

50th Ward vote fraud outlined as trial starts

By **Matthew Walberg, Tribune reporter**

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A city worker and an unemployed student who allegedly manipulated absentee-ballot applications and cast votes for 50th Ward residents went on trial Monday.

Prosecutors said Anish Eapen, a precinct captain for Ald. **Bernard Stone**, 50th, and the ward's Streets and Sanitation superintendent, flashed his work badge and made it clear to voters that they could benefit if they chose his candidate.

"Do me a favor and vote this way," Eapen told voters, said Cook County Assistant State's Attorney Lynn McCarthy.

"He let them know exactly who he was and what he could do for them," McCarthy said during her opening statement at the bench trial before Circuit Judge Marcus Salone.

Prosecutors allege that Eapen, 39, and Armando Ramos, 36, both members of Stone's political organization, helped voters unfamiliar with the process fill out fraudulent applications for an absentee ballot. Later, when the ballots were sent to the voters' homes, the defendants helped them complete the forms and in some cases actually cast the votes. Both face up to five years in prison if convicted.

The bulk of Monday's testimony came from members of an Indian family living in the West Rogers Park neighborhood. They said Eapen showed up at their homes in February 2007 as Stone was locked in a bitter contest that eventually led to a runoff.

Hema Panchigar, 39, testified that after she received an application for her absentee ballot, Eapen arrived at her home asking whether she and her husband had sent in the applications. She said she had not, and he proceeded to fill out the form, Panchigar said. Eapen checked a box saying that she expected to out of the county on Election Day, even though she said she had no travel plans, Panchigar testified.

During the April runoff election between Stone and challenger Naisy Dolar, Eapen again stopped by the home and filled out her ballot, only asking for her signature.

"Did you ever see a form like this where you were able to choose a candidate for alderman?" McCarthy asked, showing her a sample ballot.

"No, I did not see this one," Panchigar testified. "I didn't mark anything."

Attorneys for Eapen and Ramos said the men were following orders from Stone's political organization, and they were never educated on election law.

"A thoroughly untrained individual went out, per Ald. Stone's instructions through his secretary, and reluctantly knocked on doors," Eapen's attorney, Thomas Breen, said in his opening statement.

Ramos, a student from Mexico who had just become a U.S. citizen in 2006, was simply a pawn in a system he didn't understand, said his attorney, Rohit Sahgal.

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