Supreme Court Justices Now Required to Report Free Trips & Gifts

New regulations have been adopted that require U.S. Supreme Court justices and federal judges to provide greater public disclosure of any free trips, meals, or gifts they receive. The change was confirmed by the head of the federal judiciary's administrative arm in a public letter by Democratic U.S. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse. The move comes in response to calls from lawmakers and judicial transparency advocates for broader ethics reforms at the Supreme Court.

Senator Whitehouse has argued for years that the judiciary's disclosure rules have been more relaxed than other branches of government, particularly when defining what constitutes "personal hospitality" that judges do not have to disclose. He has also introduced legislation requiring the Supreme Court to adopt a code of ethics, strengthen recusal standards for judges, and bolster financial disclosure requirements.

Under the Ethics in Government Act of 1978, U.S. Supreme Court justices and federal judges must complete financial disclosure reports annually. Last year, Congress passed legislation requiring judges to file reports disclosing stock trades periodically.

The new regulations took effect on March 14 and were adopted by a committee of the Judicial Conference, the judiciary's policymaking body. They were detailed in a March 23 letter to Senator Whitehouse by U.S. District Judge Roslynn Mauskopf, the director of the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts.

The new regulations clarify that judges must disclose stays at commercial properties, such as hotels and resorts, and gifts of hospitality paid for by an entity or third-party other than the person providing it. Judges still do not have to disclose gifts that include food, lodging, or entertainment extended by an individual for a non-business purpose.

Senator Whitehouse hailed the new rules, saying they would make it much harder for justices to travel, dine, hunt, or vacation for free at the private resort of a wealthy corporate executive, especially one with business before their court, and avoid disclosing that information to the public.

The move towards greater transparency and accountability in the judiciary is long overdue. For too long, judges have been able to avoid disclosing the gifts and hospitality they receive, leaving the public in the dark about potential conflicts of interest. The new regulations will help to shed light on these matters and ensure that judges are held to the highest ethical standards.

However, there is still more work to be done. Senator Whitehouse's proposed legislation would strengthen ethics rules for the Supreme Court and federal judges. These reforms must be enacted to ensure the judiciary remains independent, impartial, and accountable to the American people.

In conclusion, the new regulations requiring greater public disclosure of gifts and hospitality received by U.S. Supreme Court justices and federal judges are a welcome development. They represent a step towards greater transparency and accountability in the judiciary. Still, more must be done to strengthen ethics rules and ensure that judges are held to the highest standards of conduct.