



SJ-R.COM

The State Journal-Register • Springfield, IL • The Oldest Newspaper in Illinois

Quinn official's violations like 'jaywalking,' ethics advocate says

By **CHRIS WETTERICH**

THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

Posted Aug 25, 2010 @ 11:30 PM

Last update Aug 26, 2010 @ 06:00 AM

The director of a reform group who pushed the 2003 ethics law that Gov. Pat Quinn's former chief of staff ran afoul of said Jerry Stermer's resignation over three prohibited e-mails was "overkill."

"In terms of whether this is a hanging offense, absolutely not," said Cindi Canary, director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform. "People make mistakes. As far as I know, we're still hiring human beings. This wasn't a mistake I couldn't see myself doing."

"In this particular situation, you've got a man who's widely thought to be an honest and honorable guy who reports his own mistakes, and then we spend resources and months sorting through 37,000 e-mails."

Andy Shaw, director of the Better Government Association, called Stermer's transgressions "the ethics equivalent of jaywalking."

However, Shaw added, "the Blagojevich trial taught us in the most graphic way about what happens when there's not a firewall between government actions and political activities."

Stermer sent three e-mails of a political nature from his state account, according to the Chicago Sun-Times. Stermer then reported his own lapse in January.

James Wright, the state's former executive inspector general, sent Quinn an investigative report on the e-mails earlier this month and urged Attorney General Lisa Madigan to refer the case to the Executive Ethics Commission.

When the Sun-Times began asking questions about the report and the fact that Wright was told he was being replaced on the same day Quinn received it, Stermer resigned, saying he did not want to be a distraction.

Canary's group pushed 2003 ethics reforms that passed in the wake of the scandal involving former Gov. George Ryan. Doing political work on state time was already illegal, but the 2003 law re-banned the practice and, among other provisions, required stricter documentation of work time.

Canary and Shaw said there must be complete separation between campaign work and public work.

Before 2003, there was "no-holds barred" use of state resources for political purposes, Canary said.

"When that law, the 2003 ethics act, was passed, one of the things we kept trying to pound on, prevention is as important, if not more important, than prosecution or punishment," she said.

Kent Redfield, emeritus professor of political studies at the University of Illinois Springfield, said the incident shows that more transparency is needed regarding what inspectors general are doing.

Under state law, inspector general investigations are secret. The Executive Ethics Commission can release part of an inspector general's final report in cases in which wrongdoing was found. Wright favors disclosure of all of his investigations, with the names of whistleblowers redacted.

Redfield said politicians required the investigations be secret because they feared becoming a target and it being made public, which could hurt their re-election prospects. There are inspector generals and ethics commissions for all statewide elected officials and the legislative branch.

"When you write something from that point of view, you limit the ability of something to do what it's supposed to do," Redfield said. "We've got a long way to go in general in terms of transparency if we want the public to have confidence in what's going on."

Canary and Redfield saw no point in the ethics commission investigating Stermer further.

"In a bankrupt state, this is not the shaking down of a hospital," Canary said, referring to testimony in former Gov. Rod Blagojevich's corruption trial that he stopped a grant in order to get a campaign contribution from the head of Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago.

"In Illinois we need to really put things on a scale. I don't think we need to waste a nickel on this," Canary said.

But Shaw said the panel should pursue the matter "if they think there is value in coming out with an explanation and a finding that can be used in the future."

"They don't seem to be overworked in Illinois," he said of ethics officials. "I don't worry about wasting their time. I think it's nice they have something to do."

Chris Wetterich can be reached at 788-1523

Copyright 2010 The State Journal-Register. Some rights reserved

Comments (8)

Louis Howe

2 hours ago

Report Abuse

You must be logged in to report abuse.