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Compliance Administrator**

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**Victims of illegal patronage set to receive awards from
The Office of the Cook County Compliance Administrator**

The Office of the Cook County Compliance Administrator has announced the completion of a nearly 18-month long investigation into allegations of illegal patronage practices within Cook County government. The Cook County Board of Commissioners approved on Wednesday a payout of \$3.2 million to more than 100 victims of illegal acts of patronage committed by the County. The payout goes to individuals who filed claims under the Supplemental Relief Order (SRO) issued by a federal court on November 30, 2006.

“I am very pleased to be able to announce these awards,” said Julia Nowicki, the federal court-appointed compliance administrator in charge of adjudicating the claims submitted under the SRO as part of her larger task of overseeing County hiring practices. “The awards are, we believe, an accurate reflection of the economic and emotional harm done to the victims of illegal patronage based upon the evidence uncovered. It is always difficult to quantify the suffering endured by employees in these situations, but I feel we have done an extremely good job of considering every aspect and compensating the claimants fairly.”

The Compliance Administrator (CA) received a total of more than 220 claim applications during the filing period. Several of the claims were dismissed after it was deemed they fell outside of the CA’s purview, leaving the CA with 209 claims to investigate. The CA determined that 105 of the remaining claims were valid under the SRO and merited compensation under the terms of the court order.

While the County employs than 25,000, the SRO limits the CA’s authority to investigate illegal patronage to the roughly 11,000 employees directly under the control of the President of the Cook County Board of Commissioners. Additionally, the CA could only give awards for actions that occurred during the relatively narrow 29-month period allowed by the SRO.

“We had a number of claims that turned up probative evidence of illegal patronage, but that were outside of the timeframe allowed,” said Nowicki. “I want to stress that these 105 claims being awarded are not the only instances of illegal patronage within the County employment system that we uncovered during the course of our investigation. Rather, the 105 individuals represent only those claims that met the criteria of the SRO as entered by the federal court.”

The CA determined the amount awarded to each claimant under the guidelines of the SRO which directed consideration of “all relevant factors and evidence regarding the claim.” Those factors include such things as salary of the positions involved, the facts of the alleged illegal patronage action, the number of applicants for the position, and the strength of the evidence presented. The CA’s attorneys conducted the investigation through interviews of claimants, as well as County employees and supervisory staff. Employment and hiring documents on file with the County were also reviewed.

“We worked hard to balance the findings of our investigative findings with the intent of the SRO,” said Nowicki. “I sincerely believe these awards are fair compensation for these individuals who have suffered at the hands of illegal patronage practices.”

Although the official investigation of claims filed under the SRO has concluded, the CA’s office will continue to monitor illegal patronage in the County, with a particular focus on reports of employees being punished for having filed a claim. “Our investigation leads us to believe that retaliation is a very real concern for County employees,” Nowicki said. “We believe a fear of the consequences of coming forward prevented many employees from doing so.” The CA noted that County employees are concerned not only about being demoted or discharged for having filed a claim, but also about harassment from superiors and administrators for speaking up about those individuals who have committed an act of illegal patronage.

In addition to fear of being punished for filing a claim, the CA’s investigation also discovered that many County employees have such a lack of faith in the system that they felt little good could result from filing a claim. “We found that many current employees believe that the patronage organization is too strong to be ousted, and that filing a claim would not help either themselves or correct the system as a whole. We were continuously encountering an attitude from County employees that said ‘You can never fix this, so why bother to try,’ and that is problematic,” said Nowicki. “It is also not an unreasonable assumption that there are a number of employees who have benefited from the patronage system over the years, and are happy to maintain the status quo.”

The CA thanks all current and former County employees who have come forward with information about illegal patronage or have otherwise aided in the claims investigations, and encourages others to come forward. “The formal claims investigation period is over, but those individuals with knowledge of ongoing illegal patronage can still help,” said Nowicki. “Much remains to be done under the SRO, and every little bit of information helps.”

All Cook County employees are required by ordinance to report any knowledge of unlawful patronage, including acts of retaliation, to the Office of the Independent Investigator General of Cook County (IIG). As the SRO gives the CA power to monitor the IIG's office, the CA urges any County employees with information about illegal patronage or retaliation to contact the (IIG), as well as the CA's office.

Nowicki's counterpart, Noelle Brennan, the federal monitor charged with overseeing application of the Shakman Decree to approximately 40,000 City of Chicago employees, announced awards in March that distributed \$12 million to 1,424 individuals with claims of illegal patronage against the City. Nowicki and Brennan's offices each operate under a separate federal order with individualized guidelines for the City and County. Brennan's order allowed claimants to be awarded compensation for allegations of illegal patronage between January 1, 2000 and May 31, 2007. Nowicki's SRO for claims against the County limited allowable claims to a smaller window spanning from August 28, 2004 to February 2, 2007.

For more information about the Supplemental Relief Order entered under by the federal district court, or how to report retaliation or current patronage, visit www.countyshakman.com.

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