

NEWS

2 Carlton County women accused of voter fraud



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Two women are facing charges of voting while ineligible in Carlton County. Anna Nicole Nelson, 27, of Carlton and Shawn Marie Kaarbo, 48, of Cloquet were charged Feb. 13 after a records search determined that neither has yet had her civil rights restored after felony convictions.

Nelson was convicted of fifth-degree possession of a controlled substance in St. Louis County Court in May 2012, and Kaarbo, also known as Shawn Marie Melton and Shawn Marie Strandberg, was convicted of first-degree assault in Carlton County in June 2010. Both are still on probation.

According to the complaints filed in the cases, both women cast votes in the November 2012 general election at a polling place in Carlton. Before voting, they both completed Minnesota voter registration applications, signed a certification indicating they were eligible to vote and put their signatures on the voter rolls at their respective polling places.

It wasn't until a couple of weeks after the election that they were found to have been ineligible to vote.

In the case of Nelson, Shane Camozzi, an election judge at the Carlton polling place, said his suspicions were first aroused on Election Day.

"There was a counselor from the Liberalis program in Carlton who brought over 15 women and vouched for them," he said.

Camozzi said he was aware that the women who come to the Liberalis program for treatment are often from throughout the state, and his initial concern regarded matters of residency. In checking the rules, however, he learned that someone who lives in the area, even if on a temporary basis, can vote in that area if someone who lives there is willing to vouch for them.

Camozzi also stated he was aware that some of the women in the Liberalis program are court-ordered to go through the program and have criminal records that might make them ineligible to vote.

"I figured there was a chance some of them were not eligible to vote because their rights had not yet been restored following felony convictions," Camozzi said. "And yet, the counselor who was with them vouched for them."

Carlton County Auditor/Treasurer Paul Gassert later clarified that vouching for someone at election time doesn't attest to the fact that person is eligible to vote, but merely to the fact that that he or she is currently in residence in the precinct.

Camozzi said he was reluctant to challenge the women's voting rights on the day of the election based on what limited information he had on hand, but he later followed up with a visit to Gassert's office as well as the office of the Carlton County attorney.

Gassert said his office is routinely notified of felony convictions so they can update the Carlton County records, and workers in his office also scan each voter's voting history after an election to keep their registration status active. If that person has a felony conviction on their record, it shows up at that time, he explained. Unfortunately, he added, that information is not always updated.

"It's nothing really new or unique to come across someone with a felony in their past," Gassert said. "Most of the time when we check with probation, we find that they've had their civil rights restored. This is the first time I can remember actually having someone who hadn't."

It was during that same post-election process that Nelson's ineligibility came to the forefront, along with Kaarbo, who allegedly voted illegally at a Skelton Township polling place.

Gassert said he believes the reason that Nelson and Kaarbo slipped through the cracks was somewhat understandable. Nelson's felony conviction occurred in St. Louis County where she normally lives, but since she was in the Liberalis program in Carlton at the time of the election, her past offense did not show up in the local records.

Kaarbo recently had a change of last name, so once again her criminal record did not show up.

And though the two women now are going through the court system for the voting offenses, their ballots will remain part of last fall's general election count.

"The down side is that we found out about this after the fact," said Gassert, saying there is no way of rescinding their votes at this point.

Camozzi was critical of a system that doesn't provide a process for verifying a felon's eligibility to vote ahead of time instead of afterward.

"It's a case of putting the cart before the horse," he said, adding that his goal is to call attention to the weaknesses of the current system.

"A lot of people feel there's no illegal voting going on," Camozzi said, "but obviously, there is. There have been some very tight races in the state of Minnesota, and it would be sad if something like this eventually affected the outcome of an election."

Both women are slated to make their next court appearance March 6.