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Vote fraud & crack: a case for Dick Tracy?

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When Defiance County election officials got a batch of voter registration cards for Dick Tracy, Mary Poppins, Michael Jordan and George Foreman, they might have wondered whether the per son who gathered the cards was smoking crack.

Maybe not, but he was being paid for his trouble in crack cocaine, said Defiance County Sheriff David Westrick.

On Monday, sheriff's deputies arrested Chad Staton, 22, of Defiance, who admitted to investiga tors that he filled out about 130 registration cards, making up the names and addresses. He said he was hired by a Toledo woman to solicit voter registrations.

She gave him a choice of cash or drugs for his work, Westrick said. He chose crack cocaine.

Deputies from Defiance County in northwest Ohio and Toledo police searched the woman's Toledo house, confiscating drug paraphernalia and voter registration forms, Westrick said.

The occupant of the house, Georgianne Pitts, 41, told investigators that she was recruited for the voter registration drive by Thaddeus Jackson, Ohio director of the NAACP's National Voter Fund.

It was not the first time Jackson's name has come up in connection with election irregularities. Earlier this year, the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections questioned 17

registration cards that Jackson turned in because the signatures on all 17 cards appeared similar. He blamed the problem on subordinates.

In 1992, Jackson resigned as chairman of the Cuyahoga County Board of Elections and later pleaded guilty to accepting improper compensation while board chairman. Jackson could not be reached for comment Monday.

Phony voter registration cards are a problem for election boards across Ohio and the country, as both Republicans and Democrats try to sign up new voters for this election.

Gwen Dillingham, deputy director of the Cuyahoga County elections board, said the 130 registration cards under investigation in Defiance County were dropped off at the Cuyahoga County board by one of 10 groups that have collected many of the 160,000 registration cards submitted this year.

"We get them for all different counties," Dillingham said. She said cards from people in other counties are sent to election officials in those counties.

Dillingham said some groups are paying people $1 to $2 for each registration card.

If Staton is found guilty of falsifying the cards, he could be sentenced to up to 12 months in jail and fined up to $2,500.

Laura Howell, deputy director of the Defiance County Board of Elections, said Staton may have been creative in filling out the cards, but he neglected one name.

"He is not registered to vote in Defiance County," she said.

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