



The Voice of Ethics Podcast Transcript

May 2026 Episode

Reverse Nepotism

Susan: Hello ethical people. I'm Susan Willeke of the Ohio Ethics Commission, welcoming you to the Voice of Ethics, the podcast where we dive into stories about ethics in government, and one of the stories about ethics and government that seems to come up way too much is something with public jobs and family members, right? Yikes. And while we don't use the word nepotism in our statute, I'm guessing that when most people hear that word, you know, you think of someone using their position to help a family member - get them a job or raise, some kind of advantage, whatever. And to be fair, that's usually what we see in ethics cases, people using public power or authority to benefit the people closest to them. But today's cases flip that idea on its head because instead of helping a family member, the question becomes: what happens when a public official uses their public position in a way that it could actually harm that family member? Or maybe not harm them, but at least to their detriment?

Maybe you want to call it reverse nepotism? Not a legal term, that's definitely not in the statute, but you get the idea. And let's be honest, most of us probably have at least one family member where on a bad day we might joke, "Yeah, I'm not pulling any strings for them," but actually taking steps that could negatively affect their job, their opportunity, their whatever, that's where things move from family dynamics into the Ethics Law.

So today's cases explore exactly that line and why the Ethics Law doesn't really care whether you're helping or hurting. But if you're using your public position involving a family member, that's a problem. So let's get into our first story. Our first quote reverse nepotism story is one that I could not stop giggling about when I first heard it.

So one of our amazing advisory attorneys here at the Ethics Commission received a phone call from a township official here in Ohio. So this township official went on and on about what a lazy cuss his brother-in-law is, how he won't get a job, he expects other people to take care of him, he's unmotivated, slothful, lethargic, slob - you get the picture.

But the twist of the story is that the township official had called our office to complain that his brother-in-law had applied for a job with the township, and the township official wanted to know if he could legally participate in making sure that did not happen under any circumstances.

That's the part that cracks me up! This guy's brother-in-law is finally getting off his allegedly lazy "you know what" and applying for a job. And now the guy wants to do everything in his power to stop it. Uh...make up your mind, dude. Right? Now, to be fair, I get it. This guy probably knows from experience that his brother-in-law might not be the best township employee they've ever had, but the irony of this was just too rich to pass up, right?

"You no good lazy cur, you good for nothing slob. You get a job already. Wait, you want to work here? No way. Get back to the sofa. Get out of our offices!" Like I said, can you spell ironic? But before we do leave this story behind us I do want to encourage you to take a look at the Advisory Opinion from 2025 that we have in our show notes.

The truth is, in that situation, that township official actually wouldn't have had an issue under the Ethics Law, you know, being involved in a job situation regarding an in-law, either to his benefit or to his

detriment, the brother-in-law, because that brother-in-law wasn't living in his house. Which, to hear this guy describe it, is clearly what he wanted to avoid - having the guy live in his house, right?

But please know that you can find sort of our official definition of family, which includes children, step-children, parents, step-parents, grandparents, siblings and domestic partners or spouses, regardless of where those folks reside. It's those more distant relatives like the in-laws – aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews, where residency matters to us. In any case, I hope that you do read that Advisory Opinion in the show notes, and I hope that that first story made you chuckle just a little bit, too.

But now moving on to our next case, which actually did result in an investigation. This next story digs into one that kind of gets into the heart of public service, conflicts of interest, and honestly, how tricky things can get when family and official duties overlap.

Now, this one involves a longtime township trustee, his son who worked for the township, and a series of decisions that cross the line under Ohio's Ethics Law. So to tackle this story, I would like to introduce to you two incredible members of the Ohio Ethics Commission's team, investigative attorney Molly Bruns and professional investigator David Sturman. They worked together on this next investigation that also fits nicely into this idea of using one's public position to negatively impact a member of one's family. So Molly and David, thank you so much for joining us today. And I am going to begin this interview with our professional investigator, David Sturman.

Okay. So, David, this is one of those weird cases. We're so used to talking to you guys about these cases where people are using their public position to help their family and all their outside business associates. This is a little bit different in that you investigated a case where there was a township trustee and his son who apparently have a, shall we say, a testy relationship, it sounds like, in their private lives. Right? I guess we'll say that.

