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Top aide to Collins gets break on job rule

Grant can bypass electronic check-in

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County Executive Chris Collins in 2009 started an electronic system to track the comings and goings of Erie County employees, chiefly for payroll purposes.

Nearly every employee who reports to work at the Rath County Office Building swipes a county identification card through a reader each workday.

Except for Collins' political handler, Christopher M. Grant.

Grant, who holds the title of chief of staff, swiped his comings and goings just for a couple of months, from mid-August to mid-October 2009, The Buffalo News has learned. He has not swiped his county tag since then.

Grant chose not to comment on the matter this week. A Collins spokesman, Grant Loomis, said Grant's hours were properly recorded when they were later entered into the system manually, with the help of an office manager.

Loomis said Personnel Commissioner John W. Greenan then approved the manual after-the-fact entries -- even though he is not Grant's supervisor.

For comparison, Greenan regular swipes his county ID as he starts and ends his work hours, and so does Loomis, according to aides to Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz, who have access to the time records.

Electronic records for employees who swipe in and out of the office show they don't start and end their workdays, or take their lunches, at the same minute each day. Not so with Grant, during several periods examined. For example, during nine straight workdays in January, he began each day precisely at 8:30 a.m. and ended at 6 p.m.,

according to his manually entered records, and he earned compensatory time for any hours over 42 in a week.

Grant's arrangement appears unusual not just for the Rath Building but also for the county executive's suite, where nearly every other employee swipes in and out of the office through the electronic system that Collins lists as one of his accomplishments.

Collins' team includes this blurb in promotional materials about the county executive's hard-charging first term in office: "Collins was shocked to find that Erie County used an inefficient paper timekeeping and payroll system that was ripe with abuse, manpower-intensive and wasteful. A new electronic swipe card system is replacing the antiquated paper-based system."

Collins does not swipe in his comings and goings. Nor does Poloncarz, who is running for county executive this year. As elected officials, neither is required to do so. They are accountable to the voters and can come and go as they please.

The electronic system exempts employees required to start their day outside the office and employees assigned to county-owned buildings not yet outfitted with card readers. A few department heads also do not swipe their county ID cards. Grant, however, is not a department head.

He and Loomis are Collins' stalwarts. They served as workhorses in his election victory in 2007 and earn approximately \$80,000 a year covering his back. Grant also is a player in the local Republican Party apparatus.

He steered the effort in 2009 to elect three more county lawmakers friendly to the county executive. He then parlayed those numbers into a Legislature coalition that usually gives Collins the votes he wants or stays out of his way.

In recent months, Grant was loaned to Jane Corwin to serve as the Republican assemblywoman's campaign manager when she ran for New York's 26th Congressional District. During that time, Grant was on "leave without pay" from county government and was not expected to report to the office. Though the campaign ended May 24 with Corwin losing to Democrat Kathleen C. Hochul, Grant has yet to return to his job with Collins. If and when he does, he will return to an office intent on winning Collins another four-year term.

The director of a good-government group and the leader of county government's largest public-employee union frowned on the exception for Grant when so many other employees must honor the electronic timekeeping system.

"As a good-government group, we urge governments to adopt rules and programs that apply to everybody, from a good-management and efficiency point of view," said Susan Lerner, executive director of Common Cause/New York. "If you provide an exception for this person, what is to stop the exception for the next person from turning into a no-show job?"

"I think you should lead by example," said Joan Bender, president of Local 815, Civil

Service Employees Association.

"We should all be held to the same standard," Bender said, but she added, "Sometimes there is a reason why higher-level management people don't swipe in. That's between them and their boss, I guess."

If Grant returns to his office, don't expect him to suddenly start swiping in and out to record his work hours through the electronic system. The Collins team does not see a problem as long as his hours are recorded accurately.

"As for Chris Grant's future plans, I cannot speak to that," Loomis said. "But I can say when he returns to county service, his time record will continue to be accurate."