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OSCEOLA COUNTY NEWS

Outside review found pattern of misconduct at Osceola clerk's office

By CRISTÓBAL REYES
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FEEDBACK

Embattled Osceola County Clerk of Courts Armando Ramirez responds to a question during a press conference at his office, in Kissimmee, Thursday, April 11, 2013. Ramirez has fired several top advisors in recent weeks. (Joe Burbank/Orlando Sentinel) Newsgate CCI id: B582843060Z.1 (Joe Burbank)

A report produced in May by an outside firm found a litany of inappropriate practices in the Osceola Clerk of Court's office, including questionable hirings of friends and relatives of high-ranking officials as well as abuse of work hours and time off.

The 48-page report — prepared by Tampa-based Brown Law & Consulting and recently obtained by the Orlando Sentinel — was commissioned by Clerk of Courts Armando Ramirez after several members of his staff wrote letters that “suggested a pervasive pattern of inappropriate activity.”

“Certain aspects of those allegations were substantiated in whole or in part and possess a character that requires the Clerk’s careful consideration on how best to proceed,” said the report, written by attorney Deborah C. Brown and consultant James F. Brown.

Many of the allegations involve relatives of Ramirez, 85, a Democrat who has been the clerk since 2013. He is currently running for re-election.

Asked what changes had been made in the months since the report was produced, the clerk’s office in an unsigned statement said “various actions were taken in response to the findings,” but did not specify any. Neither Ramirez’s campaign nor Brown Law & Consulting responded to requests for comment.

After this story was published online, an unidentified spokesperson for the agency provided a number of documents showing Ramirez had disciplined various employees since the report, including Deputy Clerk Jennifer Soto, who was suspended for three weeks, placed on probation and forced to forfeit vacation time.

Natalie Bryant, one of the whistleblowers who alleged misconduct within the agency, was fired — due in part to a separate outside investigation focused on her conduct at the agency, the records showed.

The Brown Law report found Soto had filed a public records request on behalf of John Ramirez, the elder Ramirez’s son and Soto’s fiancé, seeking a vendor list kept by the clerk’s office in order to solicit donations for the clerk’s campaign.

Soto also appointed several under-qualified friends to top positions and advocated for the hiring of her cousin as special projects manager at a higher salary than what was advertised, despite him having “no specific skills or experience related to special projects or event planning,” the probe found.

He was eventually hired as a coordinator after Armando Ramirez “had discomfort” at hiring him as a manager, the report added.

A few of the hires also involved friends of Soto’s who went to the same gym as her. Often, the questionable hires were done as part of a referral program the office used to quickly fill positions.

The report also detailed a number of episodes involving Soto’s sister, Carmen Soto, who was hired despite not disclosing her family relationship. Jennifer Soto was also found to have interfered in attempts to discipline her sister for performance issues, including allowing her to be demoted without a reduction in pay, the report said.

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One manager — Jessica Echevarría, the clerk’s executive administrative assistant and one of the whistleblowers — said she was

afraid to discipline Carmen Soto and “felt discouraged by Jennifer’s comments about it making her look bad and needing Carmen to have that job to pay the rent or mortgage,” the report said.

Jennifer Soto was also found to have given her sister time off for personal favors, including babysitting and to make a trip to the bank. Often, the report said, the time was marked as if she had worked that day when she had not.

Staff, including the whistleblowers, also appeared to have been allowed to come and go outside their scheduled shifts “with no apparent consequence” — a violation of Clerk’s office policy on punctuality.

Other allegations of misused time include shopping sprees during work hours and using staff to perform tasks outside the scope of their job, like grocery shopping or picking up Soto’s child.

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“Ms. Soto consistently requires her [Clerk of Court] assistants to perform activities that are outside of the scope of a professional assistant, and more of the scope of a personal assistant, groupie, or entourage,” said Natalie Bryan, executive director to the clerk, in a complaint written to Ramirez.

The outside probe found that Bryan committed similar violations to those of which she accused Soto, like having “similarly interfered with her own sister’s employment.” Other allegations she raised, including claims of campaign misconduct, were found to be unsubstantiated.

Bryan, like others in the office, was found to have been arriving and leaving at irregular hours. And though she mentioned Soto going out shopping with other members of staff, investigators found Bryan encouraged staffers “to acquiesce to the clothes shopping activities to foster a relationship.”

Many of the allegations she mentioned in her complaint were actions that, in her position an executive over human resources, she “should have acted to curb,” including looking into possible inappropriate hires, the report added.

“Instead, the investigation established that [Bryan] had acquiesced in or was a willing participant in some the activities that were occurring, including in some instances the same type of conduct over which accusations at Jennifer had been leveled,” the report said.

A “likely” explanation for the timing of her complaint, investigators for Brown Law wrote, was that there was a delay in the creation of an Office of the Inspector General within the agency which she desired to lead.

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Bryan’s termination letter said she provided misleading information on the creation of the office, which Ramirez wrote could have had “irreparable effects” on his relationship with county commissioners.

Dated about a week before the Brown Law report was completed, the letter further said Bryan was fired for sending a copy of the whistleblower complaint to Orange-Osceola Chief Judge Donald Myers. A separate investigation found she also decided to not retain workplace texts and Skype messages as public records, a possible violation of Florida law.

Ramirez's administration has consistently faced scrutiny for alleged nepotism and other questionable office practices dating back to soon after he was sworn into office.

Just months into his first term, **he announced Soto as his chief deputy clerk** despite her having only an associate degree in paralegal studies and a handful of years' experience working at a law firm.

Since then, according to the Brown Law report, Soto's performance at her post and her alleged questionable hirings caused Ramirez to express "concerns or regret over having employed Jennifer," despite there being no critical performance reviews on her record.

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In 2014, Ramirez was **hit with a whistleblower lawsuit** by attorney Adam Alvarez, who claimed he was fired after raising concerns about destroying public records. Ramirez was cleared of violating public records law earlier that year and the lawsuit was dismissed in 2016.

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Ramirez was **under scrutiny again in 2015** after a highly lauded employee, Jan Trzcinka, was fired after she expressed concerns about being forced to work weekend community events without pay, which she said amounted to campaigning.

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"Jan Trzcinka was terminated for insubordination and attempting to intimidate her supervisors, not for having an opposite opinion with a new office policy," Ramirez responded in an email at the time.