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Editorial

No cronies need apply

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"FBI agents fanned out across Cook County on Thursday with grand jury subpoenas and a search warrant, probing deep into the role clout plays in county hiring. ... More than a dozen agents descended on the County Building around 9 a.m. Thursday to search the county's human resources bureau, where hiring and personnel records are kept. Agents remained all day in the 8th floor office at 118 N. Clark St."

Chicago Tribune, Sept. 22, 2006

Justice Department prosecutors haven't yet divulged what those FBI agents unearthed. The investigation, as the feds often say, continues. But it's likely agents found plenty of clues to the county's real mission: This government is, first and foremost, a jobs engine for political payrollers.

That's why the Bureau of Human Resources is sacrosanct turf to the Democratic bosses who have rewarded their toadies with do-little county jobs. If a true reformer ever got hold of that office (and all of its records), imagine the mischief he or she could make for the Democratic machine. We might begin to learn who sends whom for county employment.

So the hiring of a new executive to run the Bureau of Human Resources demands intense scrutiny -- from non-machine County Board members and citizens who pay the gargantuan-and-growing tab for county patronage. Kim David Gilmore, a longtime friend of County Board President Todd Stroger, is leaving the post. The last thing county government needs is to replace Gilmore with yet another insider from the Stroger Friends & Family Plan.

Honest government aside, Stroger has an incentive to do the right thing. If he can prove to the satisfaction of a federal judge that the county no longer factors politics into most personnel decisions, Stroger can liberate the county from constraints that date to Shakman decrees aimed at clout hiring. Essentially, the county is in the same position as the City of Chicago: It must convince U.S. District Judge Wayne Andersen that it's in compliance with the fair personnel practices Shakman has dictated.

On March 1, 2009, the county becomes eligible to seek Andersen's dissolution of the constraints. The judge will factor into his decision a subsequent recommendation from the person he has appointed as his eyes and ears to monitor county personnel practices. That's Compliance Administrator Julia Nowicki, a former Cook County judge.

One way for Stroger to show Nowicki he wants her support if and when he approaches Judge Andersen: Stroger can involve her in picking Gilmore's replacement. A Stroger spokeswoman says the county plans a nationwide search. We hope it turns up an apolitical outsider with stellar credentials -- perhaps a decade's experience running H.R. at employers with more than 10,000 workers. (The sorely featherbedded county has some 24,000.)

Not that becoming Shakman-compliant is the most noble reason for Stroger to appoint a highly qualified outsider to head the human resources bureau. This office needs to set a tone for honest personnel practices -- the better to guarantee fairness to job applicants, employees and taxpayers. Part of the new chief's job should involve encouraging personnel decision-makers throughout county government to ignore politics. It's time to drain the patronage pit.

President Stroger, we urge you to find the person best qualified for this job. Expect lots of folks to be watching over your shoulder. We trust that Nowicki will be among them.

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