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Governor approves 133 clemency petitions, handles deep backlog

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Gov. Patrick J. Quinn's office has announced that the governor approved 133 clemency petitions just before Thanksgiving.

That means the backlog of un-acted upon clemency petitions left by former governor Rod R. Blagojevich is still enormous at more than 2,000.

But Quinn's actions represent "a sea change in the way clemencies are handled in Illinois," according to the leader of a legal aid organization that says it represents more clemency petitioners than any other group.

"We now have a state executive committed to doing his job" in regard to clemency petitions, said Robert B. Acton, executive director of Cabrini Green Legal Aid.

In June, Gov. Quinn said he hoped to review all clemency petitions from people seeking pardons and erasure of their criminal records by the end of this year.

Acton said he doubts that Quinn would be able to review the many remaining clemency petitions by Dec. 31.

But Quinn has so far granted about 50 percent of the petitions he has ruled on. "So I'm actually hugely encouraged by that acceptance rate," Acton said, "and I would prefer he continue to take the time necessary to make a thoughtful decision rather than race to beat an arbitrary deadline."

"Because there isn't a lot of political capital in granting pardons, I view Gov. Quinn's decision to stick his neck out for half of these petitioners, individuals who have owned up to the mistakes of their past and demonstrated life change, as an act of courage and principle. I admire that," Acton said.

The announcement from Quinn's office said Quinn last Wednesday ruled on 265 petitions for clemency, approving 133 and declining 132.

When Quinn took office in January, there was a backlog of 2,500 petitions, according to his office. Quinn has acted on 361 clemency petitions total, with 179 approved and 182 declined.

"The governor's objective is to methodically and carefully review every petition and then make the right and just determination," according to a statement from the governor's office. "It may take a little longer to make these important decisions, but the pace of petition reviews and decisions has vastly

improved under Gov. Quinn compared to his predecessor."

The huge backlog that Blagojevich left was "a source of great shame for the state of Illinois" for five or six years, said Jorge Montes, chairman of the state's Prisoner Review Board, back in June.

The Prisoner Review Board examines each petition for clemency and provides the governor a confidential recommendation about whether it should be approved.

While Blagojevich was still in office, 12 current or former clients of CGLA who had filed petitions for clemency had sued Blagojevich to try to force him to grant or deny requests for clemency within a reasonable time.

The 12 were represented pro bono by Chicago attorney Charles C. Jackson of Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP.

The 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled last April that neither state law nor constitutional rights required either Blagojevich or his successor Quinn to act on clemency petitions within any particular time frame.

Jackson said the U.S. Supreme Court in October refused to review that decision.

But Jackson said Tuesday that Gov. Quinn "should be commended for taking his job seriously.... He's stepped up to the plate.

"I guess the world at large would like to see the backlog shrink more quickly, but the contrast between the present governor and the prior governor is very stark," Jackson said.

"Gov. Quinn is showing real compassion," Jackson added, for people who have "turned their lives around and who have no political influence at all," and the governor is giving them "a real second chance at life."

According to Acton, CGLA represents only petitioners for clemency whose convictions are at least 10 years old and who have not been re-arrested in 10 years.

Sometimes the petitioners represented by CGLA have no arrest record for 20 or 30 years, Acton said. They ask for clemency to receive a clear record so they can be employed, Acton said.

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