David: Yes, correct

Susan: Okay. So there were a couple of things I want to take us through, one at a time. The first one was the dad was acting on a matter involving his sons, like township trustee or township issued truck, is that right? Something about GPS or accounting for where he was.

David: Right. So the son had a truck that had GPS in it, and the father took it upon himself to check on the GPS in what his son was doing during the day, and found out that he was not where he was supposed to be. And the father tried to use that to get the son in trouble.

Susan: And was this, was his son like a new employee, is it something like, well, he's still learning the ropes kind of thing?

David: No, the son actually was a 25-year employee of the township.

Susan: Wo one would think he probably should have known better.

David: Yeah, he knows what he's doing.

Susan: Yeah, yeah. And so dad was actually trying to get him in trouble behind the scenes. Okay. So that was one. The other one. You might have to explain this one to me because I'm a little bit confused about this one. This is something about, that the township would pay for funerals of people who had been longtime employees or trustees, and something went awry there between dad and son as well, as I recall.

David: Right. So normally the township would pay for the funeral of a township, former township employee when a township employee had passed. During this time period, the township had failed to pay

the funeral home, and the son became very vocal about this, and the father decided that he was going to call an emergency meeting of the Board of Trustees to try and get his son terminated for his behavior, referencing the township not paying the funeral home.

Susan: Was there any sort of legal representation involved, to your knowledge? Did anybody talk to anybody about this?

David: The father did talk to the township solicitor, which is the township lawyer, about this as well.

Susan: Before or after the meeting?

David: Before the meeting. And he shouldn't have had any involvement whatsoever. He shouldn't have been talking about his son in any capacity.

Susan: So he had actually reached out to the township solicitor or lawyer in advance, to get this all set up ready for this emergency meeting.

David: Yes

Susan: Wow, wow. Okay, so, Molly, just for listeners who may not live and breathe the Ethics Law like the three of us do, what would the Ethics Law say for both positively or as David said, to the detriment? What does it say about people in public, service officials, when something involves our family members, what should or should have happened?

Molly: You should just recuse yourself from everything completely. You can't participate in any part of it.

Susan: Yeah

Molly: You can't vote, obviously. You can't talk about it. You can't do behind the scenes discussions. You can't try to influence a council member or a trustee or someone else that's on that board to do something that would affect your family member. Again, whether it would affect your family member in the positive or in the negative.

Susan: These are such good points because I think you both there just sort of helpfully obliterated two myths that exist. One that, "Well, hey, if it's to their detriment, that's probably not a big deal because heck, you know" - that, so that's the first one, it doesn't matter either way, no not participate, and the second myth, Molly, I'm really glad that you kind of expounded, I think a lot of people assume "Well, I didn't vote on it." I mean, it's amazing to me how many people come up to me at a speech and say, "Well, you know, I had a conflict, but Susan, I did the right thing. I abstained from the vote." And then when we discussed deeper, you know what we find out, right?

Molly: Yes.

Susan: Right.

Molly: A lot of people think that. They think that, "Oh, I didn't vote, so everything's fine. It was okay that we discussed it earlier in the meeting, that I gave my opinion and and then I abstained during the vote." But that in and of itself is a problem as well.

Susan: There's something that I found a little surprising that maybe our listeners will too, that even after all that happened, that the the guy is reaching out to his solicitor and all that, the son's job didn't actually change. Is that right?

Molly: Correct. Correct. Yes. The son was never terminated. His job position did not change. However, the Ethics Law was pretty clear. You can't do anything that affects your children. So whether it's to their

benefit, detriment or it just keeps everything status quo. In this case, we have a dad participating in matters that affect his son. In the end, it did not ultimately benefit him or work to his detriment. But it's still a problem under the Ohio Ethics Law.

Susan: Again, that two way street doesn't matter if it's to the benefit or to the detriment, right?

Molly: Correct.

Susan: Okay, so, David, if I can come back to you, to me, one of the most striking parts of the case actually involved a warning from the county prosecutor. What can you tell us about that?

David: So the father did receive a notice in writing from the county prosecutor telling him that he needs to abstain from any discussions or voting when it comes to his son's employment. And obviously, this did not stop the father from doing what he was doing.

