



## CHANGE OF SUBJECT

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# Blagojevich must act now on pardons

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The system worked for Chandra Gill.

In a heated moment more than six years ago, Gill, then 26, grabbed the neck of an off-duty police officer working as a security guard at a high school basketball game in Urbana. The guard was trying to eject Gill's friend from the bleachers for having walked on the court, and Gill ripped the guard's shirt and scratched him during the altercation.

Gill was convicted of felony aggravated battery and sentenced to 18 months of probation. But that conviction was standing in the way of her getting a job as a school administrator, so she applied in August 2006 for a pardon.

Hundreds of ex-cons do this every year—ask the state to erase a stain from their records that employers tend to hold against them. The Illinois Prisoner Review Board collects documents, holds hearings and forwards confidential recommendations to the governor, who, in Gill's case, signed off on the pardon in January 2007.

On the merits, Gov. Rod Blagojevich's decision looks reasonable. Gill made a mistake, got past it and deserved a clean slate.

In context, however, Blagojevich's decision is scandalous—yet another example of his brazen and capricious use of power.

At the very time that Gill's pardon request was proceeding to its swift and satisfying conclusion, Blagojevich was facing a federal lawsuit filed by nine Cabrini-Green Legal Aid Clinic clients. These nine had been waiting as long as four years for Blagojevich to act on their requests to expunge convictions dating back as far as 1982.

They represented just a fraction of the huge backlog of petitioners—the Prisoner Review Board put the number at 1,571 this week—who are awaiting a decision from Blagojevich. The plaintiffs contended that the governor had a constitutional duty not to let such petitions languish for years and years.

Blagojevich argued through his lawyers that the suit should be dismissed because his powers of pardon and commutation are wholly discretionary. And while that motion was pending—in February 2007, one month after he had acted on Gill's petition—he tried to

render the complaint moot by suddenly ruling on all nine petitions.

He denied eight of the nine requests, including one from a 49-year-old deaf woman convicted in 1982 of aggravated battery—same as the charge against Gill—for her attack on an allegedly abusive partner.

Were the Cabrini-Green denials retaliatory? Prisoner Review Board recommendations are confidential, so we don't know if Blagojevich followed them in any or all of the cases.

Was Gill's pardon greased by her connections? Rev. Jesse Jackson was among those who wrote a letter on her behalf. And she was the point person at the private Loop Lab School to which Blagojevich was then giving a controversial \$1 million grant.

Blagojevich spokeswoman Abby Ottenhoff won't discuss specifics other than to deny any connection between Gill's pardon and the Loop Lab grant, so we don't know what reasoning the governor used in sorting out the worthy from the unworthy.

All we know is that he's granted 67 pardons and denied 1,160 so far—an 18-to-1 denial rate—and that U.S. District Judge Joan Gottschall ruled last month that the lawsuit against him should proceed: "The unequivocal and mandatory language of [Illinois law] requires that the Governor make some decision within a reasonable period of time," she wrote.

Translation: Governor, get cracking and make the system work for everyone, not just the chosen few.