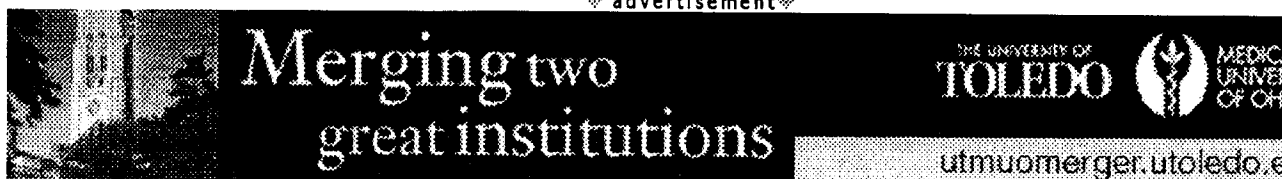


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Critics rip rules for paid staffers signing up voters Ohio's regulations too restrictive, scare away volunteers, they say

By JIM PROVANCE
BLADE COLUMBUS BUREAU

COLUMBUS - Emergency rules regulating people who are paid to register voters are too restrictive and have scared off volunteers afraid of crossing a vaguely drawn line, critics charged yesterday.

The rules, written by Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell's office, took effect with Gov. Bob Taft's signature on May 1. Mr. Blackwell's office held a hearing yesterday as it prepares to submit permanent rule language to a legislative committee for review.

The rules were triggered by a state law passed earlier this year that, in part, reacted to stories of fraud during the 2004 presidential election, including a Defiance County case in which a man who tried to register the likes of Mary Poppins and Dick Tracy was paid in crack cocaine.

An online training manual that flows from the rules requires paid registrars to "directly" submit registrations to county election boards or the secretary of state rather than any number of other public drop-off locations available to volunteer registrars.

Critics contend the language goes beyond the law's requirements and would prevent submission of the registration cards to the labor union or other organization paying the bills for review before their final submission.

"By incorrectly interpreting this law..., the secretary of state has substantially halted coordinated voter registration efforts by groups like Ohio ACORN, which were previously registering thousands of voters each month," said Rajesh D. Nayack, associate counsel with the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law. The center recently filed a lawsuit against Florida for new rules it says restrict voter registration efforts.

Peg Rosenfield, elections specialist with the League of Women Voters of Ohio, said her organization was not consulted when the rules were written and said she was unaware they'd already gone into effect.

Critics argued that the rules are so vague that volunteers fear they might not be compliant if someone pays for their meals, buys them a cup of coffee, or reimburses them for transportation costs.

"My daughter turned 18, and she just gave me her registration card. If my wife drives me down to deliver that, have I been compensated if I don't reimburse for the gas?" asked Don McTigue, an elections law attorney representing ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now.

The Ohio Democratic Party accused Mr. Blackwell, Republican candidate for governor, of using the rules to try to suppress voter registration efforts.

"This overly restrictive requirement is reminiscent of Secretary Blackwell's 2004 paper-weight directive that he backed off of after national scrutiny," said spokesman Brian Rothenberg. "Ken Blackwell seems to stop at nothing to make it harder for Ohioans to vote."

Rep. Kevin DeWine (R., Fairborn), author of the election reform law on which the rules are based, said that the law does require "direct" filing of registration forms whenever professionals are involved.

But he said the law may not be clear as to whether the filing must be made by the individual paid or the organization paying him.

"The only thing that we cared about is if someone signs a registration form, that that form get to the board within 10 days," he said. "What happens in between is not important to me."

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