

2 PLEAD GUILTY IN ABSENTEE-BALLOT SCANDAL

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When an absentee ballot scandal drove state Rep. Edwin Garcia from office last year, he bargained to stay out of jail, and left six co-defendants on their own.

Now, two of Garcia's followers face jail time after pleading guilty Thursday to election fraud.

Liz Diaz, 22, and Virgen Figueroa, 40, will be sentenced Oct. 16. Both face as much as a year in jail and three years' probation -- much stiffer penalties than Garcia faced.

Ironically, Garcia, by all accounts the ringleader, never pleaded guilty or even faced jail time. He pleaded no contest, brashly maintained his innocence to the end, and was placed under house arrest for seven weeks.

On Thursday, Diaz looked Hartford Superior Court Judge Wendy Susco in the eye, admitted to all of the facts underlying the criminal charges against her, and shuddered at the thought of going to jail.

"Garcia told her what to do and she did it," Diaz's lawyer, Gerald Klein, said afterward. "She is a nice woman who is not sophisticated about the ins and outs of politics.

"She is a follower," he said. "I'm hoping the judge will give her no jail time. The main defendant didn't get any."

Diaz and Figueroa are the first co-defendants to enter guilty pleas in the case, which stems from a 1996 Democratic town committee race in Hartford's 4th House District. Prosecutors accused Garcia and six co-workers of equipping scores of ineligible voters with absentee ballots and, in many cases, helping them vote.

Garcia was charged with 85 felony counts, before pleading no contest in January to two counts stemming from the case -- conspiracy to commit election fraud and witness tampering. He was forced to give up his **General Assembly** seat and resign his job as a city police sergeant.

Since then, the focus has turned to the co-defendants, who were charged with a total of 163 counts, including ballot fraud, witness tampering and perjury.

Senior Assistant State's Attorney John M. Massameno, who is handling the cases of the co-conspirators, said that, with the loss of his job and state seat, Garcia has suffered in ways that his co-workers never will.

Massameno said he will argue for jail time for Diaz and Figueroa because each case must be viewed on its merits.

Diaz pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit election fraud and one count of witness tampering. In exchange, the state agreed to drop 43 other felony counts.

In court, Diaz admitted to state charges that she intimidated a witness into changing her testimony during a court hearing preceding the race. The hearing was precipitated when a town committee slate opposing Garcia filed a last-minute court action, which resulted in postponement of the election. Garcia's slate later easily won the rescheduled town committee election. Garcia would go on to be re-elected last November before resigning.

Under her plea agreement, Diaz faces up to a year in jail and three years' probation on each count. Klein has the right to argue for less.

Figueroa pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit election fraud, and the state dropped 12 other counts. Figueroa faces the same penalties as Diaz. But Judge Susco has agreed to consider a suspended sentence for Figueroa if her pre-sentencing background check turns up no surprises.

Co-defendants Mary Ann Citino and Maria Lugo Moret have turned down plea bargain offers, and are scheduled for jury trials.

Co-defendant Melvin Ramos, who faces 66 counts, is cooperating with prosecutors and will be handled separately, as will co-defendant Alma Sanchez, Garcia's wife.

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