

March 7, 2002 Thursday

**Bonuses getting blurry; Madigan aides split $97,000, then some left to work for Lisa**

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD-House Speaker Michael Madigan gave 25 of his legislative staffers bonuses totaling $97,000 just months, and in some cases weeks, before they took leave from their state jobs to work for his daughter and other Democratic statewide candidates.

Madigan assigned the staffers to work for the Democratic Party of Illinois and, in turn, the four campaigns of the party's slated statewide candidates. But Sen. Lisa Madigan (D-Chicago) is the only one of the four running in a contested race.

Most of the Madigan bonuses were doled out in June, though some of his staffers got additional payments in December. In one instance, a staffer got a $20,000 bonus on Christmas Eve, then went to work for the party a week later. In other cases, staffers left the state payroll in November and January after getting June payments.

"If they're so valuable they're entitled to bonuses, which I'd argue strongly against, then how on earth could they afford to lose them all shortly after they get their bonuses? It seems to be contradictory, and it enforces the notion that what's really going on here is to go off and do the work of the Democrats, in general, and Lisa Madigan, in particular," said Terrance A. Norton, executive director of the Better Government Association.

Lisa Madigan's campaign said it had no control over bonuses awarded to her father's legislative staff and that there is nothing improper with having those staffers equally assist her campaign and the candidacies of Secretary of State Jesse White, Comptroller Dan Hynes and state treasurer candidate Tom Dart.

"There's this huge misperception out there the Democratic Party workers are doing nothing but Lisa Madigan's work, and from what I've seen that is not true," her spokesman David Schaper said.

Madigan's Democratic rival, John Schmidt, condemned the fact that taxpayers paid bonuses to legislative staffers who now are working on behalf of her campaign. Schmidt urged Lisa Madigan to reimburse taxpayers for the bonuses from her campaign fund, which Schaper categorically ruled out.

"I find it unbelievable and outrageous, the notion you'd pay bonuses out of public money for people who then turn around and go to work on a political campaign. That seems to me to raise a very serious issue of whether the public payroll is being abused to serve the interest of a political candidate," Schmidt said.

During this campaign season, no one else in the capital has tapped legislative staff for political work as extensively as the House speaker, nor have bonuses been handed out as freely on the eve of the campaigns.

The House Republicans have none of their staffers assigned to political campaigns. The Senate Republicans have only one, who was awarded a $5,000 bonus last June. The Senate Democrats have three, two of whom received bonuses of $3,500 and $5,000, respectively, spokesmen for the caucuses said.

Steve Brown, an aide to the speaker, derided those raising the bonuses as an issue for being "uninformed" of the state budgeting process and said it is completely appropriate that the staffers left the state payroll to work on campaigns, "lump sum payments" or not.

The staffers' presence isn't missed anyway, he said, because the House schedule was tailored in a way that shut the chamber for almost a full month before the March 19 primary. "After the primary is when, as usual, we'll get down to the real work of the session," he said.