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HEADLINE: 500 new voters might not exist;
State activists might be charged over questionable registrations

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BODY:

Workers paid by a liberal group to register voters in Franklin County have turned in more than 500 forms with non-existent addresses and potentially fake signatures, elections officials said yesterday.

Board of Elections Director Matthew Damschroder said he has forwarded the cards to county authorities for possible criminal charges.

Elections workers verifying new-voter forms discovered signatures with the same handwriting, addresses that were for vacant lots and incorrect information for voters who already were registered, Damschroder said. One card had the name of an East Side man who's dead.

All the questionable cards were turned in by workers for Ohio ACORN, a group that's also paying people to gather signatures for a proposed November ballot initiative to raise the state's minimum wage.

Katy Gall, the group's head organizer, said ACORN is cooperating with the investigation and already has fired some of its paid circulators.

"We are interested in seeing people who are gaming the system prosecuted," she said.

ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, faced similar problems in 2004 during a drive that added 189,000 new voters to Ohio's rolls. Prosecutors were unable to trace the originators of some falsified forms, but one ACORN worker was indicted by a Franklin County grand jury.

State law now requires people paid for registering voters to add their own names to the forms. James Lee, a spokesman for Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell, said the new provisions make it easier to investigate problems.

Lee said Blackwell's office also has had inquiries recently about potential voter-registration fraud in Cuyahoga and Summit counties.

In its six Ohio offices, ACORN has about 50 circulators who are paid between \$8 and \$11 an hour, Gall said. The group has eight circulators in Columbus.

Gall complained that the state's election-law changes make it harder for groups to catch problems because circulators must submit forms directly to elections offices in person or by mail.

In 2004, ACORN began running its own checks on voter forms before submitting them to the Franklin County Board of Elections.

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Lee, however, said internal checks are still possible.

It's a felony in Ohio to submit voter-registration forms with false information. The penalty is up to 18 months in jail.

Damschroder said he doesn't think the fake forms were submitted by people intending to cast fake ballots in November.

"I think it's just somebody out there trying to make a fast buck," he said.

ACORN is helping lead the coalition that collected more than 765,000 signatures to put the minimum-wage issue on the Nov. 7 ballot, but Gall said the group has no concerns about the signatures its circulators obtained.

Franklin County elections workers will verify those collected locally, Damschroder said.

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