

Maggie Keenan

The Importance of Whistleblowing

To blow the whistle means to signal and report wrongdoing in an organization to the appropriate authority. The over-arching charge of the whistleblower is to ensure that organizations operate in a way that aligns both ethically and legally and in accordance with all applicable rules and regulations. History confirms that a civil and safe society depends on whistleblowers. And indeed one need only read a newspaper or look online to see that rooting out wrongdoing still relies on individuals that somehow find the strength to prioritize the greater good, often to their own detriment.

I worked for the Cuyahoga County Office of Budget and Management (OBM) between 2006 and 2013. Following a nearly two year hiatus, I returned to OBM as its Director. Beginning in 2016 I became aware of activity that was illegal, unlawful, and unethical. I reported this to my immediate supervisor and, ultimately, to the County Executive but failed to receive an adequate response and, more importantly, the activity did not cease. Further, I was characterized as being “difficult”, a “naysayer”, and “closed-minded.”

I felt I had no choice but to report my concerns to the Cuyahoga County Prosecutor’s Office and an investigation began that ultimately included the Federal Bureau of Investigation and extended throughout the Administration of Executive Armond Budish. Once I was identified as a potential witness in the resulting criminal prosecutions and my testimony before multiple grand juries somehow became public knowledge, I was progressively excluded by the Administration: my character, credibility, and work product were routinely – and without merit – attacked. Managing at work became a daily struggle – I now had to do my job better than ever before because the slightest errors were used against me in ways disproportionate to other senior-level employees. On top of that, I had to both anticipate and react to attacks to undermine me and/or my employees and attacks on my credibility. This took a devastating toll on my mental health.

Governments have a moral and legal obligation to their citizens. County governments are responsible for, among other things, the administration of child welfare systems and the operation of detention facilities. Included in the activity that I reported were violations of federal civil rights in the Cuyahoga County jail and a crisis in the delivery of healthcare to inmates. My repeated concerns were ignored by the Administration and eight people died in the County Jail in 2018. To say that whistleblowers have the opportunity to protect the health and safety of the public is an understatement in Cuyahoga County. As a result of my actions, the County jail is now under the supervision of the State and the American Corrections Association. Additionally, Federal and State investigations remain ongoing.

While I agree that the attitude toward whistleblowers is changing, that change moves at a snail’s pace in Cuyahoga County. When you are in the thick of it, it is often too easy to feel dejected and regretful than it is to be proud of having done what’s right. This became especially true on December 11, 2019 when I was, without notice or cause, terminated from the position of the Director of the Office of Budget and Management. I have no doubt that my termination was in direct retaliation for my whistleblower activity. I also have no doubt that I did the right thing and, given the opportunity, I would do it again.

Encouraging would-be whistleblowers to say something when they see something requires systemic and societal change. Policies and laws must be enacted to assure whistleblower protection – people must feel safe in reporting and have more to rely on than the potential of a reactionary lawsuit.

Whistleblowers must be encouraged and celebrated as exemplary employees and exemplary public

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servants. While one doesn't want to go so far as to promote false reporting, there does need to be a culture of acceptance that we have still yet to achieve. Policies and laws must also be enacted to assure anonymity. The pressure to identify the whistleblower(s) in Washington D.C. is egregious and undermines the public trust. Corruption is rampant; whistleblowing is not. The work to be done is hard enough – whether it be in the public or private sector. The damage done by corrupt individuals can be ameliorated by promoting and protecting whistleblowers.