Susan: And Molly as an attorney, I would think this you find this very unfortunate, because one of the things we tell people all the time is get legal counsel's input and then look what happened, right?

Molly: Correct. Yes. In this case, there was a very clear warning. The dad was not supposed to participate. The prosecutor told him "do not participate." He even actually advised him to not attend or even be an observer in executive sessions that affected the son. So he was given a very, very clear warning, which is not always the case. The father knew he shouldn't be doing it. The prosecutor told him not to do it. If I remember correctly, I think it was in writing and they read it out loud at a township meeting, the email from the prosecutor saying "Do not participate in any way whatsoever." And it's clear from this case that the dad did participate.

Susan: Right. So, David, this case involves a father and a son, a very human interaction. And I have to ask you this. Not only are you a professional investigator with the Ethics Commission, you did a whole career in law enforcement before you came here. And I think you're a dad also. Is that right?

David: I am, I'm a dad.

Susan: Yes. So I'm just kind of curious from your experience, from all those different backgrounds and environment. Do you think we humans, people that, in the world of ethics or just people in public service, is it ever too easy to underestimate how careful they need to be because of our lack of objectivity as people, as parents, as, etc.?

David: So I think that the knowledge of the law gets lost in the emotions of family. When I was a uniformed police officer, they'd always say, the most dangerous call you could go on to is domestic violence.

Susan: Uh-huh

David: Because, well, first of all, you don't know what you're walking into, but the emotions can run so high nothing else will matter other than to obtain the goal of whatever they're trying to do. So even with a prosecutor saying, "Hey, don't do this. It's a felony, you're going to get in trouble." Sometimes the dispute outside of their public employment is so strong that it's just hard to overcome, and they continue to do what they're doing.

Susan: Yeah. And Molly, to follow up on that, could you just in your many years here with the Ethics Commission, also, could you talk a little bit about even those situations that feel personal, "Hey, this is between me and my son," why that's still a violation of the public's trust, too.

Molly: Yeah, because as taxpayers, as the public, you want to make sure that your public officials and employees are doing things that benefit the community. But when you insert family members into those issues, you can never fully know whether or not they're acting in the best interest of the public entity or in the best interests of themselves, whether it, again, be to the benefit or to the detriment of their family member.

David: Going on that a lot of people will say, "Why, then why not just have a rule that we don't hire any family members?" And the problem is, is a lot of these jurisdictions are so small, you don't have a choice. You know, maybe the only person who is qualified to do a certain job happens to be a family member because there's just no one else to do the job. And so it is okay for family members to work together as public officials or public employees, but they can't obviously have authority over each other, and they can't do anything that can benefit or be the detriment (or keep the status quo) of their employment.

Susan: Yeah, that makes perfect sense. So for anybody listening, if someone in my family is seeking a public job, if they're looking for a contract, they are up for a promotion, disciplinary action - what's your words of wisdom for those folks?

Molly: Just don't participate. Completely recuse yourself from the matter. Don't even try to chime in a little thought here or there. Don't try to say, "Oh yeah, they would be so good." Just completely and fully recuse yourself.

David: And ask yourself, "Am I using my position to help this person (or to hurt this person)?" And if that's the case, then walk away.

Susan: That's about as good of a summation that I can think of. So hey, David and Molly, thank you so much for being here today. Thank you for your service to the public. And well, I'm sure this won't be the last podcast I'll have you on again in the future. So thanks so much.

Molly: Thanks, Susan.

David: Alright, take care.

Susan: And that's it for this week, everybody. A huge thank you to Molly and David for joining me on the podcast today. And as always, an even bigger thank you to Nick Rohrbaugh, the behind the scenes wizard who makes these podcasts seamless, sublime and smart sounding. But most of all, thank you to everyone who joins me every other week for the world of ethics true crime.

Join me again in two weeks when we'll not only dig deep into another "ethics gone awry" story, but conversely, acknowledge an amazing public servant who made a true difference for many young lives. You won't want to miss that episode. But until then, since this episode not only dealt with family, but it's also airing very close to Mother's Day, I have to ask, why is a computer so smart?

Because it listens to its motherboard, of course. *robotic voice* Ha ha ha, LOL* Take care everybody. Be ethical. Bye.