

PA Ethics Commission: Update on Recent Cases and Rulings

"The Public Official and Employee Ethics Act was enacted to strengthen the faith and confidence of the people of Pennsylvania in their government," according to Mary Fox of the PA Ethics Commission. Fox provided a "nuts and bolts" review of the restrictions and requirements of the Ethics Act at the "PA Ethics Commission: Update on Recent Cases and Rulings" program. The program was hosted by the Local Government Academy and was held at the William E. Anderson Library of Penn Hills on June 18, 2008. Fox also reviewed recent and significant rulings of the State Ethics Commission and the practical application of such rulings to real life situations.

Fox outlined the purpose of the Ethics Act as protecting the public trust, and explained the role of the State Ethics Commission in enforcing this act. She defined what "public officials," "public employees," "candidates," and "nominees" are, explaining that the act is applied differently to these groups based on their level of authority. The Ethics Act requires and prohibits certain actions, according to Fox: It requires disclosure of financial interests, prohibits against engaging in certain "restricted activities," and requires abstention and disclosure of certain actions to avoid conflicts of interest.

Next, Fox explained statements of financial interest as documents that need to be filed by public officials, public employees, candidates, and nominees to disclose certain financial information. She brought copies of a sample statement of financial interests and explained the penalties for not filing them on time. Fox went on to discuss conflict of interest, which occurs when a public official or employee receives private benefit for himself, an immediate family member, or a business with which he or she is associated or a member of their family.

Finally, the highlight of the program was Fox's stories of recent cases where ethical dilemmas existed, ranging from stories of conflicts of interest to criminal charges that have been filed against public officials for financial impropriety. Program participants watched a short video that provided hypothetical situations where a public official's ethics were tested, and the program ended with Fox fielding questions from attendants.