prevention. Since becoming executive director in September, Arrojo wants more people to understand the agency's mission.

Because sure, people pay attention when a mayor does a dodgy deal or a politician gets caught lobbying without a license. But what they often don't see, according to Arrojo, are the unethical transactions that could have happened—but didn't.

"That's the beauty of the agency," Arrojo said. "There's this whole population of people out there that are engaging in appropriate, ethical conduct, in large part because they sought our guidance or training."

Arrojo's team of investigators and lawyers get calls, emails and requests each day from South Florida government officials and employees wondering whether a procurement process or potential side project complies with the [Code of Ethics Ordinance](#), set up to ensure transparency in government.

In response, the agency releases formal and informal opinions daily, advising against plans that violate code and pointing out a better way to accomplish a goal.

"I don't think anyone here is Pollyanna enough to think there aren't transactions going on as we speak that are unethical or based on self-interest," Arrojo said. "But over a decade and a half, thousands and thousands of people have come to us, and we've provided them guidance, and they did the right thing."



Beckham soccer stadium.

Related story: [David Beckham Faces Ethics Complaint Claiming Improper Soccer Stadium Lobbying](#)

Citizens also can file complaints or inquire about the actions of elected officials—options many people don't even know they have, according to Arrojo. He wants to change that and encourages Florida Bar members to join him.

“I am willing to partner with anybody,” Arrojo said. “Anybody that wants to stand up on a podium with me someplace and say, ‘This is what the Commission on Ethics does and this is what the ordinance does. And as a citizen, you can raise your hand and say, wait a minute, I think there's something wrong or there's a transaction that doesn't sound right. Can you look at this?’”

Election time is high season at the ethics, which provides mandatory training for all elected officials—from mayors to school board members—whether it's their first rodeo or not. At the end of every election cycle, winners have to sit through hours of training on the ethics ordinance, the state's Sunshine Law and public record laws.

“We're in the process of trying to get everyone in, get them trained and have them move on their way,” Arrojo said.

‘Cops and robbers’



Government, politics and history have always been “kind of a religion” for Arrojo, who took his first job at the State Attorney's Office in Miami under Janet Reno.

Arrojo was assigned to the felony trial unit, where he investigated a serial armed robber and immediately knew he was in the right place.

“It’s government, constitutional law and cops and robbers all mixed into one, so it was right up my alley,” Arrojo said.

Over time, Arrojo narrowed his practice to special prosecutions, focusing on public corruption, organized crime and complicated fraud cases, one of which centered around a huge voter fraud investigation in 1990s Miami and implicated Miami City Commissioner Humberto Hernandez.

Arrojo later crossed the aisle, representing police officers and corrections officers caught up in labor disputes—a career move he said gave him an incredible appreciation for the defense function.

“You can’t get up in a courtroom with your client sitting next to you and say, ‘Yeah, you guys are right,’” Arrojo said. “For me, it was an enormous growing experience as a lawyer to have to get up in federal district court and in good faith vigorously defend a client or a position that maybe was a weak position.”

With prosecution, after all, comes the discretion to pursue or drop cases. As a defense attorney, there’s no such luxury. That experience, Arrojo said, made him a better prosecutor.

“Career prosecutors are a wonderful breed,” Arrojo said. “But I realized in a very concrete way that, just because somebody said you did something, doesn’t necessarily mean you did it or that you did it in the way they’re suggesting you did.”

Beneath Arrojo’s fascination with law, government and history is his family’s story. Arrojo’s father grew up in Spain during its bitter civil war in the 1930s, which saw him drafted into the Spanish military. He later immigrated to Cuba, where he met Arrojo’s mother, lost everything to the Cuban revolution and rebuilt their lives in Miami.

Arrojo isn’t trying to save the world but rather keep his door open to it. In a year’s time, he hopes to say that more South Floridians from all walks of life know the commission is there for them.

“It’s a big job,” Arrojo said. “I just hope that I can do my part, and I’m not going to do it alone. I’m going to be knocking on a lot of doors asking for help.”

Jose J. Arrojo

Born: March 1963, Miami

Spouse: Brenda Christie Arrojo

Children: Jacob James Arrojo, Christie Lee Quintero

Education: Florida State University, J.D., 1987; University of Miami, B.S., 1985

Experience: Executive director, Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics and Public Trust, 2018; chief assistant state attorney, Miami Office of the State Attorney, 2004-2018; associate attorney, Ronald J. Cohen, 2001-2004; assistant state attorney, Miami Office of the State Attorney, 1997-2000; general counsel, Dade County Police Benevolent Association, 1993-1997; associate attorney, Miami Office of the State Attorney, 1988-1993