

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Reform association's manual suggests use of quota system

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HARRISBURG -- Despite repeated denials of a quota system, a 2004 manual utilized by the activist community organization ACORN advises managers that workers who do not produce a set number of voter registrations per day should be fired.

"If a person performs at less than standard have them come to another training, send them out with a team leader. If they still perform poorly then re-train once more, then fire," the 2004 management document states.

"Anyone who performs at less than three voter registrations per hour SHOULD NOT BE ON THE STAFF," the directive states.

A quota system for voter registration drives is barred under state law and has been cited as a major factor in pending criminal cases in Pittsburgh. Seven people, all with ties to ACORN, have been charged by Allegheny County District Attorney Stephen A. Zappala Jr., with violating state election laws and submitting fraudulent voter registration applications. Those cases are pending.

Michael McDunnah, a spokesman for ACORN's affiliate Project Vote, which issued the instructions, said in an e-mail response that the 2004 management directive is no longer in effect.

He declined to make the current version public, but acknowledged that canvassers are expected to produce 20 voter registrations per day.

"Based on years of experience conducting community based voter registration drives, Project Vote estimates 20 completed applications per shift as a reasonable performance standard," McDunnah said.

He said 20 per day was "a standard" not a quota.

Defendants in the Pittsburgh cases have stated workers were fired for not producing between 20 and 25 registrations per day.

The 2004 directive, titled "Daily Staff Management," says that individual meetings should be held nightly with canvassers to reinforce standards.

Those not meeting standards should be given "a deadline for when they should be back on standard or fired."

In the e-mail, McDunnah wrote, "this performance standard does not represent a quota system or payment per registration, but simply a baseline for job performance. Failing to meet this standard did not result in automatic termination."

He said supervisors were given "wide latitude" to set standards on a case-by-case basis.

ACORN is under scrutiny across the nation. Republicans accuse it of widespread voter registration fraud on behalf of Democrats during the presidential campaign.

"ACORN is a grassroots organization that exists to empower the working poor," said Abe Amoros, spokesman for the Pennsylvania Democratic Party. "Their efforts have been demonized unnecessarily by the right to justify their worst fears. Although there have been isolated incidents of abuse, the organization has acknowledged them, fixed the problems and overall does its job to register voters legally and effectively."

But Rep. Stephen Barrar, a Delaware County Republican, last week asked colleagues to support a resolution requesting Attorney General Tom Corbett to investigate ACORN for a pattern of alleged fraudulent voter registration in Pennsylvania and other states. He asks whether it should retain its tax-exempt status.

Corbett said through a spokesman he would have to await specific allegations being provided to his office before he can investigate.

ACORN registered 135,000 voters in Pennsylvania last year, said Ali Kronley, a spokeswoman in Philadelphia.

"You can find examples where ACORN has produced results that everyone would agree are good," said Christopher Borick, a political science professor at Muhlenberg College in Allentown. "But the organization has been mismanaged, I believe, and it has taken actions that are problematic and adverse (to its goals.)"

Borick said he is aware of no instance where votes were cast fraudulently.

"ACORN is a group that exists because of the plethora of confusing and restrictive registration and voting systems we have in this country," said Mike Young, a former Penn State political science professor.

"In that sense ACORN is both a problem -- due to its methods -- and a symptom of a problem. As long as we have voting systems rooted in the 19th century we are going to have organizations like ACORN trying to exploit them."

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