

Public Interest SA

Whistleblowers Awards 2025

Official Framework: Descriptions, Eligibility Criteria & Nomination Processes

This framework outlines the purpose and structure of the Whistleblowers Awards 2025, detailing the eight award categories and the standards for eligibility and nomination. It is intended for nominators, judges, partners, and nominees.

Date: August 28, 2025

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1. Purpose & Principles

The Whistleblowers Awards 2025 celebrate the courage, integrity, and public-spirited action of those who expose wrongdoing and those who help them to do so safely. The awards elevate stories of ethical citizenship, strengthen a culture of accountability, and encourage best practices in supporting whistleblowers across South Africa.

Guiding Principles

- **Public Interest:** All recognised actions should primarily serve the public good.
- **Integrity & Fairness:** Nominations and assessments are conducted impartially and transparently.
- **Safety & Dignity:** The safety, privacy, and dignity of whistleblowers and nominators are prioritised.
- **Evidence-Based:** Decisions are grounded in verifiable facts and credible documentation.
- **Non-Discrimination:** Participation is open and equitable, irrespective of background or affiliation.

2. General Nomination Guidelines

The following guidelines apply to all award categories:

- **Eligibility Window:** Unless otherwise stated, nominated actions should have occurred within the last three (3) years.
- **Who May Nominate:** Civil society, academic institutions, professional bodies, media houses, oversight entities, and members of the public; self-nominations are accepted.
- **Submission Pack:** A completed nomination form; a narrative (up to 1,000 words) detailing the actions and impact; supporting evidence (media reports, legal documents, institutional records, testimonies); and at least two endorsements.
- **Confidentiality:** Sensitive information, including identities, may be redacted on request. Pseudonyms may be used where safety concerns exist.
- **Verification:** The Awards Secretariat may conduct independent verification and request further documentation.
- **Conflicts of Interest:** Judges must declare conflicts and recuse themselves where appropriate.

3. Award Categories

3.1 Whistleblower Excellence Award

Description

Honours a courageous individual whose principled disclosure of wrongdoing has advanced transparency, accountability, and the public interest in South Africa.

Eligibility Criteria

- The nominee disclosed corruption, maladministration, fraud, abuse of power, or other unethical conduct in good faith and in the public interest.

- The whistleblowing incident must be verifiable by the judges (e.g. through independent journalistic articles).
- Demonstrated personal courage in the face of significant risk (professional, financial, or security-related).
- The disclosure contributed to accountability, reform, or meaningful public awareness.
- Acted ethically, without malice or personal enrichment, and within the boundaries of the law.

Nomination Process

- South African citizen or resident, or the disclosure had direct and significant impact in South Africa.
- Nominations accepted from organisations, institutions, colleagues, or the public; self-nominations permitted with supporting evidence.
- Submission pack includes: nominee details; detailed account of the disclosure (context, risks, outcomes); supporting documentation; and at least two endorsements.
- The Awards Secretariat conducts verification and may request additional evidence; confidentiality respected where necessary.

3.2 Investigative Journalism Award (Individual & Media House)

Description

Recognises outstanding investigative reporting that exposes wrongdoing and advances public accountability, including strong collaboration with and protection of whistleblowers.

Eligibility Criteria

- Published/broadcast investigative work within the last three (3) years with demonstrable public-interest value.
- Clear focus on exposing corruption, abuse of power, maladministration, or systemic failures.
- Demonstrated adherence to journalistic ethics: accuracy, fairness, and responsible reporting.
- Impact evidenced through accountability processes, reforms, or substantial public awareness.

Nomination Process

- Nominations may be submitted by newsrooms, professional associations, peers, civil society, or the public; self-nominations welcomed.
- Submission pack: nominee details; links/files of two or more investigations (series accepted); motivation statement; and at least two professional endorsements.
- Independent verification may include editorial checks, right-of-reply records, and corroborating documentation.

Individual Journalist Category

Honours a journalist whose fearless, rigorous reporting exposed wrongdoing and amplified whistleblower disclosures.

Eligibility Criteria

- Practising journalist (freelance or employed) working in South Africa.

- Investigative work published/broadcast within the last three (3) years.
- Evidence of risks faced and ethical conduct throughout the investigation.

Nomination Process

- Provide portfolio of at least two investigative pieces (or a multi-part series).
- Include a narrative of the story's significance, risks faced, and public impact.
- Attach endorsements from editors/peers and any relevant institutional acknowledgements.

Media House Category

Honours a media institution for sustained commitment to investigative journalism through resources, editorial independence, and protection of reporters.

Eligibility Criteria

- Recognised media house operating in South Africa.
- Consistent investment in investigative capacity and editorial independence.
- Evidence of impactful investigative output in the last three (3) years.

Nomination Process

- Provide a dossier of newsroom investigations demonstrating depth and impact.
- Describe institutional policies and practices for supporting investigative reporting and whistleblower safety.
- Include endorsements from industry bodies, civil society, or oversight entities where applicable.

3.3 Fallen Heroes of Integrity Award

Description

Honours whistleblowers, activists, or public servants who stood courageously against corruption or abuse of power and suffered severe consequences, including persecution or death, for their commitment to truth and accountability.

Eligibility Criteria

- Nominee took principled action against corruption, maladministration, or abuse of power in South Africa.
- Suffered significant consequences (e.g., persecution, career loss, social ostracism, or death) linked directly to their actions.
- Actions contributed to accountability, reform, or enduring inspiration for ethical conduct.
- Nominee may be deceased or living; emphasis on the severity of sacrifice and ethical legacy.

Nomination Process

- Nominations may be submitted by civil society organisations, professional bodies, colleagues, family members, or the public.

- Submission pack: nominee details (and next of kin/representative if deceased); description of actions, risks, and consequences; supporting evidence; optional endorsements.
- The Awards Secretariat will undertake confidential verification and engage sensitively with families/representatives.

3.4 Digital Courage Award

Description

Honours a pioneering individual or platform that harnesses digital media with courage, creativity, and integrity to advance whistleblowing, expose corruption, and inspire public accountability in South Africa.

Eligibility Criteria

- Use of digital platforms (e.g., YouTube, X/Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, podcasts, blogs) to promote whistleblowing or anti-corruption advocacy.
- Demonstrated impact through reach, engagement, and influence on public discourse, policy, or institutional responses.
- Evidence of courage in the face of online harassment, censorship, or professional backlash.
- Adherence to ethical standards: accuracy, fairness, and responsible advocacy.

Nomination Process

- Nominations may be submitted by civil society, academic institutions, media, or the public; self-nominations accepted with evidence.
- Submission pack: nominee details; links to relevant digital content; motivation statement on impact and risks; and at least two endorsements.
- Verification may include audience analytics, content review, and corroboration from independent organisations.

3.5 Climate Action Whistleblower Award

Description

Recognises individuals who courageously expose environmental harm, ecological misconduct, or climate-related wrongdoing, advancing accountability and the protection of ecosystems and communities.

Eligibility Criteria

- Disclosure relates to environmental harm, climate risks, regulatory violations, or sustainability breaches with significant public-interest implications.
- Nominee acted in good faith and in the public interest, with clear evidence of integrity.
- The disclosure contributed to corrective action, enforcement, or heightened public awareness.
- Open to individuals from any sector (public, private, academia, civil society); posthumous nominations considered.

Nomination Process

- Nominations may be submitted by environmental organisations, community groups, professional bodies, regulators, or the public; self-nominations generally not accepted.
- Submission pack: detailed account of the disclosure and its impact; evidence of the nominee's role; supporting documentation or testimonies.
- Shortlisted candidates will undergo confidential vetting to safeguard sensitive information and affected communities.

3.6 Hero of Integrity Award

Description

Recognises individuals who, through consistent ethical conduct and principled action, demonstrate exceptional commitment to transparency, accountability, and the public interest, inspiring others to uphold high ethical standards.

Eligibility Criteria

- Open to individuals from any sector (public service, civil society, academia, business, or community leadership).
- Nominee may not be a formal whistleblower but has demonstrated ethical courage in resisting or exposing wrongdoing.
- Actions have had significant positive impact within South Africa, influencing culture or practice of integrity.

Nomination Process

- Nominations may be made by peers, civil society, professional bodies, or the public.
- Submission pack: nominee details; detailed account of actions promoting accountability and ethics; supporting evidence; and two or more endorsements.
- Awards Secretariat may request additional references or records to verify the scope and impact of the nominee's contribution.

3.7 Whistleblower Champion Award

Description

Honours dedicated advocates who amplify the voices of whistleblowers, defend their rights and wellbeing, and bring sustained national attention to their struggles and sacrifices in pursuit of truth and accountability.

Eligibility Criteria

- Open to individuals, organisations, or initiatives actively advocating for whistleblowers' protection and wellbeing in South Africa.
- Evidence of tangible contributions: policy influence, institutional reform, strategic litigation, psychosocial support, or public awareness campaigns.

- Demonstrated courage and leadership in confronting resistance or hostility; advocacy conducted ethically and responsibly.

Nomination Process

- Nominations accepted from civil society, academia, media, professional bodies, and the public; self-nominations permitted with evidence of impact.
- Submission pack: nominee details; description of advocacy work; evidence of impact (media, policy references, programme outcomes); and at least two endorsements.
- Independent review may include consultation with whistleblowers supported by the nominee (with consent) and relevant partners.

3.8 Sherpa Award for Whistleblower Support

Description

Recognises individuals or organisations that provide exceptional guidance, protection, and mentorship to whistleblowers, helping them navigate legal, professional, and personal challenges to ensure their voices are heard safely.

Eligibility Criteria

- Active and sustained involvement in guiding, mentoring, or protecting whistleblowers in South Africa.
- Demonstrable impact enabling whistleblowers to report wrongdoing safely and pursue accountability.
- Resilience and commitment in providing support despite personal, professional, or institutional risks.
- Adherence to ethical, professional, and responsible support practices (including confidentiality and informed consent).

Nomination Process

- Nominations may be submitted by whistleblowers, civil society, colleagues, professional bodies, or the public; self-nominations accepted with robust evidence.
- Submission pack: nominee details; description of support provided; evidence of outcomes (testimonies, legal outcomes, institutional records); and endorsements.
- Verification may include confidential interviews with beneficiaries and review of anonymised case documentation.

4. Definitions & Notes

- **Whistleblower:** A person who, in good faith, discloses information about wrongdoing, risks, or unethical conduct in the public interest.
- **Good Faith:** Honest intent to address wrongdoing without malice or personal enrichment.
- **Public Interest:** Outcomes that advance accountability, protect communities, or improve governance and environmental stewardship.
- **Evidence:** Verifiable documentation including media reports, legal filings, institutional correspondence, testimonies, or expert analysis.

All information submitted will be handled with strict confidentiality. Public Interest SA reserves the right to withhold publication of sensitive details to protect individuals' safety and dignity.