

## **Official: Inmates paid to gather signatures**

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Inmates at the Butte Prerelease Center did not gather signatures for a proposed ballot measure while fulfilling a community service requirement, its program administrator said Friday.

Jay Grant said the pre-release center inmates instead were hired by an employment agency retained by backers of Initiative 161 and paid \$9 an hour to gather signatures.

"We certainly didn't allow it under any circumstances other than being paid," Grant said.

I-161 is a controversial proposal that would abolish outfitter-sponsored, non-resident big game and deer combination hunting licenses.

Some questions about I-161 signature-collecting have arisen as county election officials are counting the number of signatures by registered voters who signed various petitions for proposed ballot issues. Local election officials must turn in their counts to Secretary of State Linda McCulloch's office by July 16.

To qualify for the ballot, I-161 needs 24,337 signatures of registered Montana voters, including 5 percent of the voters in 34 of the 100 state House districts.

Grant took issue with a claim by Mac Minard, executive director of Montana Outfitters & Guides Association, in a letter sent to Silver Bow County Attorney Eileen Joyce earlier this month. The association is the leading opponent of the ballot measure.

Minard questioned the legality of some of signature-gathering efforts there on behalf of I-161 in Silver Bow County. He asked Joyce to investigate a number of alleged legal violations and disqualify any signatures illegally obtained.

Minard said three Butte prerelease inmates "volunteered that they were working off court-required community services" by gathering signatures for I-161. After completing the community service, they would be qualified to be paid by an employment service in Butte, he said.

Grant said the inmates told Minard they were performing community service after "he badgered them pretty good." Grant said.

Minard could not be reached for comment Friday.

"Contact with Jay Grant, administrator, Butte Prerelease facility, confirmed that prerelease residents were in fact being used in this manner, although no confirmation was made as to whether these individuals were indeed working off community service requirements," Minard said in the letter.

Grant said Friday he repeatedly told Minard that the inmates had been hired to gather signatures and it wasn't part of any community service requirement.

He said prerelease inmates are required to perform a total 50 hours of community service while at the center. They usually volunteer for nonprofits such as St. Vincent de Paul or the Salvation Army, he said.

"They need to pay back society," he said.

Inmates also are required to find paying jobs, with some earnings going for crime-victim restitution and some to help pay for the costs for being in the prerelease center.

Grant said this wasn't the first time that prerelease center inmates had been hired to gather signatures for a ballot measure effort.

As for the inmates gathering signatures for I-161, "they're felons, they can't have guns and they don't have a dog in the fight," Grant said. "They're just looking to make nine bucks an hour."

Minard had questioned whether prerelease center vehicles, equipment, personnel or time were used to help inmates go to gather signatures in violation of a law prohibiting public employees, equipment or supplies being used in support of a ballot issue.

Grant said the center staff usually drives inmates to their jobs, but he wasn't aware whether the signature-collectors were transported to work. They gathered signatures at the farmers' market and courthouse, both of which are a just block away from the prerelease center.

No one from the prerelease center supervises inmates on their jobs, he said.

However, the center does send staff every day to do physical checks to make sure a sample of 25-30 of its 150 inmates are at their jobs, Grant said.