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Saturday, December 6, 2008

Ware defends felony hires as filling need

Head of Wayne commission facing auditor's probe says jobs offer second chances over return to crime.

Darren A. Nichols / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- As her political career teeters in the balance, Wayne County Commission Chairwoman Jewel Ware is speaking out and standing behind her controversial practice of giving former felons a second chance on the taxpayers' dime.

Nearly two weeks before the county's auditor general is set to release a report on her hiring practices, Ware said Terrance Dortch and Kwasi Akwamu -- the central figures in the controversy, who also spent time in jail with her husband -- are being singled out for unfair treatment.

"It is very unfortunate and unfair about what has happened to Terrance and Kwasi," Ware said through commission spokesman Tim Johnson.

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"Their past criminal background should not prevent their employment with the county."

Ware faces an auditor general probe of claims that Dortch and Akwamu were no-show employees who collected county salaries to work for her husband, Jesse Long-Bey, at his resort in Idlewild in northern Michigan. The investigation -- which will scrutinize payroll records of the commission's 72 staffers -- emerged after an anonymous letter was widely circulated that included the claims.

Ware denies wrongdoing, saying some workers pitched in at the resort, Morton's Motel, on their own time.

Ware has carte blanche on hiring staffers for the panel. Since becoming commission chairwoman in 2004, Ware has hired seven people who are convicted felons, records provided to The Detroit News show. None still work for the commission or her staff.

Most did not cause problems, but others were a thorn in Ware's side, including one staffer whose contract was not renewed after allegations arose of missing checks from the commissioner.

For her part, Ware says she's responding to a growing need, primarily in Detroit, by hiring ex-felons who have served their time in prison. Ware said she comes in contact with ex-felons in her district who offer to shovel the snow or do odd jobs around her house.

"When people can't find work or get work, the situation drives some people back to a life of crime and back to the criminal justice system," Ware said. "People in other parts of the region probably don't have these types of encounters and experiences."

But former Auditor General Brendan Dunleavy said taxpayers should pay for the best qualified staffers.

"I'm all in favor of helping ex-cons, but you have to ask yourself, 'Are there folks who went to college to do that kind of stuff?' " Dunleavy said. "What was the cost benefit? There was no selection process, no input from anybody else." Statistics show there are about 1.4 million people in Michigan with felony convictions and another 1.6 million with misdemeanor convictions. The state's prison system releases about 12,000 inmates annually; about one-third live in Detroit.

That's what makes Ware's situation so tough, said Gerald Cavanagh, an ethics professor



Ware



More information

Whom Ware has hired

Wayne County Commission Chairwoman Jewel Ware has hired seven convicted felons:

- Kwasi Akwamu, who earned as much as \$82,900 as director of commission affairs. He pleaded guilty to assault with intent to murder and weapons charges in 1988. He quit when his record came to light.
- Terrance Dortch, who made \$35,828 as a legislative staff assistant. He was convicted of second-degree murder and a felony firearm charge in 1992. He took another job before the controversy.
- Sherri Johnson, a legislative aide who made \$10 an hour. She was convicted of larceny in 1990. She quit when her record came to light.
- Eitha McClendon, who made \$34,000 as a legislative staff assistant, was convicted of larceny in 1991. She's also known as Patricia McClendon. She is on administrative leave.
- Demetrius Jones, also known as Vincent Tubbs, who has convictions including armed robbery in 1992 and kidnapping in 1983. He was a legislative aide who earned \$10 an hour.
- Tino Jarod Odum, a community outreach specialist for Ware, who earns \$10 an hour. He was convicted of armed robbery and a felony firearm charge in 1992. His contract was not renewed in early 2004.
- Edward James, a legislative aide who earned \$16.50 an hour, convicted of home invasion, armed robbery and firearm charges in 1992.

Source: Wayne County records

at the [University of Detroit](#) Mercy.

"It's a delicate thing," Cavanagh said. "We all want to be forgiven when we mess up. You don't want to say a person (who is a convicted felon) cannot get a job. (But) if you hire a felon it should be transparent. Everybody should know it, and it should be above board. It's a red flag if nothing else."

Her chief political foe, Commissioner Burton Leland, says it puts a smear on the commission.

"You don't use your people to benefit you," said Leland. "That's not what the taxpayers pay us to do. She brings down the institution."

This week, Leland was dragged deeper into the controversy when one of Ware's newest hires, a former cop, accused him of assault. Leland acknowledged touching the officer, but called it "male bonding" and nothing more.

You can reach Darren A. Nichols at (734) 462-2190 or dnichols@detnews.com.

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