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Final Edition

Inside Blago’s Jobs Machine: A Special Report

'People were really appalled by admission at the University of Illinois being politically manipulated ...... This is worse'; Declaring a hiring freeze while doling out jobs based on clout, former governor carried on business as usual from day 1 of his term, files reveal

By Dave McKinney, Tim Novak and Chris Fusco

On his first full day as governor in 2003, Rod Blagojevich ordered a freeze on state hiring.

Only essential jobs would be filled, he said, promising to rein in a record state budget deficit and put an end to what he called "taking care of insiders first and taxpayers last."

Behind the scenes, though, Blagojevich aides flouted the supposed freeze, forging a patronage machine that -- despite their boss' public promises -- eventually would provide state jobs or promotions to nearly 2,500 people with enough clout to have political sponsors, a secret trove of Blagojevich hiring records obtained by the Chicago Sun-Times shows.

Among those who sponsored candidates to the Blagojevich administration for jobs and promotions between 2003 and 2005 were members of Chicago's City Council and members of Congress. Lobbyists and Blagojevich's own top fund-raisers asked for and got people state jobs, too.

There were Illinois legislators and the current occupant of the White House. Even current Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton is listed as sponsoring a job transfer for a childhood friend.

Democrats did it. A few Republicans, too.

Some who asked the now-indicted former governor for help would later number among Blagojevich's biggest critics and even vote to boot him out of office.

In all, the Blagojevich hiring database lists 386 political sponsors and 5,700 candidates for jobs or promotions controlled by Blagojevich's administration.

Beyond the nearly 2,500 people who got hired or promoted, dozens more were appointed by the governor to paid and unpaid state board positions.

Many of the clout hires got low-level state jobs like toll collector and highway maintenance worker, despite a long-standing court order that bans political hiring for such jobs.

Mary Lee Leahy is the Springfield attorney who won the landmark 1990 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that made political hiring for most Illinois state government jobs illegal. When he took office, Blagojevich hired her as a personnel consultant, but Leahy said the administration apparently ignored her advice and set up a patronage system she was unaware of.

Leahy said she's "sickened" by what the records obtained by the Sun-Times under the state's Freedom of Information Act reveal, and she points to a recent political scandal for perspective.

"People were really appalled by admission at the University of Illinois being politically manipulated," Leahy said. "I think this is worse. This is depriving people who are talented, who are qualified, from getting a good state job and supporting their family."

The state is facing several lawsuits from former government workers fired under Blagojevich. The database supports their claims, one of their lawyers said.

"The path to get a job wasn't based on qualifications," said Carl Draper, a Springfield attorney representing three clients who say their firings were politically motivated. Candidates "had to have political sponsorship."

**BLAGO LAWYER: NOTHING ILLEGAL**

Arrested late last year, Blagojevich is facing federal charges that include racketeering, extortion and fraud. He's accused of trying to trade state government business for campaign cash and also of trying to sell the U.S. Senate seat vacated by President Obama. Neither Blagojevich nor anyone from his Office of Intergovernmental Affairs is charged with any hiring-related crimes, though U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald, whose office charged Blagojevich, said in a 2006 letter that there were "very serious allegations of endemic hiring fraud" under Blagojevich.

Hiring allegations are "certainly not part of anything in the criminal complaint" that sparked Blagojevich's arrest Dec. 9, said Sam Adam Jr., a Blagojevich lawyer.

"The governor said he's never done anything illegal -- hiring or otherwise -- and we stand by that."

The database does offer glimpses, though, into the workings of Blagojevich's jobs machine -- and the politicians and others who were willing to take part:

- The electronic record includes 17 folders broken into categories identifying political sponsors who made recommendations on hires and promotions. Among them: "aldermen," "chairmen," "congressmen," "SEN-D" and "reverends."

The sponsors were largely Democrats. Among them:

- Ald. Edward Burke (14th), one of 30 Chicago aldermen the records show sent job requests to Blagojevich's office. Burke is listed as sponsoring Kathleen McChesney, former chief of Chicago's FBI office, for an undisclosed opening in an Illinois Department of Corrections post in January 2005 -- a post she ultimately didn't get. In an interview, McChesney said she had no idea why she was on the list and that she never sought a job with the state. Burke didn't respond to a request for comment.

- Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Cheryle Jackson, former communications director for Blagojevich. She is listed as having secured a deputy directorship for her husband, Charles Jackson, with the Department of Public Health in April 2003. Jackson's press secretary did not respond when asked for comment.

- Former Rep. Calvin Giles (D-Chicago). He pushed a candidate for a state corrections job, but, according to the records kept by Blagojevich aides, that person -- one of eight people on the former lawmaker's list with the last name "Giles" -- flunked out of training because "he couldn't shoot a rifle." Giles, a current state employee, didn't return a message left at his office.

- Tony Rezko, the former top Blagojevich adviser and campaign fund-raiser who's now in prison after being convicted of wide-ranging corruption involving state boards. He is listed as sponsor for 123 people. Thirty-seven got jobs; 18 got posts on state boards or commissions.

- Blagojevich signed off on hiring or promoting more than 80 job candidates credited to lobbyists Paul Rosenfeld, Al Ronan, Victor Reyes, Orlando Jones, Kevin Conlon, David Wilhelm, Milan Petrovic and David Stricklin, who raised a combined $2.4 million for him.

Some of the 386 people listed as political sponsors denied it was true.

"I don't know who came up with the list, but it's not factual," said U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush, who was credited with sponsoring 23 candidates -- including three members of his own family. "Some of those names, I don't know. None of those names are names I recommended, even my son. He used his own juice to get a job."

Only a handful of people in the ex-governor's inner circle had access to the hiring database, which was turned over to federal authorities by Blagojevich's administration in response to an October 2005 subpoena.

**TOP SPONSOR? ALD. MELL**

The pol with the best success rate with Blagojevich? His now-estranged father-in-law, Ald. Richard Mell (33rd). He's listed as sponsor for 293 state jobs -- and as having landed 110 of those.

Thirty-seven of those who got jobs were either Mell campaign contributors or members of his 33rd Ward Regular Democratic Organization. The contributors gave a combined $92,362 to political funds Mell controls, state records show.

Some on Mell's list wound up in jobs where political influence isn't supposed to hold sway, including three toll collectors, three tollway equipment operators and three customer service representatives with the tollway's I-Pass program.

Another who made it from Mell's list onto the state payroll was Joseph Cini, who was head of Blagojevich's Office of Intergovernmental Affairs, where the database was kept.

Will County State's Attorney Jim Glasgow also was on Mell's list of recommended candidates, though it's not clear for what job.

"I don't know anything about that," Glasgow said. "I've never met Dick Mell. I've never gotten any favors from anybody. I think I talked to the governor on a couple of occasions, but it was all fluff."

Mell didn't respond to an interview request.

**HIRED, THEN FIRED**

One of former U.S. Rep. William Lipinski's recommended hires got a job as a toll collector, but then he got fired in March 2004 after failing to show up for work while officials were looking into $280 that was missing from the tollbooth he manned.

"Scheduled a lie detector, then no show," the records note. They don't indicate whether criminal charges ever were considered.

A candidate sponsored by state Sen. Rickey Hendon (D-Chicago) was fired from the Illinois Department of Public Aid in August 2003 because, according to the hiring database, "She didn't call in or show up for five consecutive days, which is grounds for discharge."

Still, Blagojevich's administration offered her another job, with the Department of Agriculture, in November 2003. She turned it down.

In January 2004, Hendon's candidate was offered yet another state job, as a tollway cashier. But she turned that down, too. The reason, according to the records: "She wants a manager position."