

Advisory Opinion 23-06

This advisory opinion is in response to your request, [REDACTED] regarding the permissibility of being a presenter at a July 2023 virtual conference [REDACTED] (the "Association") [REDACTED] for which you would receive a stipend of \$1,000.00.

You shared the following information along with your request:

- [REDACTED] your office has developed resources and considerations for BCPS [REDACTED] to guide their practices [REDACTED] as a part of a [REDACTED] Workgroup for which you are the facilitator from your office.
- Your presentation would discuss considerations that the BCPS [REDACTED] Workgroup has shared.
- Your presentation would acknowledge and indicate any items that are BCPS resources but would not replicate presentations that the workgroup has offered in the past.

In response to follow-up questions from the Panel, you advised as follows:

- The Association does not conduct business with BCPS, does not have and is not negotiating a contract with BCPS, and is not subject to the authority of BCPS.
- Examples of BCPS resources that may be used in the presentation include a sample interview form, a sample observation tool, and a sample checklist [REDACTED]
- The BCPS resources would be shown to attendees as sample tools to guide their decision-making. The audience members would also review the tools and determine how they could be used within a sample assessment scenario during the presentation.

The relevant sections of the Ethics Code, Policy 8363, *Conflict of Interest – Prohibited Conduct*, provide as follows:

VII. Use of Prestige of Office

A. A school official may not intentionally use the prestige of office or public position:

1. For private gain of that school official or the private gain of another; or

2. To influence, except as part of the official duties of the school official or as a usual and customary constituent service by a member of the Board without additional compensation, the award of a state or local contract to a specific person.

IV. Employment and Financial Interests

A. Except as permitted by Board policies when the interest is disclosed or when the employment does not create a conflict of interest or appearance of a conflict, a school official may not:

1. Be employed by or have a financial interest in an entity that is:

a. Subject to the authority of the Board or school system; or

b. Negotiating with or has entered into a contract with the Board or school system; or

2. Hold any other employment relationship that would impair the impartiality or independence of judgment of the school official.

B. The prohibition described in Paragraph IV(A) does not apply to:

1. A school official whose duties are ministerial, if the private employment or financial interest does not create a conflict of interest or the appearance of a conflict of interest, as permitted in accordance with policies adopted by the Board;

2. Subject to other provisions of regulation and law, a member of the Board in regard to a financial interest or employment held at the time of the oath of office, if the financial interest or employment:

a. Was publicly disclosed to the appointing authority and the Ethics Review Panel at the time of appointment; or

b. Was disclosed on the financial disclosure statement filed with the certificate of candidacy to be a candidate to be a member of the school board; or

3. Employment or financial interests allowed by opinion of the Ethics Review Panel if the employment does not create a conflict of interest or the appearance of a conflict of interest or the financial interest is disclosed.

The Maryland Public Ethics Law contains provisions which are analogous to these provisions of Policy 8363. *See*, Annotated Code of Maryland, *General Provisions Article*, § 5-502(b) (prohibiting an official or employee from “hold[ing] any other employment relationship that would impair the impartiality and independent judgment of the official or employee.”) and § 5-506(a) (“An official or employee may not intentionally use the prestige of office or public position for that official’s or employee’s private gain or that of another.”)

The Maryland State Ethics Commission (“SEC”) has issued a number of advisory opinions construing the Public Ethics Law’s “prestige” provision and a public agency employee’s permissible outside employment activities. In interpreting *General Provisions Article* §§ 5-502(b) and 5-506(a), the SEC has stated in its opinions that “[w]e have advised, for example, that use of State time, materials and equipment would be within the prestige prohibition, and this section has been the basis for prohibiting employees from engaging in private businesses that involve interaction with populations also served by their agencies.” SEC Advisory Opinion No. 99-06. *See also*, SEC Advisory Opinion No. 02-02 (“the focus has been to avoid situations in which the population served by the private practice and the agency may overlap.”)

Based upon the information that you have provided, the Panel advises that it is permissible for you to make a presentation [REDACTED] to the Association and accept the offered stipend. However, consistent with the above-referenced advisory opinions from the SEC:

- (1) the presentation must be performed on your own personal time; and
- (2) the presentation may not incorporate any BCPS materials or resources.

The Panel would like to express its appreciation for this request for an advisory opinion and your sensitivity to the ethical considerations that generated the request.

This Advisory Opinion has been adopted by the Ethics Review Panel members on May 18, 2023.

Tim Topoleski, Ph.D.
Chair

Thomas Keech, Esq.
Vice Chair

Ralph Sapia, Esq.
Panel Member

Owen Jarvis, Esq.
Panel Member