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front page

Widening Inquiry On Pataki Donors And Parole Board

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The scribbled note from a political fund-raiser for Gov. George E. Pataki to a Pataki administration official carried a terse directive: "These are three names that need to be followed up with."

What came next were details on three men in New York prisons — violent young felons whose relatives had made sizable donations to the Pataki campaign in the belief, prosecutors say, that the money would get the inmates paroled.

The note was among a series of documents unearthed by the United States Attorney's office in its investigation into the campaign's fund-raising, a trove that provides a rare view of Pataki officials assisting a handful of major campaign contributors.

The documents, and courtroom testimony, recount how the campaign sent inquiries about the prisoners directly to the Governor's office, which passed them on to the Parole Board. In fact, this week, a parole official pleaded guilty to lying to Federal officials in the case and insisted in court that he was told that the Governor's office had expressed strong concern about one of the prisoners, who was released on parole. The other two were not.

While strenuously denying any wrongdoing, even some of the Gover-

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nor's closest associates privately acknowledge that the investigation has at times offered an unflattering portrait of the administration.

And now it seems to be expanding. The parole officer who pleaded guilty this week, Ronald Hotaling, strongly suggested in court that the chairman of the Parole Board, Brion D. Travis, who was appointed by Mr. Pataki, told him of "the interest of the Governor's office in the release" of one of the felons.

Several state officials say that in recent months, the administration has revamped the Parole Board, which is controlled by the Governor's appointees, and greatly reduced Mr. Travis's role in its day-to-day operations. Thomas Grant, a spokesman for Mr. Travis, would not comment on Mr. Travis's job.

Prosecutors are also said to be focusing on a separate case involving whether parole officials gave lenient treatment to Shlomo Helbrans, a Hasidic rabbi imprisoned in a widely publicized kidnapping case.

In a letter recently entered into the court record, the prosecutors say that a parole official "took steps to facilitate the release of" Rabbi Helbrans because the official felt "improper political pressure" being brought on the rabbi's behalf. Rabbi Helbrans was convicted of kidnapping a teen-ager, Shai Fhima Reuven, in 1994, after Shai's mother entrusted him to the rabbi for bar mitzvah instruction.

Pataki aides dismiss the 20-month-

old inquiry as a politically motivated attempt to embarrass the Governor. They say no one received special favors, noting that of the three young prisoners, only the one with an exemplary prison record was paroled. They say the two parole officials found guilty this month were hired under Mr. Pataki's predecessors. And both were indicted for lying when questioned in the case, not for influence-peddling.

Michael McKeon, the Governor's press secretary, declined to comment on specific documents or testimony. "The prosecutors know that those members of this administration involved in these cases handled themselves appropriately and properly," Mr. McKeon said. "At some point, they are going to have to acknowledge that fact. In fairness, it should be sooner, rather than later."

In the Rabbi Helbrans case, prosecutors are examining whether the board released him at the urging of an influential rabbi, Leon Perlmutter, who has assisted the Pataki campaign in raising money from Orthodox Jews. In one document, the prosecutors assert that a parole staff employee was told by a superior that Rabbi Perlmutter was someone who could deliver votes and therefore should be listened to on inmate releases. The employee, who was not identified, was contacted directly by Rabbi Perlmutter about several cases, including Rabbi Helbrans, according to the record.

Both Rabbi Helbrans and Rabbi Perlmutter have denied any wrongdoing. In an interview last year, Rabbi Helbrans said, "I didn't receive

any kind of special treatment."

The inquiry by the United States Attorney's office in Brooklyn began in January 1998 after the parents of one of the three young inmates complained to the police that a volunteer Republican fund-raiser, Yung Soo Yoo, had offered to help win parole in exchange for contributions but had reneged. Mr. Yoo is a prominent businessman among Koreans in the New York region, and all three inmates were sons of Koreans.

The family of one of the inmates, James Jhang, gave at least \$12,000 in 1994 and 1995 to the campaign, while the family of another, Boyoung Chung, gave \$9,500. Neither man was released. The family and friends of the third inmate, John Kim, gave several thousand dollars, prosecutors say. The campaign eventually returned most of the donations from the three inmates' supporters.

Mr. Kim was released after Korean immigrants in Queens lobbied the Parole Board. His family has close ties to Grace Koh, the Governor's liaison to Asian Americans, who also lobbied for his release.

Several officials of the Pataki administration and campaign later testified before the grand jury. Besides the guilty plea from Mr. Hotaling, the prosecutors won the conviction of Sean McSherry, a parole commissioner, on perjury charges this month. Prosecutors have contended that Mr. McSherry caved in to political pressure and spearheaded the release of Mr. Kim undeservedly in 1996. Mr. McSherry had been known as one of the most cautious commissioners in making release decisions.

The documents portray a domino effect of inquiries that began with Mr. Yoo, who sent the names of the prisoners to Patrick Donohue, a Pataki fund-raiser. Mr. Donohue then sent the handwritten note to Jeff Wiesenfeld, director of community affairs for the Governor. Mr. Wiesenfeld in turn contacted Mr. Travis, asking for information about the three young inmates.

In Mr. Kim's case, the documents show that Mr. Wiesenfeld, who supervised Ms. Koh in the community affairs office, tried to get Mr. Kim into a work release program. "John Kim appears to have made a stunning turn from a life that was previously influenced and dominated by gang interactions," Mr. Wiesenfeld wrote Mr. Travis on Dec. 7, 1995.

Mr. Travis replied days later that Mr. Kim was not eligible for work release because of his conviction for a violent felony. But Mr. Travis wrote that Mr. Wiesenfeld's recommendation would be considered when Mr. Kim was up for parole.

The Governor himself is not mentioned in the campaign and administration records, and there is no evidence that he had any involvement in the parole decisions. But according to court testimony, he did cross paths with one of the contributors.

Detective George Slater, an investigator, told the court that Mr. Chung's mother, Incha Chung, recounted how she had met the Governor at a fund-raiser and whispered that she was "waiting for news."

The Governor, Mr. