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Final Edition

**Blagojevich's ethics lesson; Records show ex-governor took his online ethics exams -- but apparently he should have paid more attention**

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SPRINGFIELD-Once a year, Rod Blagojevich, Illinois' now-impeached former governor, would sit down at a computer terminal and type in "RODBLAGOJEVICH1210" -- an easy-to-remember log-in that included a four-digit reference to his birthdate.

That would transport him to a virtual classroom where he would go through the ins and outs of state ethics laws, using a nearly $2.6 million online-training program Blagojevich himself had put in place in 2004.

The aim of the online endeavor was to "return honor to public service and restore our citizens' trust in their government," the ex-governor wrote to fellow ethics trainees in the program's inaugural run. "I am taking this training, and it is mandatory for all state employees."

Since then, the online state ethics lessons have been given 900,000 times, reaffirming for state employees rules about when it's illegal to accept freebies or do political work, and how to report any wrongdoing.

The Chicago Sun-Times obtained copies, via a Freedom of Information Act request, of the ethics training programs that Blagojevich is certified as having taken each year between 2004 and May 30, 2008, when he last received ethics training.

There's no record of how Blagojevich answered questions in those training courses. But the ethics regimen offers some clear tips that should have warned him of the "pay-to-play" pitfalls that brought federal charges against him and resulted in his ouster from the governor's office.

For example, the ethics-training program that Blagojevich took at 1:27 p.m. on April 26, 2006, presented all state employees with this fictitious lunchtime encounter between "Philip," a major campaign contributor, and "Henry," a candidate for statewide office:

"Philip: You know, Henry, I'd really like to become a member of a state board.

"Henry: You're more than qualified.

"Philip: I'd consider doubling my previous contributions to your campaign if you'll appoint me to a board once you're elected.

"Henry: I'd love to have your support this year. But I can't appoint you to a board in exchange for your contribution. That would violate the state Ethics Act.

"Philip: I didn't realize that.

"Henry: That's the law, and I have to follow it.

"Philip: I understand."

To drive home the point, Philip and Henry's dialogue was followed with this multiple-choice question: "It is unlawful for a state officer or employee to promise which of the following in exchange for a political campaign contribution?"

The choices: "A. an appointment to a state board; B. a job with a state agency; C. a regulatory decision from a state agency that will benefit the potential contributor; D. all of the above."

With "D" being the correct answer, that basic lesson in pay-to-play politics dealt directly with the root of Blagojevich's legal problems: trading appointments for campaign contributions.

It came two years before Blagojevich and his emissaries allegedly tried shaking down U.S. Senate hopefuls for campaign contributions. And it was two years after Blagojevich had named Ali Ata head of the Illinois Finance Authority -- an appointment that came a few months after Tony Rezko presented Blagojevich with an envelope containing a $25,000 contribution from Ata.

"When he was taking those tests, he must've been chuckling to himself," Sen. Susan Garrett (D-Lake Forest), the lead Senate sponsor of the 2003 ethics law that required ethics training, says of Blagojevich. "He violated his own ethics law. And he knew he was doing it when he was taking his own test."

In the 2004 ethics-training program, campaign fund-raising also was addressed with an explicit definition of "solicitation misconduct," a crime "when an employee asks for or receives political contributions from a person whose business is regulated by the employee or employee's agency."

During Blagojevich's impeachment trial, Illinois House prosecutors played a secretly recorded federal wiretap in which Blagojevich was heard linking a potential $100,000 contribution from a racetrack operator to his signing of legislation that would pump millions of dollars into the state's regulated horse-racing industry.

"When people contribute money to the people and agencies that regulate them, it looks bad," the documents said. "It looks like people can buy favors from the government, and that costs us the public's trust. If you participate in solicitation misconduct, you can lose your job, and you can go to jail."