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BODY:

19 in Hamilton Co. suspected

Hamilton County election officials will meet this morning to discuss 19 voter registrations for people who may not exist, which would be a rare case of election fraud.

Board of Elections Director John Williams subpoenaed those named on the voter registration cards after similar handwriting and false addresses raised election workers' suspicions. The sheriff's department could not find them, he said.

The cards were turned in, Williams said, by someone affiliated with the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), a group that represents low-income people.

"We have a very extensive fraud detecting process," said Dierdre Murch of ACORN. "If this is true, I don't know how they got there."

Officials in Columbus are also investigating possible improprieties by an ACORN worker there.

ACORN has registered more than 1 million new voters nationwide, including 158,036 in Ohio, according to its Web site, www.acorn.org.

Murch said she took 526 new voter registrations to the board of elections late Thursday that the group found in a mismarked box and are asking the board to accept even though the deadline was Monday.

Ohio is under unprecedented scrutiny over its election process this year as a battleground state in what is expected to be a close presidential election. Unprecedented levels of voter interest also resulted in record numbers of new voter registrations.

State and local officials say those factors contributed to an unusually high number of potential election fraud cases. Lake and Summit counties are investigating over 1,000 potential instances of voter registration fraud.

By comparison, Hamilton County's 19 potential fraud cases out of the 68,728 new voter registrations tallied so far appear to be a pretty small number, Board of Elections Chairman Tim Burke said.

The Board of Elections can refer election fraud for prosecution if it decides there was malicious intent. It's a felony and carries a possible sentence of up to one year in jail and a \$2,500 fine.

The only other incidents Burke could remember in his dozen years on the board involved candidate petitions. In 2001, four women were sentenced to 30 days in jail each for signing fake names on petitions they were supposed to be circulating for would-be congressional candidate Jim Condit Jr.

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