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**Figure in Public Aid probe alleges State Police shielded Edgar aides**

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SPRINGFIELD-A key figure in the federal investigation of the Illinois Department of Public Aid suggested the State Police covered up what role Gov. Edgar's administration may have played, new court documents showed Thursday.

Michael Martin, the indicted co-owner of Management Services of Illinois, also told a government informant wearing a recording device that he was prepared to implicate top Edgar aides in exchange for a plea bargain.

A transcript of the tape shows Martin saying, "There's no way . . . the governor's office is going to get out of this thing unscathed."

Federal prosecutors allege that Martin, of Springfield, was part of a bribery scheme that cost the state at least $ 7.1 million in improper payments from the Public Aid Department to MSI. Facing similar charges are William Ladd, MSI co-owner; Ronald D. Lowder, a former manager in the Public Aid Department; and James R. Berger, former deputy director of the department.

Curtis Fleming, former chief of the department's collections bureau, has pleaded guilty and cooperated with federal prosecutors. It was Fleming who in September recorded four conversations with Martin, which now are coming to light.

In the documents filed by prosecutors Thursday, Martin told Fleming that the State Police allegedly "filtered out important information" from material turned over to federal investigators, a claim State Police Director Terrance Gainer denied Thursday night.

Martin said he was prepared to go to prosecutors and finger longtime Edgar aides Michael Belletire and Janis Cellini, among others, in exchange for leniency. Prosecutors said there is no plea bargain. Belletire served as Edgar's deputy chief of staff and now is executive director of the Illinois Gaming Board. Cellini is Edgar's personnel director.

Belletire said, "To my knowledge, neither myself nor anyone else in the administration had anything to do with the details of this contract." Cellini could not be reached.

A transcript of the conversation quotes Martin as saying, "I mean, they'll hear from us on what phone calls were made from Belletire, from Janice (sic) Cellini, from you know, conversations with Robert and conversations with Berger, what was agreed to, why things were done the way they were done."

The documents did not divulge the nature of the phone calls Martin alluded to. And, the reference to "Robert" is unclear, though the public aid department's director is Robert Wright, who has not been charged in the case.

Edgar spokesman Thomas Hardy on Thursday night dismissed Martin's claims. "The governor believes that Martin is not a credible individual and he's just talking to try to help his own situation, and drag the governor in," Hardy said.

But Martin's attorney Ronald Menaker disputed Hardy's claim that Martin's statements aren't credible.