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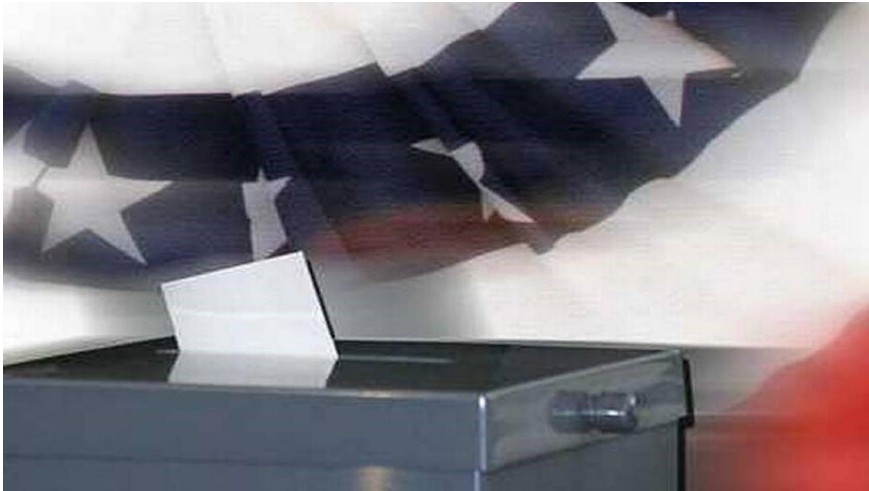
Charge: Local election judge, 88, sent in dead husband's ballot

By Elizabeth Donald

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NOVEMBER 04, 2016 02:28 PM ,UPDATED NOVEMBER 05, 2016 08:45 AM



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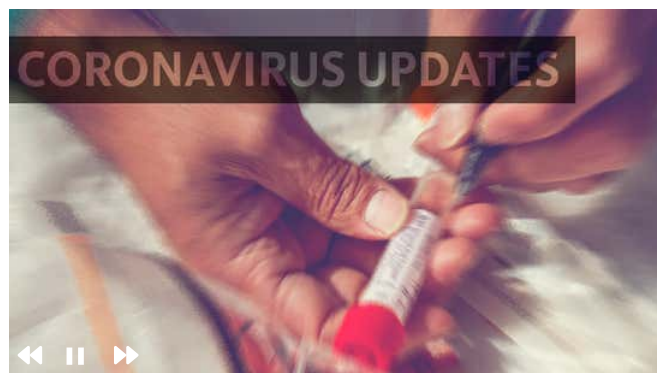
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A Madison County election judge is facing felony charges of voter fraud, only days before the election.

Audrey R. Cook, 88, of Alton is accused of sending in an absentee ballot in her late husband's name. Cook is a Republican election judge in Madison County, according to Madison County State's Attorney Tom Gibbons. She was charged Friday with two felony election-fraud counts.

Cook said Friday she doesn't see that she did anything wrong. She and her husband, Vic Cook, served as election judges for many years together.

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"My husband was very sick, and we applied for absentee ballots for both of us," she said. "We got them a couple of days after he died, and I knew how he wanted to vote."

Cook said it has been very hard for her, having lost her husband of 66 years.

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“He was a decent, honest and wonderful man,” she said, breaking down crying. “I knew what he wanted... Now they’re not going to count it.”

Cook was not in custody as of Friday afternoon. The prosecutor's office said Cook will be allowed to turn herself in. A judge has set bond at \$20,000. Each count carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison.

Gibbons said that any attempt to undermine the security of the electoral process must be treated extremely seriously. He said that as Cook is a trained election judge, she must be held to a higher standard, as she took an oath to uphold the Constitution and the law in protecting the electoral process. Election judges hand out ballots, check signatures and monitor voting at election precincts.

“While my heart goes out to this woman for her loss, we must protect the electoral process from any possible fraud,” Gibbons said. “No matter what the reason, voter fraud cannot be allowed. Anyone considering an attempt to subvert the electoral process should think twice.”

Cook said she had not consulted a lawyer yet. “I don’t see any reason to,” she said.

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Gibbons said the county clerk’s office carefully examines every absentee ballot at multiple levels, including checking the names against the death records. The ballot was never opened or submitted, after a clerk found it had been submitted in the name of a deceased person, Gibbons said.

Gibbons said the absentee ballots are printed with reminders that submitting a ballot on behalf of someone else constitutes perjury. He said he did not know which candidates had been supported on the ballot.

“We owe our gratitude to the county clerk’s office and the many election judges serving throughout our county for their hard work and perseverance in maintaining the integrity of our elections,” Gibbons said. “This case is an example of the tremendous skill of the many men and women serving in this important position, and their vital role in preventing fraud.”

Earlier this week, Madison County Clerk Debra Ming-Mendoza issued a press release detailing the safeguards in place to protect the integrity of the election.

“There are numerous safeguards that protect the integrity of our voting machines, the tabulation of election results, even how the ballots are transported to the county clerk’s office,” Ming-Mendoza said. “The state board of elections oversees the testing of the equipment used and the procedures being implemented in every county.”

Ming-Mendoza said each of the 109 election authorities in Illinois must conduct errorless pre-tests of automatic tabulating equipment to verify that it will correctly count votes for all offices and public questions, all of which is done no less than five days before the election. Madison County’s test was done Oct. 28 in the presence of citizen observers, and afterward the equipment and memory cards are locked and sealed in containers until election day. They are only unsealed and unlocked in the presence of the election judges.

Ming-Mendoza said election judges go through nine intensive training sessions covering voting procedures and potential issues. Election judges must declare party affiliation, and both Democrats and Republicans process the ballots together in the presence of any authorized poll watchers from campaigns.

Gibbons said Cook will be removed from her position as election judge.

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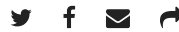
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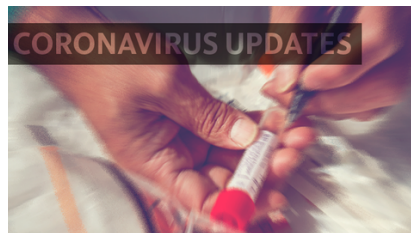
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