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Allegheny reform association fires canvassers for not achieving quotas

By Walter F. Roche Jr.
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A former ACORN employee on Friday contended the organization had a quota system requiring canvassers to register 20 to 25 voters a day when she worked for the group during the 2008 election.

Another person among seven defendants in Allegheny County's ACORN voter fraud investigation intends to fully cooperate with prosecutors, his attorney said.

Ashley L. Clarke, 21, of East Hills was among four people District Judge Gene Ricciardi held for trial after nearly three hours of testimony by county elections employees and law enforcement officials.

Though she would not elaborate, Clarke said during a brief interview outside the courtroom that ACORN, or the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, imposed a quota system on canvassers. She said she knew of co-workers who were fired for not achieving quotas.

Others held for trial yesterday were Eric L. Jones, 20, of East Hills, Alexis Givner, 23, of West Mifflin and Mario Grisom, 28, of North Point Breeze. All face charges of forgery, obstruction and election law violations.

A fifth defendant, Latasha Kinney, 27, no address available, was bound over for trial last month. Two remaining defendants are scheduled for preliminary hearings this month.

District Attorney Stephen A. Zappala Jr. filed the charges in early May, following an investigation that began late last summer when county election officials turned up more than 50 questionable voter registration applications.

Attorney Scott Coffey, representing Jones, said his client will cooperate with the prosecution and tell "everything he knows" about ACORN's 2008 registration campaign.

ACORN officials vehemently deny the existence of a quota system, which is barred by state law. Zappala has said he is confident the evidence would show a quota system was in place.

In a news conference held while the hearings were under way, ACORN officials and labor union representatives said the charges were politically motivated and

an attempt to stymie the organization's efforts to get low-income and minority residents involved in the political process.

"We helped to get 35,000 people registered to vote," said Hazel Hastings, an ACORN organizer and supervisor during last year's campaign. She labeled the charges of fraud "completely ridiculous."

Maryellen Hayden, lead organizer for ACORN of Allegheny County, said ACORN had an extensive quality control system in place and that system uncovered suspect applications.

Among those testifying before Ricciardi was Denise Halliburton, a county Elections Division employee, who testified an ACORN canvasser approached her at a shopping mall.

Halliburton said she filled out an application but deliberately didn't sign it.

"I wanted to see if they would put a forgery," she said.

Later, Halliburton said, she learned from a co-worker that someone submitted the application and forged her signature.

She could not, however, identify the ACORN worker who approached her.

Givner, who is charged with forging that signature and faces a trial on that charge, did not testify. According to court records, Givner told investigators ACORN fired her because she did not meet her assigned quota of 22 daily voter registrations.

Walter F. Roche Jr. can be reached at wroche@tribweb.com or 412-320-7894.