

## **Rebuilding Trust in Our Government**

In the wake of the Watergate scandal and the economic malaise of the 1970s, President Ronald Reagan declared in his 1981 inaugural address that “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.” His presidency ushered in an era of disdain for government and a widespread cynicism that government could be effective in addressing our challenges.

Today, as we confront a crisis that has shaken confidence in our financial system and economy, we have an opportunity to restore public trust and confidence in the legitimate role of government. Indeed, to effectively tackle our economic challenges and to implement the reforms we need in our healthcare, education, energy, and environmental policies, our government will need to garner strong public support.

However, rebuilding public trust will not happen in the face of a pervasive perception that government is not transparent and accountable, cronyism is rampant, and public officials are more interested in helping themselves than in serving the public good.

Here in Massachusetts, we have seen recent allegations of bribery (in the case of former State Senator Diane Wilkerson) and concerns about influence peddling and other ethical abuses on Beacon Hill. Last week, the Speaker of the House Sal DiMasi became the third Speaker in a row to resign under ethical or criminal charges. While the vast majority of our elected officials and government employees are honest, dedicated public servants, the actions of a few create a dark cloud over all.

Taking strong, swift, and decisive action to address these abuses and begin to rebuild public trust should be the first priority for our state government in the new legislative session.

Last fall, Governor Deval Patrick created a Task Force on Public Integrity with a mission to develop a comprehensive proposal for ethics and lobbying reform in our state. Their recently released report (available online at [www.mass.gov](http://www.mass.gov)) addresses reforms in three areas: (1) strengthening enforcement of ethics, campaign finance, and lobbying laws; (2) strengthening civil and criminal penalties for abuses; and (3) improving awareness and education for public officials.

### ***Strengthening enforcement of ethics, campaign finance, and lobbying laws***

The Task Force’s recommendations would expand the investigative and enforcement authority of the State Ethics Commission, Secretary of State, and Attorney General. The Ethics Commission could promulgate new rules and

regulations, more strictly regulate gifts, and share appropriate information with other regulatory bodies. Lobbying activities would be more tightly defined, and the Secretary of State would gain expanded powers to enforce our lobbying laws. Lobbyists would be required to file quarterly reports with information regarding their clients, compensation received, and association with government officials. Finally, the Attorney General would gain enhanced authority to pursue both civil and criminal complaints.

### ***Strengthening civil and criminal penalties for abuses***

Many of the penalties for ethics or lobbying abuses have not been updated in decades. The Task Force recommended strengthening both civil and criminal penalties for those found guilty of betraying the public trust, both elected officials and lobbyists. Bribery would be punishable with up to ten years imprisonment, a \$100,000 fine, or both. Violations of conflict of interest laws would be punishable with up to five years imprisonment, a \$10,000 fine, or both. Violations by lobbyists of the registration rules or gift restrictions would also result in harsh penalties of up to five years imprisonment, a \$10,000 fine, or both.

### ***Improving awareness and education for public officials***

In both the areas of ethics and lobbying, the Task Force determined that many people do not have the necessary understanding of the rules and what steps they must take to ensure full compliance. To address this deficiency, they made a number of recommendations for mandatory education. All public employees would be required to complete online ethics training every two years, and lobbyists would be required to take an annual certification course.

The Task Force's recommendations are now before the Legislature. Acting swiftly to implement comprehensive ethics and lobbying reform would be a good first step to rebuilding public trust and confidence in the integrity of our public officials and the effectiveness of our government. And, strong public support will be critical as we face very difficult decisions in the coming months to deal with our fiscal and economic crisis.

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