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## **Ethics Training Unfunded**

A new law requires education of Louisiana elected officials and government employees in ethics and campaign finance laws.

But the Legislature did not appropriate any money for the Louisiana Board of Ethics to implement the new law.

Ethics officials estimated it would cost at least \$500,000 to begin the training program — the first phase goes into effect Jan. 1.

The training program is aimed at helping people avoid sometimes costly but avoidable violations of law.

No one inserted the money in the nearly \$30 billion state budget bill after some legislators questioned the ethics agency's cost estimate.

"I'm concerned about it," state Rep. Regina Barrow said Thursday.

The Baton Rouge Democrat who sponsored the law said, "I've been advised there are ways I can actually get the money to them once we determine the appropriate amount."

Commissioner of Administration Jerry Luke LeBlanc said, "We need to help them execute their legislative mandate."

But nobody approached LeBlanc's office, which handles the finances for executive branch offices, to ask about ethics funding, he said.

Elected officials and governmental employees are required to complete ethics education and the Board of Ethics is required to offer the course, under the new law.

The education could be offered at seminars or via an Internet-based program.

The program would be phased-in between 2008 and 2012.

Legislators, statewide elected officials and Public Service Commissioners are the initial group required to take the classes. In 2010, the training requirement extends to about 5,000 other elected officials and then in 2012 to about 250,000 public servants.

The ethics board's fiscal note for program implementation included money for new staff positions, including a programmer to develop an Internet-based training program; and additional office space because of the expanded staff.

Acting ethics administrator Kathleen Allen said she's going over the cost estimate to determine how much money the agency needs to at least get started implementing its new responsibilities.

Allen said she will submit report to the board's executive committee in September.

"It's something that will have to be addressed," said board chairman Hank Perret.

The phase-in will help the agency as it works on implementing the web-based ethics training program and its content, Allen said. A key feature of any Internet-based program will be a method to verify that the official or employee actually completed the training, she said.

Allen said she is looking at the cost and feasibility of contracting out the programming work. Still, she said, the original proposal for an in-house programmer would be more beneficial.

Rep. Hunter Greene, R-Baton Rouge, one of the legislative opponents of the ethics spending plan, said he thinks a lot of the program can be implemented without major new expenditures and with existing staff.

Greene said the ethics agency already conducts seminars on ethics and campaign finance laws. And he said ethics officials are always available to answer questions about them.

"I don't understand the need for \$500,000 to \$800,000 a year in (additional) costs," said Greene. "I'm glad to hear we didn't appropriate money for it. They need to see how far they can go without it."

Allen said the law gives the 23-person staff ethics agency a lot more responsibility and mandates officials and employees to get the training or face fines for failure to do so.

The initial training of 144 legislators, seven statewide officials and five Public Service Commissioners can be done without new staff, Allen said. But once the education is required of thousands more that will be a different story, she said.

(Marsha Shuler)