

Seven charged in vote-fraud scheme

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Workers who were paid by a community-organizing group to register voters allegedly pulled names out of phone books and newspapers.

By [Keith Ervin](#)

Workers accused of concocting the biggest voter-registration-fraud scheme in state history said they were under pressure from the community-organizing group that hired them to sign up more voters, according to charging papers filed Thursday.

To boost their output, the defendants allegedly went to the downtown Seattle Public Library, where they filled out voter-registration forms using names they made up or found in phone books, newspapers and baby-naming books.

One defendant “said it was hard work making up all those cards,” and another “said he would often sit at home, smoke marijuana and fill out cards,” according to a probable-cause statement written by King County sheriff’s Detective Christopher Johnson.

Prosecutors in King and Pierce counties filed felony charges Thursday against seven employees of ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, claiming they turned in more than 1,800 phony voter-registration forms, including an estimated 55 in Pierce County.

The defendants have not entered pleas. They are scheduled to be arraigned Aug. 2.

None of the defendants has been arrested in connection with the alleged scheme. Two are in jail in unrelated cases.

The defendants faked cards as an easy way to get paid, not as an attempt to influence the outcome of elections, said King County Prosecuting Attorney Dan Satterberg. None of the phony registrations led to illegal voting.

“This is the worst case of voter-registration fraud in the history of the state of Washington. There has been nothing comparable to this,” state Secretary of State Sam Reed said at a news conference with Satterberg, King County Executive Ron Sims and acting U.S. Attorney Jeff Sullivan.

State and local officials said they have signed a five-year agreement with ACORN that requires the organization to beef up its training and procedures for detecting and reporting fraud. ACORN agreed to pay King County \$25,000 for investigative costs and acknowledged it could be subject to criminal prosecution if fraud occurs again.

Most of the alleged fraud took place in King County, whose Elections Canvassing Board on Thursday revoked 1,762 voter registrations filled out by ACORN canvassers. Most of the registrations used the addresses of Seattle homeless shelters.

Little Rock, Ark.-based ACORN organizes low- and moderate-income communities on issues including affordable housing, interest limits on payday loans and wider participation in elections.

King County prosecutors coordinated the probe, which began after election workers discovered in October that signatures on registration cards submitted by ACORN seemed to have been written by only a few people. The King County Sheriff’s Office, Pierce County prosecutors, U.S. Attorney’s Office and FBI participated.

King County prosecutors charged Tina Marie Johnson, 24, of Tacoma, and Jayson Lee Woods, 19, of Elkridge, Md., with eight counts each of providing false information on a voter registration. Clifton Eugene Mitchell, 44, of Lakewood, Pierce County, and Ryan Edward Olson, 28, of Needles, Calif., were charged with two counts each, and Robert Edward Greene, 56, of Tacoma, and Kendra Lynn Thill, 18, no known address, with one count each.

Brianna Rose Debwa, 35, of Tacoma, was charged with one count of providing false information on a voter registration and one count of making a false statement to a public official. The penalty for each charge is up to one year behind bars.

None of the defendants could be reached for comment Thursday.

Satterberg called Mitchell “a ringleader.” According to charging papers, he encouraged canvassers he supervised to forge registration forms to meet ACORN’s quota of 18 to 20 registrations per canvasser per day at a time when the organization was threatening to shut down the Puget Sound voter drive for poor performance.

Mitchell allegedly told investigators that a staff member in the ACORN national office promised him a \$25,000-a-year job with benefits “if he got the numbers up.”

Charging papers said Debwa, who was responsible for verifying the identity of newly registered voters and submitting cards to election officials, suspected canvassers were falsifying registrations in the final weeks of the two-county registration drive but didn’t report it to higher ACORN officials for fear of losing her job.

Canvassers were paid \$8 an hour, prosecutors said.

ACORN’s Washington state president, John Jones, said he will put the emphasis in future campaigns on “doing it right” rather than meeting a quota. To guard against fraud in the future, he said, “We’re going to screen people better, we’re going to do background checks on them, we’re going to check their references, we’re going to get people with a track record in doing this. ...

“I apologize to the residents of the state of Washington. One thing we know for sure is ACORN is coming back, we’re coming back stronger and we’re going to give you a better product.”

Jones said he was unaware of canvassers’ criminal records.

According to court documents, Mitchell has two convictions for violating orders of protection against his girlfriend. He is currently booked into Pierce County Jail on a charge of violating a protection order issued in June.

Johnson pleaded guilty in Pierce County in 2002 to two counts of second-degree child molestation for taking part in a “truth or dare” game that resulted in a 12-year-old girl touching the private parts of an adult man. She also has convictions for burglary and theft in King County Superior Court.

Olson pleaded guilty in Pierce County to a 2005 charge of harassment for writing a bomb-threat note he claimed was intended as a prank on a co-worker. Greene is in Pierce County Jail on charges of possessing crack cocaine.

Elsewhere, four ACORN canvassers in Kansas City, Mo., have pleaded guilty in federal court to felony voter-registration fraud.

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