



North Dakota Ethics Commission plans to ask for more staff, citing workload

By Jack Dura, North Dakota Monitor

North Dakota's Ethics Commission plans to ask the Legislature again for more staff, citing a growing workload and a desire to drive an educational approach.

The commission on Monday reviewed and approved its second annual report covering July 1, 2025 through June 30, 2026. In that period, the commission received 34 complaints, closed or dismissed 43 complaints and issued five advisory opinions, according to the report.

"That's the primary message here, is that there has been such an increase in all of the work that the commission has to do," Commission Chair Pam Sharp told the North Dakota Monitor. Complaints and advisory opinions are time-consuming to handle, she said.

Of the 34 complaints, 16 related to elected or appointed state officials. Another 12 related to local officials, four to state officials outside the commission's authority and two were about private citizens – all people the ethics panel doesn't have the authority to investigate.

People might not understand the ethics panel's authority as to those subjects, Sharp said.

In all of 2025, the commission received 84 complaints, more than double the 41 received in 2024. So far in 2026, the ethics panel has received 50 complaints.

In 2024, the commission revised how it counts complaints. Previously, a single complaint could be about multiple people with different allegations. Now, one complaint can only be about one person.

During the report period, the commission carried out 14 investigations and didn't make any findings of ethical violations. Five investigations are ongoing.

The ethics panel has confidentiality requirements in what it can say about complaints and investigations.

The commission so far has issued findings on one investigation that stemmed from complaints about Republican Rep. Jason Dockter related to his ownership of a Bismarck building.

The commission has 29 complaints pending, including ones from 2023 and 2024. More than 200 complaints have been filed with the ethics panel since it started meeting in 2019.

The report makes several recommendations to the Republican-led Legislature, including requests for more staff. The commission has three staff members: an executive director, a general counsel and an operations administrator.

Last year, the Senate approved a fourth position for education and communications, but the House cut it. The Legislature approved a \$1.4 million budget for the agency for 2025-27. The Ethics Commission plans to ask for two new full-time employees for legal and educational purposes. A staffer to help people with questions and to educate the people the commission regulates would help enormously, Sharp said.

"As the (complaints) go up, the time available for education, it just isn't there," she said.

Republican Gov. Kelly Armstrong has advised state agencies to submit slimmer budget requests for the 2027 legislative session, which begins in January. His budget guidelines include a freeze on new full-time positions.

Sharp, who is retired from leading the state's Office of Management



and Budget, acknowledged the staff requests as "a really big ask," but said the commission's first years only had two employees, one full-time and one part-time, at a time with few complaints coming in. The commission now needs more resources to do its work, she said. "I think we just need to plead our case and show (lawmakers) our workload, and I really would love to get them to understand how far we

could go if we could do more of a preventative strategy than just having complaints piling up," Sharp said.

In the last year, the membership of the Ethics Commission has completely turned over, with no one left from the initial makeup in 2019. Sharp is the longest-serving of the current members, at about 10 months.

Earlier this month, the commission's website was struck by bots sending phony online form submissions for two days, resulting in more than 24,000 emails the commission's staff have had to inspect for legitimate submissions possibly mixed in. State informational technology staff secured the commission's website with a type of firewall.