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CONTACT: Janel Causey
jcausey@gopnm.org (505) 298-3662

In Case You Missed It

KUNM Radio: Sec. of State Office Dysfunctional, Former Employees & Other Elections Officials Say

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Secretary Of State's Office Is Dysfunctional, Former Employees And Other Elections Officials Say

By Jim Williams

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Resignations, dismissals, and allegations of impropriety have plagued the New Mexico Secretary of State’s office since Mary Herrera was elected in 2006. Former employees, and some current ones, say the office is deeply dysfunctional and that it’s having an impact on the agency’s work. Herrera has said many of those former employees were incompetent and that her opponents are now trying to smear her just before the election. KUNM’s Jim Williams dug deeper into the issue and has this report.

Williams: Two long-time Secretary of State’s office employees were put on administrative leave last week. This after they went to the F-B-I over concerns about Herrera, alleging among other things that she’d had her employees campaign for her on state time. They handed over documents they say back up the allegations. But this is just another piece of a growing puzzle. As KUNM has reported previously, some former Secretary’s office employees say they left because of mismanagement and a lack of professionalism in the office. In recent weeks, some of those former employees have

come forward with specifics. But first: this story is as much about the people who would not speak on the record as those who would. I spent countless hours on the phone and in person with well over a dozen current and former employees of the Secretary of State's office. Each spoke at length of cronyism, incompetence, and humiliation, and each was overwhelmingly certain there would be retaliation if they spoke out. But that didn't stop some of them.

Vigil: It just uh, from day one it was a really bad situation. Mary Herrera and her staff were very paranoid. They went into this administration not trusting anybody.

Williams: That's Trish Vigil. She oversaw the Secretary of State's Human Resources Department for several years. When Herrera came in, she says,

Vigil: She brought in her best friend and moved her in the office with me. I was having a very difficult time, they were making my life miserable there. I was told they were trying to get rid of me. So I had to dot my i's and cross my t's, watch what I did...which I did. I went on Medical Leave. The doctor advised me to take a couple weeks of Administrative Leave due to my distress and everything that was going on.

Williams: Vigil came back from medical leave, and she says without explanation, was stripped of her duties, had her keys taken away, and was moved to a corner office where she did...

Vigil: Absolutely nothing. I pretty much was like a backup to the front desk receptionist whenever they needed to take a break, or they called in for the day. But that's pretty much all I did for a year.

Watson: We weren't given any respect for our knowledge. We were made to feel inadequate.

Williams: That's Trena Watson, who was senior administrator in the office when Herrera came in. She'd been working on computer networks, writing programs, and maintaining the agency's servers.

Watson: And it...it was kind of a hostile environment Which makes it very hard to do your job, let alone work as a team as we needed to do.

Williams: Her administrative access was taken from her, and she was excluded from setting up new employees' workstations.

Watson: I had not done anything wrong, I had not received a reprimand. It very much felt like they came in and anyone who had worked under the previous administration was under suspicion. And that makes you feel...depressed, that you're not trusted, that every move you make is being watched and questioned for no reason. They had no reason to

mistrust me.

Williams: Watson says within just six weeks of Herrera's entrance to the office...

Watson: Morale tanked.

Williams: The exception, she says, was for employees who had worked on Herrera's campaigns. They were given opportunities, and many of them stayed on...for a while. But even for them, the honeymoon was short. Herrera appointed Francisco Trujillo of Taos as her deputy secretary. That's when, according to many, things went downhill fast. Daniel Gutierrez had been a longtime friend of Herrera's. He'd helped her on her campaigns, and after she was elected, he says, she convinced him to come out of retirement to work as a special projects coordinator for her. One of his first projects was an 18-page training manual for county clerks. It was, he says, comprehensive, and took weeks to put together. He says Trujillo wanted to approve it.

Gutierrez: So I give it to him, and I'd ask him two or three days later, "have you...?", and he says "I'm so busy, I'm so busy", he's always so busy, he was like totally disorganized. And half the time, you know, he wasn't there. So he said he was too busy: "I'll get to it, I'll get to it." Well, you know, so I would just wait and wait and wait. Basically he handed it back to me as a one-pager. And that really didn't cover the issues that I was hoping to accomplish with a lot of the clerks that maybe didn't have enough personnel trained in their areas, their particular counties or whatever. And that bothered me.

Williams: Gutierrez says he was then reprimanded for "poor leadership" after allowing those he supervised to shift their hours earlier in the workday...and then Trujillo denied him a day off after weeks of intensive pre-election work. Gutierrez then tried to talk to his longtime friend Herrera about what was happening.

