

Prison Employees Help Illinois Governor Monitor His Image

Written by Rich Miller
Tuesday, 29 July 2003 18:00

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In yet another example of how obsessed Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich is about his public image, even during “the worst fiscal crisis in the state’s history,” the governor is requiring state employees to videotape and review local TV-news broadcasts about him seven days a week on state time.

In one instance, a prison psychologist was ordered by his warden to review the tapes “for any newscasts concerning Governor Blagojevich.”

A source gave me a May 14 memorandum from the warden of the East Moline Correctional Center, Ian Oliver, which spelled out the duties for Dr. Keith Frainey. I published the contents of the memo last week in my newsletter, and several media outlets picked it up. A few papers outright stole it (including the *Chicago Sun-Times*), not identifying the original publication at all, and many didn’t get the whole story, so here it is.

Frainey was informed in the memo that newscasts were currently being taped for Quad Cities channels 4, 6, 8 and 18. According to the memo, channels 4, 6, and 8 “are taped at 5 p.m., 6 p.m., and 10 p.m.” Channel 18 “is taped at 9 p.m.” That would be at least five hours of news broadcasts every day, seven days per week.

“Mr. Frainey has been appointed to review these tapes on a daily basis for any newscasts concerning Governor Blagojevich,” the warden wrote. “Where there is information on a tape complete the attached form and route the tape to the Warden’s Office by 9:15 a.m.”

Two prison counselors, Mike Weaver and Jeff O’Brien, “have been appointed as backups,” according to the memo.

Their union complained about the new duties, and the orders were changed. Management personnel are now taping the broadcasts.

Blagojevich spokesperson Cheryle Jackson defended the videotaping, although she did agree

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that requiring a psychologist to review at least five hours of TV newscasts every morning was probably not the right move.

Despite the specific wording of the Department of Corrections memo about tracking TV stories “concerning Governor Blagojevich,” Jackson denied that state employees were being used to monitor broadcasts solely about the governor. The employees are looking for coverage about all state agencies, she insisted.

Jackson also reasoned that using state employees and several VCRs and televisions in each facility to monitor the broadcasts actually saves the state money because video-clipping services charge “thousands of dollars a month.” The governor, she said, “is trying to do more with less.” The other option, of course, would be to not tape the programs at all – something Jackson never mentioned.

Jackson claimed that the Department of Corrections “already monitors its media around the state. So, we thought we would partner with Corrections to monitor the coverage.”

A spokesperson for Corrections confirmed the department has checked its own coverage “for years,” but, when pressed, admitted it was not a daily, ongoing project. Broadcasts were taped usually when the department knew a story would appear, the spokesperson said. The practice of daily monitoring started since the governor took office.

So why is the governor’s office doing this? Jackson explained that they were just following normal business practices. “Any company does this,” she said.

Jackson also claimed the video clips give the governor’s office “one means of knowing what state agencies are doing, what’s getting covered.

“When the media raises an issue, sometimes it’s the first we’re learning of it,” Jackson said, adding the videos are “sometimes a wealth of information for us.”

Jackson also pointed out that the state has collected newspaper clippings on a daily basis “for eons.” Those duties are handled by the Illinois Information Service.

Jackson said she didn’t think it was unreasonable for someone in an agency’s public-relations office to monitor the broadcasts. But not every regional state office has a PR person, and the current East Moline monitoring is not being handled by a public-relations person, according to the department.

Jackson did not know offhand how many state offices or state employees were monitoring news broadcasts seven days per week, but Illinois has several downstate TV markets besides the Quad Cities and Quincy. Rockford, Peoria, Metro East (via St. Louis), Carbondale, Decatur, Springfield, Bloomington and Champaign all have television stations. And then there’s Chicago.

The governor said recently that he was hiring auditors to find waste in government and get rid

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of excess employees. Their first recommendation should be to stop using state workers to puff up the governor's vanity.

Check out the slightly redacted memo at <http://www.capitolfax.com/tv.jpg> .

Editor's Note: *After considerable pressure, the governor's office announced this week it will no longer require state employees to videotape TV news shows. Volunteers will handle the task on their own time.*

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax, a daily political newsletter. He can be reached at <http://www.capitolfax.com>