

Inquirer Editorial: Seth Williams no longer a lawman; he should step down

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Federal authorities Tuesday indicted Philadelphia District Attorney Seth Williams on 20 counts of fraud. Given the gravity of the charges and the time it will take Williams to prepare his defense, he should immediately resign.

[The 50-page indictment](#) describes a lawman who was rotten from the start. Just after taking office in 2010, Williams was friended by a businessman who sold pre-paid phone cards and a bar owner who had evaded federal taxes. The pair bought him luxurious vacations in the Dominican Republic, Las Vegas, San Diego, and Key West.

In return, Williams was asked to help a defendant plea bargain for a reduced sentence and to use his influence to speed one of his benefactors through security at the Philadelphia airport after overseas trips. The bar owner also asked Williams to vouch for him to keep a California liquor license.

The indictment said Williams was a willing partner, nauseatingly gushing to one buddy, “How would you like me to repay you,” and advising him that, “In the future always give me at least a week to help a friend.”

These charges are self-inflicted wounds to Williams and yet another blow to the public’s faith in the legal system. Williams’ fall comes only months after he played the role of a crusading reformer by prosecuting crooked politicians caught in a corruption investigation when then-Attorney General Kathleen Kane would not.

Like his predecessor, Lynne Abraham, Williams focused on apprehending sexual predators in the Catholic Church. He worked with the justice system to reduce gang violence and increase felony convictions. His investigation of a fatal hose factory fire helped reveal serious defects in the city’s building code enforcement system.

Those good works have been obscured by Williams’ arrogant acceptance of trips, home improvements, an iPad, an expensive couch, cash, and passes to Eagles, Phillies, and 76ers games. He apologized in January after the city Ethics Board fined him a record \$62,000 for failing to report \$175,000 in gifts wrapped in hypocrisy, knowing full well that his acceptance of the trinkets had doomed his career.

There were other signs in recent years that Williams wasn’t the compassionate reformer who entered the political scene like a breath of fresh air when he unsuccessfully tried to oust his former boss, Abraham, in 2005. In ruthlessly pursuing civil forfeitures, he threw people out of

their homes if a relative who lived there was even accused of selling drugs. He convicted the small fry while letting the big shots slide after a fatal building collapse.

Williams was finally elected district attorney in 2009 and reelected in 2013 by voters who never thought he would be accused of crimes. Neither did this newspaper, which endorsed him each time. In fact, one would have to go back to the 1970s to find another Philadelphia district attorney accused of ethical breaches, F. Emmett Fitzpatrick, but even he was never charged with a crime.

Williams' charges make it even more important for voters to scrutinize the eight candidates competing in this year's election for district attorney. In the end, voters must use their best judgment, which is always better when it is fully informed.