

Governor Phil Murphy

Governor Murphy Unveils Legislative Package of Comprehensive Ethics Reforms for State Government

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Legislative Package Will Modernize Ethics Laws to Strengthen Restrictions on Lobbying, Enhance Financial Disclosures, and Increase Public Access to the Legislative Process

TRENTON – Building on his long-term commitment to changing the political culture in Trenton, Governor Phil Murphy today unveiled a sweeping set of ethics proposals to strengthen restrictions on lobbying, enhance financial disclosure requirements, and increase transparency in the legislative process. The legislative package, which follows Governor Murphy's call for action in his State of the State address in January, will have bipartisan sponsors in the Senate and the Assembly, including Senator Richard Codey, Senator Chris Brown, and Assemblyman Ryan Peters.

"When I ran for Governor, I pledged that if elected, I would make every decision based on what is best for the people of New Jersey, not Trenton insiders," **said Governor Murphy**. "At a time when public cynicism about government is all too common, we must restore the public's confidence by making government more transparent and accountable than ever. For the first time in a decade, we are proposing comprehensive ethics reforms to ensure that elected officials are serving the public interest, not the special interests."

Alongside bipartisan partners in the Legislature, Governor Murphy announced a comprehensive legislative package outlining wide-ranging new ethics rules in New Jersey. The five bills contained in the package will address the following:

- **Lobbying Reform:** The bill will target the shadow lobbying industry by requiring lobbying firms and companies that hire lobbyists to disclose when they hire a person or firm to provide professional services other than lobbying, a proposal that was introduced by Senate President Sweeney last session. This bill will also reduce the threshold for individuals to register as governmental affairs agents from 20 hours of lobbying activities per calendar year to one hour per calendar year.
- **Eliminating Legislative Exemption to OPRA:** The bill will remove the very broad legislative exemption to OPRA that exempts all communications for the use of a legislative member in the course of their official duties. Eliminating this exemption ensures that the executive branch and legislative branch would operate under the same rules. The Legislature would still have access to the advisory, consultative, or deliberative privilege that exists pursuant to N.J.S.A. 47:1A-1.
- **Aligning Gift and Outside Income Rules:** Currently, legislators and legislative staff are permitted to accept gifts as long as they do not know or have reason to believe that the gift is offered to them to influence the performance of their public duties or responsibilities. This bill would subject legislators and legislative staff to the same standard that currently governs executive branch employees, who are prohibited from accepting any gift related in any way to the employee's public duties. Additionally, this bill will also prevent high-level legislative staff from receiving outside income unless they seek review and approval by the Joint Legislative Committee on Ethical Standards. Under current state law, designated senior staff members in the Governor's Office cannot receive outside income unless they seek review and approval by the State Ethics Commission. Lastly, the bill will require legislators and all executive and legislative branch employees earning \$100,000 or more per year to fill out the detailed financial disclosure form promulgated by the State Ethics Commission.
- **Extending the Cooling Off Period:** New Jersey's "cooling off" period, which statutorily applies to the Governor, Cabinet, and legislators, is currently one year, meaning those officials must wait a full year after leaving their jobs before being able to register as lobbyists. The bill extends this cooling off period from one year to two years and applies it to all executive and legislative branch staff earning \$100,000 or more per year as a matter of law. A number of states, including New York, Colorado, and Alabama, have two-year prohibitions, partially based on the rationale that a two-year cooling off period ensures that a former official will not be lobbying during the same legislative session when they were in office.

- **Legislative Transparency:** The legislative proposal will require bills or resolutions not to be voted on unless their final form has been made publicly available on the Legislature's website for 72 full hours preceding the vote. This closely mirrors a rule in the U.S. House of Representatives that was put in place by Speaker Nancy Pelosi in January 2019. Under the legislative proposal released today, either House would be able to waive this requirement by an emergency 3/4 vote. This legislative proposal will also require the disclosure of all organizations or individuals who submit testimony supporting or opposing bills or resolutions, similar to an existing requirement in California.

Additionally, in the coming weeks, Governor Murphy will take executive action on new measures to increase transparency in New Jersey by mandating new requirements for those who do business with the state.

In 2012, the Center for Public Integrity gave New Jersey a B+ grade on ethics, the top grade in the nation. By 2015, New Jersey fell to a D grade, and was ranked only 19th in the nation. Today's announcement reflects Governor Murphy's commitment to make New Jersey's ethics laws as strong as any in the country.

"These ethics standards have not been updated since 2005," **said Senator Richard Codey**. "They were considered the best in the country then, and we want to stay to that standard. I believe Governor Murphy's package does just that."

"For too long, our ethics laws have fallen short of the standards we should expect of our elected officials," **said Senator Chris Brown**. "Governor Murphy's new comprehensive ethics reforms will help build confidence in our political process and ensure that state government works for New Jersey families, not powerful special interests. I'm looking forward to sponsoring these new bills to bring some much needed accountability to Trenton."

"As an elected official, I understand the need for transparency and accountability in state government, and ethics reforms are integral to this mission," **said Assemblyman Ryan Peters**. "Governor Murphy's new proposals will strengthen our requirements for lobbying and close loopholes that have existed for far too long. I am proud to be a partner in this important work."

"Restoring voters trust in government is absolutely essential to improving our democracy," **said Jesse Burns, Executive Director of the League of Women Voters of New Jersey**. "Pulling back the curtain on Trenton will make the legislative process more transparent and accessible, ultimately making it easier for voters to be heard on issues that impact their daily lives."

"The Governor's proposed reforms will make our political process more transparent, more accessible, and ensure our citizens can be fully informed about government and legislative affairs," **said Dena Mottla Jaborska, Associate Director of New Jersey Citizen Action**. "For our democracy to function we can no longer have our government leaders and legislators operating in the dark. Too often we've seen the dangers of backroom deals serving special interest lobbyists that the general public has little or no input on. This package of reforms will allow New Jersey residents to fully engage in our political process, and ensure New Jersey's government serves its people, not special interests. We applaud these proposed reforms and urge the State Legislature to adopt them as soon as possible."

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