

**Office of the Cook County
Compliance Administrator**

221 North LaSalle Street
Suite 455
Chicago, Illinois 60601

—
Telephone: 312-386-1532

www.countyshakman.com

Julia M. Nowicki
Compliance Administrator
julianowicki@countyshakman.com

Peter A. Monahan
Counsel
pmonahan@countyshakman.com

Thursday, September 25, 2008
For Immediate Release

**Victims of illegal patronage notified of awards by
The Office of the Cook County Compliance Administrator**

The Office of the Cook County Compliance Administrator sent award determination letters on Tuesday, September 23, 2008, to claimants who filed allegations of illegal patronage against Cook County. The Cook County Board of Commissioners previously allocated a payout of up to \$3.2 million to more than 100 victims of illegal acts of patronage committed by the County. The claims were filed under the Supplemental Relief Order (SRO) issued by the federal court on November 30, 2006. The Compliance Administrator (CA) adjudicated more than 220 claims. Only acts of illegal patronage occurring between August 28, 2004 and February 2, 2007, were eligible for an award.

The CA determined that 108 claims meet the guidelines of the SRO and merited compensation under the terms of the court order. Those 108 individuals will receive an amount ranging from \$323,000.00 to \$250.00 from the County within the next 60 days. The amount of each award was determined 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. In some cases, when documents were not produced by the County after multiple requests, the CA drew inferences in favor of the claimants’ allegations.

“I am very pleased to be able to announce these awards,” said Julia Nowicki, the federal court-appointed compliance administrator charged with adjudicating the claims 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. 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.”

During the course of the CA's investigation it was discovered that illegal patronage takes many forms throughout the County's employment system. For example, the CA encountered a number of claimants who were passed over for a promotion because they lacked political ties. One such claimant applied for two promotions, both of which were ultimately awarded to coworkers on the basis of political affiliation rather than merit or qualification. The claimant eventually ended up performing the job functions of another politically-connected employee – without compensation – while that employee spent time at work on political activities. Another claimant applied for a promotion that he should have received under union guidelines. The position was instead given to a political hire based on a recommendation from the 8th Ward. When the claimant sought assistance from the union, he was told by the union that it did not want to get involved in politics.

Many claimants were forced to perform additional job functions without compensation. One claimant was required to perform the functions of her own job title, as well as the job functions of a coworker with political connections for five years. Eventually the claimant was forced to perform the job duties of three positions. Requests for upgrades made to the County on behalf of this claimant by her supervisor were blocked because she did not have a political sponsor. A department restructuring left another claimant performing the job duties of three new positions for more than a year while the administration searched for politically-connected individual to hire. Once the position was filled the claimant was promoted, but was forced to assume some of the duties of the patronage hire when that individual proved to be unable to satisfactorily perform his job. Eventually, both this claimant and the employee with political connections had their positions cut in 2007 budget reductions, but while the claimant remained unemployed, the patronage employee was brought back in a Shakman Exempt position within one month of his layoff.

The CA's investigation also uncovered situations in which altered documentation resulted in either loss of employment or loss of a promotion. One claimant was discharged when her department restructured. The claimant's job duties, however, were given to a politically-connected coworker who herself had been designated for layoff in 2007 budget cuts, but whose job was saved when her personnel records were backdated to show a transfer instead of a layoff. Another claimant was required to perform the job functions of an open position for several months while the position was posted and interviews were held. The claimant applied and tested for the position, receiving the highest scores on both the exam and the interview. A call from "downtown," however, ordered the department head to fill the position with an unqualified but politically-connected applicant whose test and interview scores were significantly lower than the claimant's. The political applicant's scores were subsequently altered to justify the hire.

Some claimants who were granted an award were forced to tolerate years of political harassment that either caused or exacerbated existing health issues resulting in substantial harm to both their physical and emotional well being. One such claimant openly questioned policies and decisions of a political nature and was active in providing a means of work-related support for coworkers regardless of political affiliation. That claimant was fired after speaking out at a Cook County Board of Commissioners meeting against patronage and political discrimination.

A number of the claims received by the CA evidenced illegal patronage but fell outside of the 29-month period allowed to be considered by the court order. One claimant applied for a County position in late 2003, but prior to his interview was told by a colleague with a similar background and experience who had just been hired in the same job title that the claimant needed to obtain a letter from a political sponsor prior to his interview. The claimant did not have a political sponsor and was not hired for the position. Another claimant applied and tested for an open position in 2000. At the interview, which was comprised of a panel of several individuals, the claimant was asked a single question: "Do you know anyone who works for the County?" When the claimant answered no, she was immediately dismissed from the interview. The claimant was not offered the position.

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. 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 Inspector 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.

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.

###