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Slide Ended in Apparent Suicide

Friend of Blagojevich Was Faced With Debts, Prison Term

By [Peter Slevin and Kari Lydersen](#)
Washington Post Staff Writers
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CHICAGO. Sept. 14 -- Christopher Kelly was a roofer, a fundraiser, a gambler and a felon. He started small, made millions, befriended a young politician named Rod Blagojevich and died last weekend in an apparent suicide.

It was an ignominious end for a handsome and gregarious man who was one of the former Illinois governor's closest friends. Together, prosecutors said, they used the levers of power to violate the public trust. Together, they were due to face a Chicago jury next year.

A few days before he died, Kelly, 51, acknowledged that his world was crumbling. As he pleaded guilty in court last Tuesday in an \$8.5 million kickback scheme involving roofing bids at O'Hare International Airport, he spoke at times in a whisper. He said he was under pressure.

By then, Kelly's marriage had foundered and he was living apart from his three young daughters. His finances were in ruins and he was already facing prison on a different charge of cheating the Internal Revenue Service. On Sept. 18, he was scheduled to begin serving eight years behind bars.

Yet it was a shock to close followers of Chicago politics and the Blagojevich scandal when Kelly died Saturday in the main county hospital. Local authorities said Kelly's girlfriend, a former Northwestern University basketball player, answered a text message or a call from him and found him ill in his Cadillac Escalade.

She told police that she pushed Kelly into the passenger seat and drove him from the parking lot of a lumber yard to a hospital. A few hours later, he was transferred to the larger John H. Stroger Jr. Hospital, where he died.

Blagojevich, who allegedly plotted to split illegal profits with Kelly and former fundraiser Antoin "Tony" Rezko, was quick to blame federal prosecutors for indicting Kelly in three separate cases and for urging him to testify for the government in return for a lighter sentence.

"Chris Kelly took his life because of the pressure he was under," Blagojevich said last weekend. He has been on the airwaves asserting his own innocence. "He refused to make it easier on himself to lie about someone else."

Advertisement The U.S. attorney's office would not comment on the latest twist in a saga that began in December when Blagojevich, then governor, was led from his home in handcuffs. He was later impeached, in part for allegedly trying to profit from his authority to



Country Club Hills, Ill., Police Chief Regina Evans answers questions after meeting with Christopher Kelly's girlfriend. (By M. Spencer Green -- Associated Press)

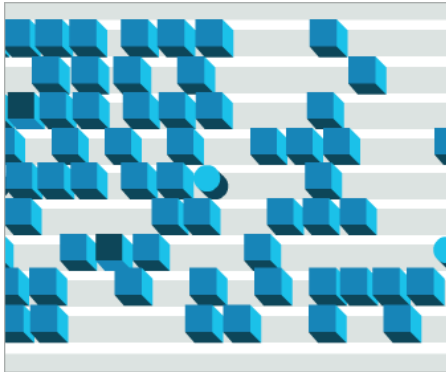


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appoint someone to fill Barack Obama's Senate seat after Obama was elected president.

Kelly was "Rod's go-to guy," said Cindi Canary, director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform. She called him a "larger than life" friend and fundraiser "who would get a lot of credit or blame, depending on how you look at it, for making Rod Blagojevich governor of Illinois."

Kent Redfield, a professor of political science at the University of Illinois at Springfield, described Kelly as "part of

the inner circle from the beginning." He called it ironic at best that Blagojevich made Kelly his point man with the Illinois Gaming Board.

Kelly wagered millions of dollars with an Illinois bookmaking operation and millions more in Las Vegas casinos, according to court documents. As the losses grew, he illicitly siphoned money from his roofing business to pay debts, then falsified his tax returns. He pleaded guilty in June.

The most serious charges had still awaited. Kelly was due to stand trial next year on allegations that he plotted with Rezko and the incoming governor as early as 2002 to profit from an abuse of power.

Prosecutors contend that Blagojevich would grant significant authority to Kelly and Rezko while agreeing to delay taking his cut until leaving office. Asked about that allegation last week by The Washington Post, Blagojevich called it "preposterous."

Police in Chicago and nearby Country Club Hills, where Kelly's girlfriend found him, are investigating his final hours and comments he made to police.

"People commit suicide for all kinds of reasons, all kinds of demons," Canary said. "We don't know if he would have changed his mind and testified. We don't know if he would have shed new light on things. Whenever somebody dies, secrets go to the grave with them."

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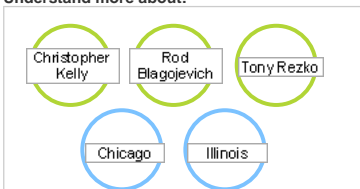
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