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Support needed for Jindal's ethics reform

Gov.-elect Bobby Jindal is giving violators of state ethics laws fair warning. Some violations could result in jail terms. That may be the strongest threat ever made against those whose actions contribute to the state's shabby reputation.

The governor-elect made the statement to a meeting of the Council for a Better Louisiana.

"The real consequences for those who break the rules should not be a slap on the wrist," he said. "They should go to jail."

Jindal has also pledged to call a special legislative session dedicated to ethics reform. Spokeswoman Melissa Sellers says it will be called within a month of the new governor's inauguration.

Jindal has made the most serious ethics problem, unwillingness of elected officials to disclose their incomes and assets, a major priority.

He says he also will push for "more meaningful and specific disclosure from lobbyists." We applaud his statement that people have a right to know who is spending money to influence public officials.

After the meeting, Sean Reilly, one of Jindal's top transition advisers, indicated the effort to improve ethics in the state will be far-reaching. Reilly, a leader of Blueprint Louisiana, says the advisory panel will recommend that personal financial-disclosure laws apply to local officials as well as those at the state level.

If a bill goes to the Legislature with that provision included, all of the governor's clout will be required to get it approved. In the last legislative session, inclusion of local officials was used successfully as a weapon to kill a House bill that would have required greater disclosure of personal finances. Legislators were creative in altering the bill so failure was assured. They amended it so that it would apply to every state and local official in Louisiana, creating an overpowering contingent of opponents.

Negative reaction was so strong that, in the final hours of the session, lawmakers simply shoved the ethics bill aside and let it die.

A strong disclosure law is badly needed. The Center for Public Integrity ranks Louisiana fifth from the bottom in terms of openness about how legislators earn their money and how their personal business may conflict with their public decisions.

At least two factors offer reason for optimism that Jindal may win the ethics reform battle. One of them is the fact that LA Ethics 1, a coalition of 50 business and public-interest groups, has the determination to continue the fight and the clout to make good things happen.

The other is the change in the Legislature. Because of term limits, there will be an unprecedented number of new faces. The new delegates will hopefully not have the negative attitude toward ethics reform that has been obvious in the actions of so many long-time incumbents.

Ethics reform will be one of Jindal's greatest challenges. He will need public support to make a difference.