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Two arrested in 2014 ballot petition forgery case

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Two people charged with forging signatures on a 2014 ballot petition were booked Tuesday into the Boone County Jail.

Tracy R. Jones, 48, of Albuquerque, N.M., and Rogell H. Coker, 52, of Columbia were arrested recently in San Diego, Boone County Sheriff's Department Detective Tom O'Sullivan said. He did not know the circumstances of their arrests or when they were apprehended. Jones is being held at the jail on a $15,000 bond; Coker is jailed on a $13,500 bond.

Boone County Sheriff's Detective Matt Vessar began investigating the alleged fraud on Jan. 9, 2015. Jones and Coker were hired by Buzzards Bay Strategies to collect signatures for a ballot initiative to allow early voting in Missouri, a push for an amendment to the state constitution that never made the ballot. A reporter could find no contact information for Buzzards Bay, a political consulting company that was based in Massachusetts. Two others hired by Buzzards Bay, Keven L. Hayes, 44, and Danny L. Williams Jr., 34, also were charged in Boone County.

The signature gatherers were paid $10 to $15 an hour to collect signatures for the initiative, but the Boone County Clerk's Office found irregularities on their petitions. In total, the four people were responsible for 297 petitions that had fraudulent signatures, according to probable cause statements.

Hayes was arrested on May 12, 2015, about six weeks after a Boone County prosecutor filed charges against him, Coker and Williams, of Columbia. Jones was charged May 20, 2015. Williams, Jones and Coker each face three counts of forgery, a Class C felony punishable by up to seven years in prison.

Hayes also was initially charged with three counts of forgery, but pleaded guilty in March to perjury in a procedure not involving a felony and was given a four-year suspended prison sentence. He is serving a five-year probation term.

Williams has not been arrested; his bond was set at $25,000.

Authorities said Jones forged 618 signatures on 171 petitions, Williams was responsible for 114 questionable signatures on 40 petitions, Coker forged 116 signatures on 26 petitions and Hayes signed 363 people's names illegally on 60 petitions. The group collected the signatures between March 1 and April 30, 2014, according to the probable cause statements.

Coker and Jones did not have attorneys listed in online court records. Coker is scheduled to appear Monday in a Boone County court and Jones has a court date of Sept. 7.