

OP-ED SEPTEMBER 30, 2015

# Miami-Dade needs an honor code

## HIGHLIGHTS

A proposed ordinance is before the County Commission

Corruption, grossly unethical practices should be punished

Ethics are a vital element of integrity in government



Parra - TNS

BY JOSEPH CENTORINO  
[ethics.miamidade.gov](mailto:ethics.miamidade.gov)

Last year, the Miami-Dade Commission on Ethics endorsed a resolution recommending that the county adopt a public-service honor code. An implementing order for the code, together with a resolution and enabling ordinance, all sponsored by Commissioner Rebeca Sosa, are now before the County Commission.

If adopted, county officials and employees would be obliged to follow an honor code that revives a long-ignored requirement from a 1964 administrative order that they report criminal misconduct in government to authorities when they know about it. It also adds directives that employees monitor their

workplaces for misconduct, place the public interest over personal loyalties and cooperate with investigations. Failure to abide by the code may lead to disciplinary action.



CENTORINO

---

Honor codes are familiar to those from whom the highest degree of personal integrity is expected. Military personnel and students attending many 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 government.

Anyone whose primary duty is to serve and protect the public cannot perform that duty adequately by remaining a bystander while aware of corrupt practices by a colleague or supervisor.

Simply telling public servants the rules against criminal or ethical misconduct is not enough. Too often we have seen scandals erupt in local government that could and should have been exposed by those closest to the scene. We need a game-changer.

We admire the armed forces, police and firefighters for their willingness to confront dangerous physical threats to our safety. Isn't corruption within government also a physical threat? The safety of our roads, buildings, drinking water, schools, and park facilities may be undermined by corrupt practices.

I refer to criminal corruption or grossly unethical practices, not about minor failures to comply with technical requirements. And we don't need another forum for personnel 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 loyalty to co-workers, career concerns and the stigma of being a “snitch” would impede an honor code.

The first two of these are easily addressed. In the public sector, loyalty to the public must always trump personal loyalties. Anyone who cannot follow that tenet doesn’t belong in public service.

Job security is a common obstacle to one’s willingness to report corruption. But shielding supervisors or co-workers is not an acceptable role for public servants. Reporting employees should be protected. Skittish employees can use alternate ways to expose corruption, including anonymous letters and government hotlines, though these latter methods could require corroboration.

The “snitch” problem is difficult. Understandably, those who have suffered under corrupt regimes that employed 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 serve us.

Oversight of government is important through civic involvement and elections, but we cannot realistically expect the public or law enforcement to oversee the daily activities of more than 20,000 county personnel.

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

They must supply the conscience that responds to public concern about government integrity. An honor code requiring them to report corrupt activity could be an important step toward making that happen.

Cynics may predict that public employees will lack the moral courage needed to report wrongdoing. I am confident that, with appropriate training and reinforcement, we can bring a more ethical organizational culture to county government.

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

*JOSEPH CENTORINO IS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE  
MIAMI-DADE COMMISSION ON ETHICS & PUBLIC TRUST.*

