

Local Voter Fraud Claims Rise

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When DeeAnn Athan received a new voter registration card at her downtown law office a few weeks ago, she figured it must be a mistake.

The card had her age and middle initial wrong and a different Social Security and driver's license number. The only things correct were her gender and party affiliation.

After making a few calls, Athan discovered she had two voter registrations on the books at the Hillsborough County elections office. One had her place of residence listed as her West Shore Boulevard home; the other her Kennedy Boulevard office.

"I thought to myself, 'What's going on here?'" Athan said. "How could this happen?"

Hillsborough County Elections Supervisor Buddy Johnson said the discrepancy is likely a case of voter registration fraud by a third party group that pays people to register voters.

"Someone from one of these groups probably saw her name and address in a phone book or elsewhere and registered it, thinking they could get away with it," he said.

Hillsborough elections officials have come across numerous other questionable voter registration applications in the run-up to the Nov. 4 general election, which has seen hundreds of thousands of new voters added to election rolls across the state.

In June, Johnson's office discovered that Community Vote Project, a third party voter registration group, had submitted duplicate registrations and applications with other irregularities, according to Kathy Harris, his chief of staff and legal counsel.

Harris said she didn't know many questionable registrations were involved, but said the group fired the workers who were responsible and is no longer operating in the county.

Attempts to locate representatives for Community Vote Project were unsuccessful, and no one answered the phone at their former office on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

On Thursday, Pinellas County Elections Supervisor Deborah Clark said her office has discovered that a Denver-based nonprofit third party group, Work for Progress, had submitted at least 35 questionable voter registrations in the past two months.

On some of the applications the handwriting and addresses were virtually identical, while others had no address. One application was turned in incomplete, so elections staff sent a notice to the applicant. The voter responded that she has been registered to vote since 1995 and stated that she had not submitted a new registration application since then.

Clark has asked state elections officials to look into the questionable voter applications.

Voter registration and petition fraud is a felony in Florida.

With the general election only weeks away, scores of fraudulent voter registrations are being investigated across the country, most of them submitted by third party groups.

One group, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, which has registered some 1.3 million voters nationwide, is facing allegations of fraud from elections officials in Wisconsin, North Carolina, New Mexico, Michigan, Ohio and Missouri.

Johnson said the task of identifying voter fraud has become more complicated.

"It used to be ballots being dropped in the river or buried in an orange grove," he said. "Now it's become a very sophisticated process and we need to keep an eye on it."

Athan said the incident has shaken her faith in the integrity of the voting system.

"I take my right to vote very seriously," she said. "I feel like that's been violated."