

Gloria Banister
Ethics Administrator

Obréziah Bullard
Ethics Officer



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STATE OF THE COUNTY

FIRST ANNUAL REPORT OF THE HENRY COUNTY ETHICS OFFICER

TO: Henry County Board of Commissioners
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Henry County Board of Ethics
339 Phillips Drive
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FROM: Obréziah L. Bullard, Esq.

DATE: February 7, 2023

Pursuant to SB22(j)(H), the Ethics Officer hereby files with the Henry County Board of Commissioners and Henry County Board of Ethics the first annual report. The purpose of the annual report is to describe the activities of the Ethics Officer in carrying out the goals of their office and the code of ethics and reporting on the ethical health of Henry County.

INTRODUCTION

To thoroughly assess the progress of the Ethics Office, it is essential to note the timeline of its creation. On March 8, 2021, SB 22, sponsored by Senator Emanuel Jones, was passed and made effective. The first board members of the Henry County Board of Ethics were sworn into office with seven (7) members, five of which were selected by the grand jury, two (2) were selected by the Tax Commissioner, and two (2) alternatives which were chosen by the Superior County Clerk of Court on January 18, 2022.

On May 30, 2022, the Board hired its first Ethics Administrator, Gloria Banister, and its first Ethics Officer, Obréziah L. Bullard, on July 7, 2022. On August 9, 2022, an alternate Board member voluntarily resigned. The Clerk of Superior Court Sabriya Hill was notified, and a replacement was sworn in on September 1, 2022.

ACTIVITIES OF THE ETHICS OFFICER

Creation of the Office:

Upon being hired by the Board of Ethics, the Board was waiting on the renovation of the office space provided by the County, which was completed in August 2022. The Ethics Administrator immediately began working on tasks to properly have the office functionality, such as purchasing

office inventory and supplies, coordinating with information technology to set up emails, computers, and phones, establishing mail procedures, creating a logo, and creating stationery. After the onboarding of the Ethics Officer, the Ethics Officer worked with the Board to establish the Board's mission statement and core values conducted training for the Board, created Henry County Rules of Ethics and Henry County Procedure Rules & Procedure per SB22, created the necessary formal documents to facilitate the Board's duties under SB 22, and facilitated a soft launch to the County.

While creating Henry County Rules of Ethics and Henry County Procedure Rules & Procedure, the Board had questions regarding the implementation and needed clarity on contradictory language. The Ethics Office proposed amendments to help fortify SB22.

The Ethics Administrator and Officer worked together to develop a functional website where complaints can be remitted online and secured record retention by Tyler Technologies' case management software.

On August 15, 2022, the County's Integrity Hotline went live, and the Board began receiving complaints. Shortly after the hotline became live, the Ethics Officer and Administrator met with the County Manager, Cheri Matthews, to introduce the Board and its mission and emphasize the Board's desire to work with the County to fulfill its duties effectively.

A county-wide correspondence was sent to every County employee introducing the Board, advising that complaints could be submitted, and stating that the Board's website was forthcoming on September 2, 2022. Shortly thereafter, on September 12, 2022, the website became live, providing resources for County officials and employees and allowing for online complaint submissions.

Ethics Officer and Administrator continued introducing the new Board to the county by attending the County's Department head meeting, where they briefly spoke to the attendees regarding what the Board does and how to contact it. Throughout the remainder of the year, the Ethics Officer and Administrator continued to individually meet with Department Heads to answer any questions they may have regarding the Board and its purpose, as well as coordinate annual training.

Challenges:

No new venture comes without hurdles, and the Ethics Office is no different. Although the office was hopeful to begin annual training in January of 2023, our efforts have been thwarted by a lack of understanding regarding SB22. As a result, several scheduled ethical trainings had to be canceled and are in the process of being rescheduled upon County approval of the proposed Acknowledgment of Receipt form that employees must sign after the completion of their training.

After the Ethics Officer met with the County Attorney to discuss the county's concerns, the issues were able to be resolved. Additionally, the board has had challenges regarding its budget. With such a limited budget, the Board cannot engage in any third-party services needed for formal investigative hearings and ongoing staff training.

Future Endeavors:

Many County departments have inquired into a virtual option to do training. This would help ensure that every Henry County employee, whether seasonal, part-time, or full-time, can engage in ethical training. Distant learning is very prevalent in today's society. Not only is it convenient for employees, but it provides the ability to reach a more significant number of people in a smaller amount of time. The Ethics Office is looking into the ability to produce this type of training.

ETHICAL HEALTH OF HENRY COUNTY

The overall ethical health of Henry County remains questionable. In less than three (3) months of the Board's launch, between September-December 2022, the Board received seven (7) complaints. One (1) was dismissed for lack of jurisdiction, two (2) (consolidated into one case) are pending probable causing investigations, one (1) is pending for the Board's review, and the Board voted three (3) to advance to a formal investigation. The resolution of the pending cases will give more insight into the County's ethical status.

Nonetheless, County employees appear eager to learn more about the Board and how to maintain integrity within the County; however, many are worried about retaliation. Although the Ethics Office has provided employees with the ability to file anonymous complaints, it becomes inevitable that their identity may be revealed through circumstantial information.

The Ethics Office has been diligent in attempting to start educational training, as this is the foundation of a County of ethics.

Henry County Code of Ethics is well on its way to being a valuable asset to the community. In a concise amount of time, County employees have taken advantage of their opportunity to seek advice and address concerns. The purpose of is B22 was to provide transparency within the County, and the creation of the board has done just that. While it is evident that not all County officials are happy that the Board exists, it is also apparent that the employees are.