Kansas ethics panel fines former corrections secretary for taking $100K job with CoreCivic

TOPEKA — The Kansas Governmental Ethics Commission has fined former corrections secretary Joe Norwood $5,000 for taking a job with CoreCivic after authorizing a lucrative state contract for the company. The ethics panel also recommended authorities further investigate Norwood’s dealings with CoreCivic. As corrections secretary under former Gov. Sam Brownback, Norwood helped orchestrate a 20-year agreement for CoreCivic to build and operate a new prison facility at Lansing — a $362 million deal panned by lawmakers and auditors as overly costly for the state. Norwood immediately went to work for CoreCivic after Gov. Laura Kelly took office in January 2019. Norwood said he was paid $100,000 by CoreCivic for consultant work last year. The company terminated his contract March 1, following an inquiry by The Topeka Capital-Journal and a published news report. A CoreCivic representative said Norwood didn’t disclose the potential violation of state law when he accepted employment. State employees who are involved in contract negotiations are forbidden for two years from accepting payment from the parties they dealt with. The ethics commission determined Norwood violated the state’s “revolving door” law because he signed an amendment four months before he left office that added $3 million to the value of the CoreCivic contract. Randy Debenham, attorney for Norwood, told the ethics commission during an April 22 hearing that the former secretary wasn’t directly involved in negotiations with CoreCivic. “It didn’t occur to him that simply signing a contract would lead to problems,” Debenham said. The attorney argued the appropriate sanction for an unintentional, “technical” ethics violation should be a written admonishment. Ethics commissioner Jerome Hellmer, a retired district judge from Salina, said he recognized agency leaders rely upon subordinates to handle certain tasks. Signing a contract could be an administrative function, Hellmer said, but Norwood’s relationship with CoreCivic “goes beyond the pale.” The secretary had worked directly with the company, and the state contract was worth millions of dollars. “Immediately after his termination, he then turns to the very entities which he was working with before, and has acknowledged he benefited by receiving income of roughly $100,000 at least in one year,” Hellmer said. Mark Skoglund, executive director of the ethics commission, said this type of ethics violation is uncommon and among the most serious, especially when individuals profit from the arrangement as Norwood did. “Revolving door issues speak to a central concern about people’s ability to have trust in government,” Skoglund said. The ethics panel by unanimous vote issued the maximum $5,000 fine and referred the matter to law enforcement authorities for further investigation.