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Union

2 charged with voter fraud in Elizabeth school board election

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Two people face charges of voter fraud for filing faulty mail-in ballots in last year's Elizabeth school board election. (NJ Advance Media file photo)

By [Tom Haydon | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

ELIZABETH -- Two people face voter fraud charges stemming from the Elizabeth school election last fall in which they allegedly filled out applications for absentee ballots for voters who did not exist or for people who were not eligible to vote, authorities said today.

Felicia Simmons, 36, of Asbury Park and Melvin Howell, 49, of Elizabeth, each is charged with third-degree vote-by-mail fraud, acting Union County Prosecutor Grace Park said in a statement today.

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Park said the investigation was sparked by information from the Union County Clerk's Office.

Union County Clerk Joanne Rajoppi on Wednesday said she recalled that her office received at least 54 applications for absentee ballots that appeared to have irregularities.

Investigators from the prosecutor's office Special Prosecutions Unit discovered that in the days leading up to the election, both Simmons and Howell were helping Elizabeth voters fill out applications to vote by mail, Park said.

However, Park said, Howell was found to have allegedly filled out such applications for voters who didn't exist, according to the investigation, and Simmons falsely claimed to have assisted an ineligible voter.

The prosecutor said Simmons and Howell were served Tuesday morning with summonses stating the charges.

In the last school board election a slate of candidates back by Elizabeth Mayor J. Christian Bollwage defeated long-time board member Tony Monteiro and his running mates. The election resulted in [Bollwage-backed candidates holding six of the nine seats on the school board.](#)

It is unclear who received, or would have received the votes on the ballots allegedly tainted by Howell and Simmons.

Both defendants are expected to make their first appearances in court next week, Park said.

Rajoppi said her office noticed irregularities on at least 54 requests for absentee ballots that were sent in prior to the school board election.

On each of those requests, line four of the application - which asked if there was an alternate address to send the absentee ballot - was crossed out, as if a person had put in an address and then wanted to hide that information, Rajoppi said.

She said her office looked up information on each of the 54 people, and discovered some were not eligible to vote.

Rajoppi said her office sent new applications for absentee ballots to each of the 54 people.

She recalled that one of the people was a man seeking citizenship.

"He called up and he was very upset that this happened because he was still seeking citizenship," Rajoppi recalled.

Third-degree crimes carry a maximum sentence of five years in prison upon conviction.

Attempts to contact Howell and Simmons were unsuccessful.

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