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Welcome Remarks For Pre-Conference

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WELCOME

I want to welcome you all to this pre-conference day of our Annual Government Ethics Conference. This is the second year that we have offered this special pre-conference program. We received a very favorable response last year and I am delighted to see such strong interest in a pre-conference program once again this year. I understand that most of you will be staying on for the full conference and I hope to meet many of you today and over the next several days.

OVERVIEW OF PRE-CONFERENCE DAY

Today we have a program that is designed for ethics officials who are relatively new to the program. This morning and immediately after lunch we have a series of concurrent sessions that deal with core substantive areas of the ethics program. I am sure that many of you have already had some experience in dealing with issues involving gifts, conflicting financial interests, seeking employment and post employment. This is an opportunity to deepen your knowledge of these areas and raise questions that you may have encountered on the job. We will wrap up the day with a general session that will provide some very helpful tips on how to run an effective ethics program. So the day focuses on some core aspects of the program and we have lined up experienced presenters for these sessions.

CONNECTING TO OGE AND THE ETHICS COMMUNITY

Attending this conference is an excellent way not only to enhance your knowledge of the ethics program but also to become better connected to the larger community of federal ethics officials and the staff of OGE. I think that having such a strong

relationship is very important because, in addition to the resources within your own agency, there is a wealth of resources out there to help you do your job as an ethics official.

There are a number of things that you can do - and should do - to establish or maintain a relationship with OGE staff and keep informed about the work that OGE is doing. First, OGE has a team of desk officers whose job is to assist agencies in the management of the ethics program. Each desk officer has a specific portfolio of agencies that they work with. Your desk officer can help you with questions about financial disclosure, training, or the ethics laws and regulations. If you don't already know who your desk officer is, you can call Trish Zemple in the Program Services Division at 202-482-9286, and find out who is assigned to your agency.

Another way to keep up to date on OGE activities, as well as other developments in the ethics program, is to sign up for the OGE list serve, if you have not already done so. The list serve is an e-mail ethics news bulletin that OGE issues about twice monthly. It provides very timely information on Federal Register notices, ethics memoranda, training opportunities and other ethics developments. The list serve is especially useful to ethics officials working in regional offices in terms of getting up-to-the-minute information. You can sign up by contacting Teresa Weakley in our Program Services Division at 202-482-9283.

I also encourage you regularly to visit our web site at www.usoge.gov for new developments and for information on the ethics program, including forms, the text of OGE advisory opinions with search capability, DAEOgrams and links to other ethics sites.

And finally, I want to encourage you to maintain relationships with ethics officials in other agencies. One way you can do this if you work in Washington is to take advantage of the monthly lunchtime programs offered by the Interagency Ethics Council. If you work in a regional office in a Federal building with a number of Federal agencies, I would urge you to see if there are ethics officials working in those other agencies and to establish working relationships with them.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE AGENCY ETHICS OFFICIAL

I don't know how long each of you has been in your job as an ethics official or how you view yourself within the larger scheme of the executive branch ethics program. But I want to emphasize this morning how essential you are to the success of the ethics program. Without the 500 ethics officials who attend our

conference and the 8,000 others out there, in Washington and throughout the country, the ethics program would not be as strong as it is today.

We at OGE depend upon ethics officials to make this decentralized ethics program work. OGE can provide leadership in interpreting ethics law and setting the course for ethics policy. But that goes only so far. So where do you come in?

First, you have a first hand knowledge of the programs and operations of your agency that puts you closer to the factual circumstances of ethics issues. Because of that knowledge, you recognize what companies are prohibited sources, what kind of financial interests might present a conflict, what situations pose appearance concerns, and what kinds of outside activities might be problematic for an employee of your agency. You also are closer to the specific issues on which employees most need training.

Second, you are in a better position to administer the agency ethics program in a way that serves the agency mission. An agency ethics program advances the agency mission by preserving the impartiality of the policy-making process and preventing scandals that can divert attention from mission and consume time and resources. The agency ethics official is in the best position to administer an ethics program for the agency in a way that does not compromise ethics requirements but serves the agency. I strongly encourage you, when you conduct training, or hold briefing sessions, to tailor these sessions to your agency's specific needs and issues.

Finally, as an agency ethics official, you play a special leadership role in promoting an ethical culture within your agency. Even if ethics is a collateral duty for you, you are in a position to make a strong contribution to that ethical culture. In some cases, for example in regional offices, you may be the spokesperson for the ethics program in your office or region.

SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

Technical knowledge and expertise is certainly important in the work of an ethics official. And much of that technical knowledge consists of understanding a complicated set of conflict of interest laws and a comprehensive administrative code of conduct with very specific rules. As ethics officials, you must be knowledgeable so that you can advise employees of their obligations under these laws and regulations. There is a great deal of detail that takes some time to master. Many of the sessions today and over the following three days are dedicated to enhancing that

technical competence.

But it is equally important to keep in mind the reasons for the specific rules that we have and the principles that underlie them. For example, many of you may already have provided advice to employees on gifts questions. As you work with these rules, you will become more familiar with their details. But I especially want to encourage you not to forget the underlying principles the specific rules are based on. The very detailed and specific rules in our administrative code are derived, some from law, but many from general principles, 14 of them, that are stated in a Presidential executive order and incorporated in the standards of conduct.

For example, we have a rule on gifts in the first place to uphold the principle that even the appearance of a bribe or currying favor is not acceptable. It is OGE's job and it is the job of every ethics official to explain to employees that we work and deal with, the important principles behind these complicated rules.

As a new ethics official especially, you may feel completely immersed in the responsibilities of this new position. You have a flood of financial disclosure reports that must be reviewed and certified. Each request for advice may force you to research a new area of law. And you are busy ensuring that employees receive the required training. Amid all of this activity, I encourage you to keep in mind the goal that underlies all of the work that we do in the ethics program.

In part, that goal is to see that employees avoid ethical pitfalls and stay out of trouble. This means ensuring, to the greatest degree possible, that the behavior of employees complies with the minimum standards set forth in the ethics laws and regulations. But, meeting minimum standards is not the ideal of ethical public service. We must reach beyond minimum standards and focus on affirmative ethical principles in order to achieve the highest standards of conduct. And that means not only following fundamental principles but avoiding actions that would create even the appearance of improper conduct.

Perhaps the most fundamental ethical principle is that an employee undertakes a public trust. That trust means that employees should always serve the public interest and not personal interests or the private interests of friends, or family, or former clients, or former employers. Whenever employees honor the public trust of their office, they fulfill the commitment that they make and earn the confidence of the American people. So ultimately

our ethics program is intended to maintain public confidence in Government leaders and Government employees.

CONCLUSION

Finally, I want to say that this is an exciting time to be working as an ethics official. You will be dealing with a number of challenging issues such as what to do about contractors in the Federal workplace, or whether private consulting arrangements are proper, or how to provide guidance to officials for dealing with contacts by former clients and employers. So I encourage you to use all of your enthusiasm, talents and resources to deal with these and other issues and to meet the challenge of your new responsibilities.

Today is a day set aside especially for you. Tomorrow you will be joined by 400 other ethics officials from across the executive branch. Again, I encourage you to take the opportunity to meet your new colleagues. I think you will be impressed by their dedication and professionalism. Once again I want to welcome you to the conference and welcome to the executive branch ethics community.