

Applicant was asked: Which party are you?

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By LESLIE MURRAY

A job applicant for a Union County post was asked about his political affiliation and encouraged to "get active" in the Democratic party to improve his chances of being hired, Republicans say -- and they've got the emails to prove it. But the county employee who made those comments was not responsible for the hiring decision, and a county spokesman said this week that her comments did not represent the county's position "in any shape, way or form."

Carolyn Vollero, a former county employee and chairwoman of the Cranford Democratic Party, asked Garwood resident Dennis Clark about his partisan affiliation while Clark was seeking employment with the county in 2004. The written request is made in a chain of emails shared with the Chronicle last week by Phil Morin, the chairman of the Union County Republican Party and a former Cranford mayor.

Vollero, who is also a former Cranford mayor, recently retired from her post as chairperson of the county Bureau of Mosquito Control. She did not return repeated calls for comment regarding the correspondence.

Clark, who is a registered Republican and is currently running for a seat on the Garwood Borough Council, said that he and Vollero met when she was invited to judge an essay contest for the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post in Garwood. At the time Clark, a disabled veteran of the Vietnam War, was looking for employment. He applied for a job as a part-time clerk with Union County Division of Veterans Affairs and in an email dated March 24, 2004, thanked Vollero for her involvement in the VFW contest and asked for assistance in the application process.

That day, Vollero responded to say she would reach out to a woman she knew in the Veterans Affairs office.

She also asked Clark what she called a "personal question." "(A)re you a registered voter & how are you registered? Dem. OR Rep.?" Vollero wrote.

Clark responded less than 10 minutes later, telling her that he is a registered Republican, though he rarely votes along strict party lines. "I hope that won't preclude my getting the position, if I'm qualified," he wrote.

In another email two days later, Clark wrote that he had had an interview and was hopeful he would be offered the job. "I think this job is tailor-made for me and I would greatly appreciate any help you would be able to give me," he wrote.

Ultimately, though, the job went to another applicant -- a veteran with ties to the Democratic Party. In an April 5 email, Vollero wrote that she had been told Clark was "a wonderful candidate, but only one position was open." She offered him encouragement for the future and then wrote, "Also consider trying to get ACTIVE with the DEMOCRATS in Garwood. Think about it."

Clark responded later that day, writing, "How if I'm a registered Republican can I get active with the Democratic Party of Garwood? I don't think it should matter what party I'm affiliated with, if I meet the qualifications for a County position." Clark said he kept the emails and sent them to Morin about a year ago, after reading a story in a local newspaper about the impact of political affiliation on employment opportunities. Asked if he feels his political views affected his application, he said, "Absolutely."

Morin called the emails the "most blatant example of partisan politics as the deciding factor of getting a job in Union County," and he said Vollero's role is significant because of the "senior position" she held with the county. "She certainly bragged in her emails (about) her ability to assist him," Morin said.

However, county officials said this week that Vollero's comments do not mirror the county's position.

"Carolyn Vollero's views and opinions expressed in these emails do not represent those of this administration or the County of Union in any shape, way or form," said Sebastian D'Elia, a county spokesman. "Ms. Vollero's employment duties did not include hiring or the development of hiring policy for the County." "The County of Union hires the best suitable candidates for all our positions (and) is an equal opportunity employer," D'Elia said.

He also said that the county employees mentioned in the correspondence between Vollero and Clark did not recall the interview with Clark, nor did they remember any conversations with Vollero about Clark's application for employment. The county does not typically allow department heads to speak to the press, and D'Elia declined the Chronicle's request to interview the individual who made the hiring decision.

According to the New Jersey State Department of Personnel, which deals with discrimination in the workplace, political affiliation can not be considered when evaluating a job applicant. "It is totally and unequivocally inappropriate to ask an applicant about their political affiliation," said George Laufenberg, communications director for the department.

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