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Nashville judges disciplined after investigation into trips to Costa Rica, letter says

Two Nashville judges were disciplined after investigations into trips they took to Costa Rica the same time as disgraced former Judge Casey Moreland, but the details remain shrouded in secrecy.

Moreland, who is in prison on federal corruption charges, told prosecutors other judges and attorneys went with him on trips to Costa Rica and that attendees regularly paid for prostitutes and used marijuana, court records show. Some of the attorneys continued to practice in Moreland's court after the trips.

Government travel records show Criminal Court Judge Monte Watkins and General Sessions Judge Aaron Holt were in the Central American country at the same time as Moreland.

Nashville lawyer Brian Manookian filed complaints with the state board of judicial conduct, saying Watkins and Holt should be investigated for potential ethics violations related to the trips. The Moreland trips were first reported by The Tennessean.

Watkins and Holt have denied wrongdoing, but a letter sent to Manookian in June confirmed the board investigated the complaints and that "appropriate disciplinary action has been taken."

The letter, sent by judge and board chair Dee David Gay, does not explain the extent of the disciplinary action. Tennessee law allows for a wide array of discipline against judges to remain secret.

Private reprimands and censures are allowed under law, although public reprimands and censures are occasionally issued.

Watkins confirmed the disciplinary action through a court administrator but did not give any details. Court staff did not respond to requests for comment from Holt about disciplinary actions taken against him.

"The important point is for you to know that your complaint was investigated, and the Board's action was based upon your complaint," Gay wrote in the letter. "Your interest in maintaining the integrity of the Tennessee judiciary by bringing this matter to our attention are greatly appreciated."

Manookian blasted the board for keeping details about the investigation and the judges' discipline secret.

He said repeated attempts to see the judges' responses to his complaints, which are normally shared with the complainant, were ignored.

"After confirming that my allegations were true, and that Judge Watkins and Judge Holt were punished as a result, the Board refuses to disclose what specific disciplinary action was taken," Manookian said in a statement. "Public confidence in the judiciary is undermined — and whistleblowers are deterred — when we are told that judges have engaged in misconduct, but that the punishment or corrective action must remain secret."

Manookian was suspended by the Tennessee Board of Professional Responsibility in September. The suspension was lifted in May.

Manookian's legal team, who filed suit in federal court in an effort to lift the suspension, said he was targeted for challenging local judges.

Daniel Horwitz, a Nashville lawyer who represents Manookian in the federal suit, said the Board of Professional Responsibility was "significantly more concerned about prosecuting whistleblowers like Mr. Manookian" rather than rooting out corruption.

Costa Rica trips armed attendees with 'compromising information,' prosecutors say

Federal prosecutors on Moreland's case said the Costa Rica trips created “an atmosphere of cronyism and favoritism” in Moreland’s court that violated rules of judicial conduct.

Moreland was not charged for his behavior on the Costa Rica trips. But federal prosecutors described the trips in a court filing arguing Moreland should face prison time on other corruption charges.

"All of the attendees possessed compromising information on Moreland, as he did on them," court documents said.

Moreland made a deal with prosecutors in 2018, pleading guilty to taking thousands of dollars from a nonprofit that helps people recovering from drug addiction. Moreland also pleaded guilty to attempting to bribe and intimidate a witness and to conspiring to obstruct federal investigations into his behavior.

Reach Adam Tamburin at atamburin@tennessean.com or 615-726-5986 and on Twitter @tamburintweets.