

University of Illinois Vendor, School Officials Violate State Gift Ban

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In mid-April, the Office of Executive Inspector General for the Agencies of the Illinois Governor (OEIG) released a report on an investigation into ethics violations by athletic department officials at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). The report is an important reminder that vendors and others interacting with employees at public universities may be subject to the same ethics rules that apply to officers and employees in the executive branch of state government.

The OEIG investigation found that Midwest Foods and its co-owner, John Fitzgerald, gave prohibited gifts to UIC Associate Athletic Director Adam Levinson and other UIC employees and officials. OEIG interviewed Fitzgerald, Levinson and other UIC officials as part of the investigation, finding that the illicit gifts included tickets to Chicago Bulls and White Sox games as well as use of a rental apartment in Santa Monica, California free of charge. The sporting tickets each had an estimated value of up to \$160, while the use of the rental apartment had an estimated value of up to \$2,985. The OEIG determined that Levinson and Midwest Foods, through its co-owner, Fitzgerald, violated the State Officials and Employees Ethics Act's ban on the solicitation and acceptance of gifts from prohibited sources by state officials. Midwest Foods and Fitzgerald were prohibited sources since they did business and sought to do business with UIC.

In its investigation, the OEIG also determined that UIC's Athletics Department had entered into contracts without following university procedures for approval and legal review. OEIG ultimately did not refer the matter to the Illinois Attorney General's office for possible prosecution, but the office recommended that UIC take certain internal disciplinary action and remind all UIC employees of the gift

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ban. Moreover, the vendor received some unwelcome public scrutiny as its dealings were reported in the *Chicago Tribune* and *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*.