

JAILINGS FOR VOTE FRAUD

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Many in Hartford's largely poor Latino community have a perception that the system is stacked against them. The courthouse dealing of their former hero and state representative, Edwin Garcia, is doing nothing to dispel that notion.

On Friday, a judge jailed a second Garcia underling in a 1996 ballot fraud scandal -- this time a woman six months pregnant. Jail time is something Garcia, a former police sergeant, bargained to avoid.

"The message is that if you're powerful and connected, you tend to walk away from situations," said community activist Jose Rodriguez. "That's a sad message to send.

"The ringleader is starting his life over again, and these poor folks are going to spend Christmas in jail -- Thanksgiving anyway," Rodriguez said.

Liz Diaz, 23, a former 4th District town committee member, was sentenced to two months in jail Friday by Hartford Superior Court Judge Wendy Susco.

Susco's decision, coming one day after she sent 40-year-old Virgen Figueroa away, had Hartford's Hispanic community buzzing. Figueroa, who received a two-month jail sentence Thursday, is also a former town committee member who played a relatively small part in a widespread conspiracy to register ineligible voters to cast absentee ballots in a hotly contested town committee race that threatened Garcia's power base.

"The chief and the Indians are in the same battle," said South End resident Juan Morales. "You have to give equal dosages of medicine. It's a raw deal from the perspective that you're treating people differently."

Garcia was considered by prosecutors to have masterminded the absentee ballot campaign that resulted in the arrest of seven people on a total of 248 felony counts.

Garcia pleaded no contest to three of 86 felonies, including witness tampering and conspiracy to commit election fraud. He maintained his innocence to the end. His case was handled by a different judge, Raymond Norko, who earlier this year placed him under house arrest and required him to wear an ankle bracelet for several weeks.

The felony convictions forced Garcia to give up his 4th House District seat and his police job. Garcia, who now works at a construction job, could not be reached at home to comment Friday.

Friday, Garcia's lack of jail time was the theme in the arguments by Diaz's attorney, Gerald Klein. He said Garcia essentially used his legislative seat and his badge as bargaining chips to stay out of jail.

"Her life is not without worth?" Klein asked the judge, looking at Diaz. "My client did not have that benefit" of a badge and a seat to trade in, he said.

Diaz, a pregnant mother of two who pleaded guilty to two of 32 felonies, said she knew her actions were wrong and apologized to the court.

But Susco said she could not overlook the most serious charge -- witness tampering at a court hearing preceeding the election. The state said Diaz approached a woman in court and got her to change her story about why she needed an absentee ballot.

"Interfering with the judicial process is intolerable," Susco said from the bench. "That's what's going to earn you some jail time."

Adding insult to injury, Diaz was accompanied in court by Garcia's girlfriend, Alma Sanchez, another co-defendant in the case. Sanchez, along with three other defendants, is awaiting disposition of her case.

Klein said in open court what has long been privately admitted by prosecutors -- that Garcia also bargained to keep Sanchez out of jail, despite her 28 felony charges.

"He makes a deal for himself and his wife, and the rest go to jail," Klein said. "What else can you say?"

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