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Profile in Public Integrity:

Tom Hood

Executive Director, Mississippi Ethics Commission



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Tom Hood is the Executive Director and Chief Counsel of the Mississippi Ethics Commission. Hood joined the Commission in 2003 as assistant director and counsel and was promoted to his current role in 2006. Hood helped draft Mississippi's Ethics Reform Act of 2008 and advised the Mississippi Legislature on the bill's implications. Earlier in his career, Hood was a lawyer in private practice focusing on construction law.

You began your legal career as a prosecutor in the Public Integrity Division of the Office of the Mississippi Attorney General. What led you to focus your career on government corruption?

In a word, mentors. My father was a life-long prosecutor and was always heavily involved in state and local government. I literally grew up in the county courthouse across the street from my father's small town law office. He also represented a number of local government boards over the years, including his hometown board of aldermen and school board, which he represented for over 45 years. From watching him, I realized there are two types of board attorneys: those who tell their clients how to follow the law and those who tell their clients what they want to hear. My dad was a straight shooter. On at least one occasion it cost him his job, but his integrity was always impeccable.

My older brother has spent his entire career as an extraordinarily accomplished prosecutor and has prosecuted many public corruption cases. We both began with former Attorney General Mike Moore, who championed our state's White Collar Crime Act and founded the Public Integrity Division. Another of my mentors is Secretary of the Navy and former Mississippi Governor Ray Mabus, who, as State Auditor in the mid-1980s, investigated scores of corrupt local officials which resulted in an historic reorganization of our system of county government.

You have worked at the Mississippi Ethics Commission since 2003. Which of your office's achievements are you most proud of? What obstacles have you faced in your work?

Honestly, our greatest accomplishment is also maybe our most mundane achievement. Every day a small group of dedicated public servants does everything possible to ensure that state and local government serves the public. Sound familiar? We churn out decisions which are difficult but consistent and fair. That's what it takes to maintain integrity in government—constant tending to the details. Our greatest obstacles are too much politics and too little funding. I bet that sounds familiar too.

You helped draft Mississippi’s “Ethics Reform Act of 2008.” What made this reform so important?

Probably the biggest change was adding FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) enforcement to our jurisdiction. We now enforce the Public Records Act and Open Meetings Act through an administrative complaint process. Our involvement has dramatically increased compliance with our state’s open government laws, which in turn, furthers our mission of discouraging and uncovering corruption.

The legislation also removed some impediments to enforcing the Ethics in Government Law. The Ethics Law barely passed the Legislature in the late 1970s and barely survived reauthorization several times in the early 1980s. As a compromise, our enforcement authority was watered down. For instance, we were required to provide a copy of the confidential complaint to the respondent before conducting the investigation. Numerous times our investigator would show up at the city hall or the county courthouse and discover the records we needed had been “misplaced.” Thanks to a change in the law, we no longer face that problem.

What advice would you give the newly appointed leader of a city or state ethics commission?

Be patient. You can’t usually accomplish the changes you want in your first month or year or maybe even your first decade. You have to take a long-term approach and realize you may lose some battles in the course of winning the war. Being patient also requires surviving, and surviving requires watching your back, especially when you’re dealing with politicians. You have to be non-political, but you also have to be keenly aware of the politics going on around you. Don’t bring a knife to a gun fight. Don’t lose faith, but don’t be Don Quixote either.

Also, be professional, polite, respectful and totally honest with everyone you encounter, especially the people you don’t like or respect. Your reputation is everything. You have a tough job. You can’t make everyone happy. You will make enemies. But respect is an incredibly powerful asset. It doesn’t matter that much whether people like you, but if they respect you, they will listen.

What’s the most important or interesting thing you’ve learned about public integrity or corruption over the course of your career in the field?

Crooks usually get caught. Most public corruption is generated by a sense of entitlement, combined with apathy or disdain for the public: “I deserve this. I worked hard to get where I am. I won that election or appointment or promotion because I’m great. I’m not paid enough for what I do.” That sort of greed and arrogance is usually a crook’s undoing. A few years ago our state had a huge corruption scandal involving the corrections commissioner, a couple of former legislators and hundreds of millions of dollars in kickbacks. The commissioner had been highly and widely respected for many years. Everyone acted like the world was ending: “How could this happen? The system has failed. Who’s at fault?”

Guess what? The system worked. Some guys lied, cheated and stole public funds, and they got caught. It happens all the time. That’s why some of us get up and go to work every day—to keep watch. My father taught me to know my place in the justice system, to do my job and to place my trust in the system. When we do that, it works.