

## Lake County cop guilty of vote fraud

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He's been suspended without pay for 2 years

BILL DOLAN

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Feb 12, 2008

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**C**ROWN POINT | A Lake County police officer was standing on the wrong side of the law, and he could barely find the words to say he was sorry Monday.

"This is the first time I've been to court as a defendant. I'm only human," Ponciano Herrera told a Lake Criminal Court judge after pleading guilty to a single misdemeanor count of vote fraud stemming from the 2003 East Chicago Democratic primary.

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So many votes for mayor were stolen during that race that the Indiana Supreme Court overturned the results and ordered a new election.

Lake Criminal Court Judge Thomas P. Stefaniak placed Herrera, 42, of East Chicago, on 90 days of probation after accepting a plea agreement in which the prosecutor's office and Indiana Attorney General Steve Carter dismissed felony counts against Herrera. A conviction on the felony counts would have made it impossible for Herrera to return to police work.

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Herrera said he would attempt to regain his job on the county police force, but he still faces a hearing before the Lake County Police Merit Board, which could fire Herrera.

He said he was raised in East Chicago, joined the U.S. Air Force, returned home and worked 15 years as an officer. He was trusted enough by Sheriff Rogelio "Roy" Dominguez to work as a liaison between the sheriff and bereaved families of fallen local soldiers.

His career hit a low point when he was charged in 2005 by the Joint Vote Fraud Task Force -- a collaboration among the prosecutor, attorney general and state police -- to delve into the disputed East Chicago primary election.

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Herrera's jury trial was cancelled after he admitted Monday he handled a forged absentee ballot.

Herrera said the sheriff suspended him from his job without pay after he was charged two years ago and he has had to support his family by working for the Gary Street and Sanitation departments.

Diane Poulton, a spokeswoman for Lake County Prosecutor Bernard Carter, said this marked the 38th vote fraud conviction resulting from that election.

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