



NEWS

# Fraud cases, misconduct up in county



By **DAILY NEWS** | |

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Reports of fraud and misconduct by Los Angeles County government employees have increased steadily in recent years, possibly because of the worsening economy, officials said Monday.

During the nine months ending June 30, the Office of County Investigations opened 676 investigations into allegations of fraud and misconduct, according to a new report on the county's fraud hotline. They substantiated 91 tips, referring them for prosecution or disciplinary action.

During that time, seven county employees were convicted of crimes, 13 were fired and 18 were suspended, the highest number of suspensions and convictions since at least 2000.

By comparison, in 2005-06, officials investigated 571 tips. By the end of the current fiscal year 2008-

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09, they expect to receive nearly 1,000, according to county budget documents.

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OCI chief investigator Guy Zelenski said the worsening economy may explain part of the increase.

“Usually, when the economy gets bad, people sometimes get desperate,” Zelenski said.

At the same time, he noted the county has seen fewer instances of misused office computers after the county installed Web filters to block inappropriate sites.

The misconduct ranged from children's services managers approving overtime requests for each other to animal-care workers loaning money to co-workers during work hours at 50 percent interest to parks employees stealing a bag of more than \$3,400 in cash collections.

“I've seen a lot more cash thefts,” Zelenski said.

“Cash is very liquid and easy to convert to personal use.”

Among the most serious cases last fiscal year:

A Los Angeles County children's services supervisor was sentenced to three years in state prison for fraudulently billing more than \$500,000 for child care that was not provided.

A Registrar-Recorder's Office employee allowed a private solicitor unauthorized after-hours access to a secured county work area to prepare documents for his private business, costing taxpayers more than \$4,000. The employee also

admitted to having sex with the solicitor in the office.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Federal Trade Commission are investigating unidentified individuals who used counterfeit county warrants to defraud the public in an international mail scam costing taxpayers more than \$20,000.

“Fraud and waste in county government cannot be tolerated and Supervisor (Michael D.) Antonovich is pleased that the hotline has become a vital tool for people to report instances of fraud and waste of taxpayer money,” said Tony Bell, spokesman for Antonovich.

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