Gutierrez: And she was always too busy. One time I caught her in the hallway, says "hey Mary I need to talk to you about a couple of things". She said "well, make an appointment". I said wait a minute, I've known this person for thirty years, forty years, she can't take five minutes to talk to me? So I called her administrative assistant. She said "well, Mary's all booked up, I don't know when she'll be able to see you".

Williams: Others say Trujillo worked to undermine their relationships with Herrera. Gutierrez says Herrera allowed that to happen.

Gutierrez: She's lost a lot of friends. A lot of them, over the years that I knew were like me. You know, they'd known her for thirty years or forty years. And she's just changed totally. I mean like totally, totally. Once she became secretary of state, she was a totally different person. A totally different person.

Williams: Herrera generally refers questions on these issues to Trujillo. In an interview

earlier this year, Trujillo told KUNM the high turnover rate comes from the transition from one Secretary to another, and then from government officials looking to move to other agencies. He also reflected on a statement Herrera made to KUNM earlier this year that many of the former employees were “not competent”.

Trujillo: Sometimes it’s very easy to say “I just don’t wanna deal with this person, I don’t have the time, I don’t have the patience”. But hopefully you find the time, you find the patience, and you take whatever steps are necessary, you give them whatever tools they need, you give them whatever training they need to bring them up to an acceptable level. If they don’t come up to an acceptable level, then that’s when a member of management needs to follow a progressive discipline to either take care of the problem, or bring in someone that will do the job efficiently.

Williams: But critics of the administration say the problem is there’s no one overseeing Trujillo and Herrera. Santa Fe County Elections Director Denise Lamb spent several years in the secretary of state’s office working for Rebecca Vigil-Giron. She says a number of things have fallen through the cracks under Herrera and Trujillo. For instance, the state is supposed to send out address confirmation cards to voters in election years.

Lamb: It didn’t happen in 2008. It’s required by federal law. It did not happen. And it leaves us with a larger voter file than we would otherwise have if it had taken place, and that increases the cost of elections. We have to have more ballots, we have to have more voting equipment.

Williams: And in the runup to the 2008 presidential election, Lamb says Herrera’s office sent out numerous last minute directives, some contrary to election code, some resulting in litigation.

Lamb: Directives about the felon reinstatement that were issued too late to actually reinstate any felons, directives on challengers and watchers that were issued after the election schools were already completed so we couldn’t tell our poll workers. There was just a general lack of planning and foresight.

Williams: Many of the state’s 33 county clerks also have issues with Herrera and Trujillo. San Juan County wanted a server-based voter information system. Chief Deputy Clerk Fran Hanhardt worked with Trujillo to try to get Election Systems and Software, ES&S, the state’s contractor, to build one.

Hanhardt: He had had a conversation and correspondence from ES&S that they were not interested in providing San Juan County with a server-based system. They wouldn’t even consider it. That was in June. In July, Francisco sent us a memo that they were still working on it, they were still working on it. We didn’t know until after the fact, until November, that he had known since June. We worked all of those months to get

everything compiled and ready and all of that stuff, and he knew darned good and well that they weren't ever gonna do it.

Williams: Add to this an office that's about as transparent as a brick wall. KUNM has made numerous document requests from the Secretary's office, from multiple resignation letters to contentious e-mails. In each instance, we've been told the documents can't be found. And many clerks and other election officials say they often don't get calls returned from the secretary's office, and have to turn to each other for help. Denise Lamb says she frequently gets calls from other counties because of it. Santa Fe County Clerk Valerie Espinoza, a fellow Democrat, says it's so bad she had considered running against Herrera this year.

Espinoza: I'm disappointed that I didn't run because I'm so disappointed in the leadership of that office. She makes it hard for clerks like myself. In fact, you're very familiar with the ethics complaint that she filed against me for not filing a campaign expense report, yet I didn't run, didn't file petition signatures, and you know I explored the idea. And that's where I am today, looking back and saying I should have run.

Williams: Of the numerous on the record and off the record conversations KUNM held for this story, several of the sources, many registered Democrats, said they will not vote for Mary Herrera in November. Many of these people had been long-time supporters of hers. Meanwhile, Secretary's office spokesman James Flores and Administrator Manny Vildasol remain on paid leave after taking their allegations to the F-B-I that Herrera engaged in campaign activity using state personnel and resources. Elections Director AJ Salazar resigned in February, citing this in his resignation letter. The attorney general's office has said it's investigating it, as well. Herrera has called the allegations "politically motivated, false, and ridiculous." It remains to be seen what kind of judgment New Mexico voters will make in November. For KUNM, I'm Jim Williams.

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