

BuffaloNews.com

Collins adviser's employee tag swipes don't add up

Manual time entries different than electronic

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Published: August 12, 2011, 12:00 AM

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Updated: August 12, 2011, 6:33 AM

Christopher M. Grant, the Erie County executive's inner-circle political adviser, has finally begun to swipe his employee ID tag to electronically record his comings and goings for the county payroll.

But something doesn't add up. Even though Grant swipes his tag — occasionally — to record the times he starts and ends each work day, someone else, for unknown reasons, still manually enters his hours for the same work shifts — just like in the old days when Grant didn't bother with the electronic system.

Those manual entries, likely completed by an office manager, form the basis for Grant's paychecks. But in every case, the manual entries don't jibe with the electronic record. For example:

- July 18: Grant swipes in at 8:56 a. m. and out at 6:11 p. m.

But someone later records his hours for that day as 7:55 a. m. to 6:16 p. m., giving him an extra hour worked.

- July 19: Grant swipes in at 7:57 a. m. and out at 5:58 p. m.

Someone manually records that he worked from 8:15 a. m. to 6:20 p. m. Both spans of time are close to a 10-hour day.

- July 26: Grant swipes in at 7:53 a. m. and out at 5:41 p. m.

Later, manual entries report Grant starting at 8:02 a. m. and ending at 6:25 p. m. — a

work day about a half-hour longer.

- July 29: He swipes in at 7:45 a. m. and out at 5:29 p. m.

Manually, his hours go down as 8:45 a. m. to 6:49 p. m. — a work day 20 minutes longer.

Grant will not get rich off the extra two hours recorded on his behalf for those four occasions. Because he's not allowed overtime pay, his extra hours are taken as time off later.

But under the county's rules, the electronic swipe times create the "official time and pay record." The "deliberate falsification" of any time or pay record "by any employee" is considered fraud, according to procedures County Executive Chris Collins' team laid down.

Grant's confusing records were uncovered by auditors working for Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz as they reviewed the uneven use of the electronic system. Poloncarz, a Democrat, is running against the Republican Collins for county executive this year.

"We find these payroll record discrepancies puzzling and require an explanation," Poloncarz's chief auditor, Michael Szukala, said in a letter Thursday to Collins' personnel commissioner, John W. Greenan.

Szukala asked why Grant's hours of work were changed — adding 2.14 hours — and for the identity of the supervisor who approves the manu-

al changes. It was Greenan who would approve Grant's manually entered time records in the months before he started swiping, a Collins spokesman has said.

Szukala shouldn't hold his breath while waiting for a response from the Collins team.

"This is a nakedly political review," Collins spokesman Grant Loomis said of the report. While he criticized Poloncarz and the time his auditors spent finding an "\$83 discrepancy," he did not challenge what the auditors found. Nor did Loomis answer whether anyone would be disciplined for falsifying the records or why someone was doubling back to change Grant's data.

"The electronic swipe system is designed for 9-5, stationary employees who spend their day in the same office," Loomis said, "not for senior staff and department heads that are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

But Loomis, who like Grant is considered a senior executive assistant and is paid in the \$80,000 range, does swipe. So does Greenan.

Grant holds the title of "chief of staff," and he has been with Collins since he ran for county executive in 2007. Among Grant's duties are to cover the county executive's back amid the vagaries of government and politics, to participate in policy discussions, win votes for him in the Legislature and shape the Collins message.

Grant was closely involved in the 2009 County Legislature elections that doubled the size of the Collins-friendly Republican bloc. He was in the thick of Collins' short-lived stab at a governor's race. He took a leave to manage the congressional campaign for Collins chum Jane Corwin. And of course he's a fixture in this year's effort to win Collins a second term. He has extraordinary sway within the Collins administration.

For most of the Collins term in office, Grant did not swipe his comings and goings and in no way abided by the electronic system Collins installed to replace a paper-based system said to be "ripe with abuse."

Even after a Buffalo News article in June called attention to Grant's practices, he did not swipe his comings and goings. Collins had also said Grant shouldn't have to. He considered him the equivalent of a department head, and not all Collins' department heads swipe.

Then Grant abruptly started to swipe on July 18.

For the payrolls that have processed since then, Grant on just five occasions swiped both in at the start of his day and out at the end of the day. On the other days, he swiped in but not out, and his quitting time was manually recorded later.

On those five occasions when he swiped both in and out, someone manually established new start and stop times for those same days.