

FOCUS - 3 of 3 DOCUMENTS

Copyright 2004 Detroit Free Press
All Rights Reserved

Detroit Free Press

Found on Freep.com
Detroit Free Press

SEPTEMBER 23, 2004 Thursday METRO FINAL EDITION

SECTION: NWS; Pg. 1B

LENGTH: 697 words

HEADLINE: CAMPAIGN WORKERS SUSPECTED OF FRAUD;
VOTER-REGISTRATION PROBLEMS PROBED

BYLINE: DAWSON BELL FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

BODY:

Overzealous or unscrupulous campaign workers in several Michigan counties are under investigation for voter-registration fraud, suspected of attempting to register nonexistent people or forging applications for already-registered voters, election and law enforcement officials said Wednesday.

Officials in Wayne, Oakland, Ingham and Eaton counties have been contacted about the problem, which appears to be an outgrowth of unprecedented efforts by political interest groups to register thousands of new voters before the November election.

State Elections Director Christopher Thomas said he hoped criminal prosecutions would result. Thomas, who has held his post for more than 20 years, said the scale of voter-registration drives this year and the irregularities were like nothing he had seen before.

Although there is little likelihood that phony registrations could be used to affect the outcome of an election because of safeguards in place, alleged fraud undermines confidence in the system and burdens local elected officials, Thomas said.

"We don't want to give the impression that there are a lot of people who will be able to vote" using a phony registration, Thomas said, "but these clerks have enough to do without having to screen thousands of duplicates" and bogus applications.

Ingham County Sheriff's Detective Mark Bowser said an investigation of suspected registration fraud has been under way since late August and could be turned over to the county prosecutor by the end of the week.

Bowser said it is unclear how widespread the problems are. He said the investigation has reviewed "a couple thousand questionable registrations."

Representatives from two groups whose workers have submitted apparently-fraudulent applications -- the Public Interest Research Group in Michigan (PIRGIM) and Project Vote -- downplayed the issue Wednesday, insisting that it involved only a handful of workers and a limited number of registrations.

David Leland, national director of Project Vote, said fewer than 100 of the thousands of applications his group has collected in Detroit, Pontiac and other four other urban centers had been identified as fraudulent.

But the massive registration drives have produced thousands of registration applications from voters already on the rolls, city elections officials said.

CAMPAIGN WORKERS SUSPECTED OF FRAUD;VOTER-REGISTRATION PROBLEMS PROBES

Detroit Elections Director Gloria Williams said her office has been receiving several thousand new registrations a day, about half of which were duplicates of people already registered.

Heidi Blankenship, regional director of a PIRGIM voter-registration drive designed to generate 20,000 new voters in Ingham and Washtenaw counties, said only three or four workers out of dozens in the project were suspected of wrongdoing. She described them as "young students who didn't realize it was a potential felony."

She said PIRGIM pays workers a flat rate, with bonuses for exceeding registration targets. The group attempts to verify a sampling of new registrations, she said.

Project Vote's Leland said workers from the offices of the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), which are collecting registrations in Michigan, had produced nearly 70,000 new registrations with a very low error rate.

"I feel very happy with the way it is working out, but we will do whatever we can to ensure the integrity of the process," he said.

There have been scattered reports of similar voter-registration problems from around the country. The Project Vote office in Ohio fired two workers earlier this year for submitting bogus voter applications.

Ingham County Clerk Mike Bryanton said some of the alleged fraud he had reviewed was "pretty obvious," including names taken out of the phone book and as many as eight people registered from a single apartment address.

Bryanton said he didn't know whether the bad registrations violated election law or could be prosecuted under some other statute, such as forgery. But they are a "real pain" for local clerks, he said.

Contact DAWSON BELL at 313-222-6604 or dbell@freepress.com

[DISCLAIMER]

THIS ELECTRONIC VERSION MAY DIFFER SLIGHTLY FROM THE PRINTED ARTICLE.

GRAPHIC: Photo

LOAD-DATE: August 31, 2005