

January 26, 2001, FRIDAY, Late Sports Final Edition

**Minister urges Ryan to resign**

By Steve Warmbir and Dave McKinney

Staff reporters

The Chicago minister who lost six children in a fiery accident that later took center stage in the bribes-for-licenses scandal called on Gov. Ryan on Thursday to resign.

"I do believe there is enough evidence to show that the governor had knowledge of this and that he hid that knowledge," the Rev. Scott Willis said at a news conference when asked if Ryan should quit.

"It would be refreshing to see somebody come up and say, yes, and admit to it and step down," Willis said.

Willis later suggested that the governor apologize to Illinois residents for helping create unsafe roads when he was secretary of state.

"I think if all the charges are in fact true, he owes everybody an apology for putting people at risk," Willis said, his wife, Janet, by his side.

The news conference marked Willis' first extensive comments after a former top Ryan aide, Dean Bauer, pleaded guilty last week to obstructing justice.

The governor was told of the Willis family's statement while vacationing in Jamaica, his spokesman, Dennis Culloton, said.

"First of all, the governor's heart goes out to the Willis family. No one can fathom what they've been through," Culloton said. "And so it is, with the utmost respect, that I simply say, the scenario that the reverend is portraying is simply not so.

"The governor had no knowledge of any cover-up and would not have tolerated it for a moment," Culloton said. He noted that Ryan apologized last year for what happened on his watch as secretary of state.

The cover-up involved trucker Ricardo Guzman, who illegally received his commercial driver's license from the McCook testing facility by paying a bribe, authorities said. In November 1994, Guzman was driving on Interstate 94 in Wisconsin when a taillight assembly and a mud flap fell off his truck and into the path of the Willis family van.

The truck parts sheared through the van's gas tank, igniting a fire that trapped and killed the Willis children.

Bauer pleaded guilty to telling a former secretary in October 1999 to trash two incriminating documents, one of them relating to Bauer's attempts to stop the investigation into how Guzman got his license.

Bauer, 72, the highest-ranking Ryan aide convicted so far, is expected to be sentenced to six months behind bars and nine months of home confinement. He has refused to cooperate with investigators, and his plea agreement does not force him to do so.

Willis' first reaction was that Bauer got off light, but he now is reserving judgment, he said.

"They may have done the right thing," Willis said, thanking federal prosecutors for their work.

Willis said it was "incomprehensible" that Bauer wouldn't cooperate, given the danger to the public. He also said he wished the public could have learned more about what went on at Ryan's secretary of state office through Bauer's trial, which won't happen now.

The Willis family urged Ryan and his friend, U.S. House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.), not to inject themselves into the selection of the new U.S. attorney in Chicago. U.S. Attorney Scott Lassar and federal investigators are leading the probe of Illinois' license-for-bribes scandal, for which Bauer was convicted.

Willis also asked Ryan to apologize to his attorney, Joseph Power. His legal work was key in helping uncover the wrongdoing in Ryan's secretary of state office, but Power was repeatedly attacked as wrongheaded and politically motivated.

"Why isn't the governor coming and saying, 'Joe, you did a wonderful job. We've got to get to the bottom of this'? " Willis asked. "He owes Joe an apology."

Culloton declined to comment on the suggestion.

Despite their devastating loss, the couple is sustained by their hope that justice will be served and they will see their children in the afterlife, they said.

"And then before God, we will have to rest and be satisfied," Willis said.