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THE PLAIN DEALER

Connections count at Cuyahoga County recorder's office; politicians and their relatives fill dozens of well-paying jobs

Posted by [Joseph L. Wagner](#) April 27, 2008

Even if you have never been to the Cuyahoga County recorder's office, you will no doubt be familiar with the names of the workers behind the counters.

That's because some have appeared on your election ballots for mayor and City Council. With others, their spouses or relatives have sent you campaign fliers for congressional races, judgeships or school board seats.

Recorder Patrick O'Malley's staff directory, you might say, is a Who's Who of the politically connected, with surnames of Mottl, Russo and Sustarsic.

A Plain Dealer review of the recorder's 2007 payroll found that O'Malley has given nearly three dozen jobs, with combined salaries of \$1.4 million, to politicians and their kin - former mayors, the son and daughter of a judge, the wife of a councilman.



O'Malley

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O'Malley declined to talk at length about his hiring practices, but he acknowledged that he has a well-connected payroll: "What am I going to do, pretend it doesn't exist?"

He also said that just because some employees are politically connected, their jobs aren't guaranteed. The recorder said he fired Roy Jech, a Parma councilman, from an office manager position because he said Jech's performance was unsatisfactory.

Jech said he was fired over a dispute with O'Malley about a candidate endorsement.

One of O'Malley's former personnel chiefs said the recorder personally handled hiring. Full-time jobs were seldom posted, said Mark Sullivan, who served as personnel director for six years, and O'Malley supplied the candidates.

Sullivan said he rarely interviewed applicants.

"There were names Pat gave me, and he just said, 'This is who we're hiring,'" Sullivan recalled. "He didn't want me questioning him."

But Sullivan said he did question O'Malley about two disbarred lawyers on the payroll.

William Lavin, a \$75,000-a-year assistant supervisor, served prison time for bank fraud a decade ago after being accused of stealing money from clients. Paula Harris, a \$37,131-a-year clerk, was accused in 1995 of participating in a telemarketing scam that targeted the elderly. She pleaded guilty to conspiracy to defraud the federal government .
O'Malley's explanation: "He believed in giving people second chances," Sullivan said.

Lavin and Harris could not be reached for comment. O'Malley would not let them take calls at the office.

Sullivan resigned last summer to take a personnel job with the Ohio Lottery Commission, where the hiring practices are far different. Sullivan said job openings are posted with minimum qualifications, and he participates in extensive interviews with applicants.

Critics such as county GOP Chairman Rob Frost contend that O'Malley runs the recorder's office as a patronage machine for the Democratic Party and himself, dispensing jobs as a way of building an influential political network.

Frost said patronage drives up the cost of government by padding the payroll with unqualified and unnecessary workers.

"We're losing our county population, and our county budget just keeps growing," he said.

The handing out of jobs for political or personal reasons is legal in Ohio. But patronage is under attack by federal prosecutors in Chicago and has been scorned by government reformers dating to Tammany Hall in New York.

One of the reasons the practice survives is that it allows elected officials to easily expand their political bases.

"Patronage workers give a candidate a long reach into a community," said Henry Eckhart, spokesman for government watchdog Common Cause-Ohio.

But Eckhart said taxpayers should not "underwrite the cost of a campaign organization."

Some people think that patronage fosters effective government because the people who are hired want to make the boss look good, said John Green, political-science professor at the University of Akron.

And that patronage exists in Cuyahoga County, a longtime Democratic stronghold, should come as no surprise. Green said the practice is most often found in areas where one political party has dominated.

At the recorder's office, O'Malley took over in 1997, when fellow Democrat Frank Russo became county auditor. Over the next 11 years, O'Malley rid the office of all but 12 of Russo's hires and expanded the payroll by about a dozen employees.

Some of those people got their jobs through unorthodox channels.

Frederick Fleming filled O'Malley's gas tank one day and was hired on the spot as a \$12-an-hour clerk. Olympic boxing hopeful Raynell Williams told O'Malley, a former wrestler, that he needed cash while training. Williams is now on leave from his \$25,000-a-year clerk's job.

By O'Malley's count, his office now employs 103 workers. That's nearly twice as many employees as work for the recorder in Franklin County, which has slightly fewer people than Cuyahoga County.

Taking some credit for a dozen of those hires is Kevin Conwell. The Democratic Cleveland city councilman said he forwarded 12 job candidates to O'Malley and the recorder hired them all.

"He's been good to our community, more than anybody in that county building," Conwell said.

But the councilman said he had nothing to do with one other O'Malley hire: Conwell's wife, Yvonne. She was hired as a \$41,000-a-year clerk in 2004, two years after her husband took his council seat. Her previous job was as an \$11.69-an-hour case manager for a mental-health agency. She is now a \$51,500-a-year communications director for the recorder.

Not all of O'Malley's hires have worked out as well.

The recorder fired former Cleveland City Councilman Nelson Cintron in May 2006. Cintron said the firing came after he launched an unsuccessful campaign for state representative.

Earlier this year, Cintron tried to unseat O'Malley in the Democratic primary. Cintron lost and accused O'Malley of using a "small army" of employees to campaign against him.

O'Malley said the workers campaigned on their own time.