

Why Public Service Is Important to Me

By Dena M. Castricone



AS AN ATTORNEY WHO HAS SPENT MOST OF MY CAREER practicing in privacy and healthcare, I had never considered the possibility that I may one day serve on the Citizen's Ethics Advisory Board (CEAB). The CEAB has nine members appointed by the governor and legislative leadership and is the governing body for the Office of State Ethics (OSE). While I did not know anything about the agency or its board prior to my appointment, after learning more about the OSE and CEAB, I decided to pursue the appointment.

The OSE is an independent regulatory agency that was created in 2005 to administer and enforce the state's Codes of Ethics. Those codes address the conduct of public officials, state employees, and lobbyists as well as lobbying and state contracts generally. Although the OSE's work is not related in any way to my healthcare and privacy law practice, I was drawn to the OSE's work as a citizen of the state who believes deeply in the importance of ethics in government.

With the support of the Connecticut Bar Association, then Governor Dannel Malloy appointed me to the CEAB in 2015 to complete the four-year term of a departing member and was reappointed in 2018. In 2017, the CEAB elected me to serve as the chairperson.

When I first joined, I recall being instantly impressed by the OSE leadership and staff. The OSE is a small but mighty independent agency that has earned the respect of all in state government for its accessibility, prompt and thorough legal advice,

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fair enforcement, and quality education programs. I also recall being concerned about my lack of familiarity with the ethics laws. But, thanks to the knowledgeable OSE staff, that was not an issue.

While I had no ethics experience, my legal training has proven helpful to me while serving on the CEAB, especially when studying statutory language, assessing draft opinions from the OSE's legal division, serving as hearing officers, or sitting for a board hearing. One need not be a lawyer to serve, however. In fact, most CEAB members are not lawyers and I find the combination of lawyers and non-lawyers offers a diversity of perspective that is critically important to our work.



In terms of balancing my busy legal practice and the work of the CEAB, I have managed without significant difficulty. Serving as the board chair of a state agency is not nearly as time consuming as the role of a state legislator. In truth, I could never be a legislator because, during legislative sessions, those dedicated public servants often work well into the wee hours of the night. I go to bed at 9 p.m.

The monthly CEAB meetings, on the other hand, rarely run past 2 p.m. and subcommittee meetings generally occur immediately before or after regular board meetings. Service as a hearing officer is shared by the board members throughout the year and time-consuming board hearings rarely occur. Further, my regular communications with the OSE's executive director, Peter Lewandowski, are never lengthy or after my bedtime.

Board hearings present the most challenging time commitment. In those hearings, the board essentially sits as a jury in an enforcement matter where a judge has found probable cause. This has happened only once during my seven-year tenure on the board. The board sat for four full days of testimony and evidence and, following public deliberations, issued its findings.

On balance, the CEAB time commitment is not substantial. As with anything in life, if it is important to you, you will make the time for it. Fortunately, the OSE staff and their leader, Pe-

ter Lewandowski, make it easy to serve on the board and to continue to be involved. And being involved is very important to me.

There are many reasons I love serving on the CEAB, including having the opportunity to work with such a wonderful and engaged board and a talented OSE staff. But the primary reason I love serving is that there is a true commitment to carrying out the mission of the OSE among all nine board members in a non-partisan manner. While all board members are political appointees, political affiliation is virtually never a factor in our work. When the CEAB members gather to take on the business of the OSE, we do so as nine citizens of the State of Connecticut with a shared belief that good government cannot exist without ethics. And it's a privilege and an honor to do that work with them. ■

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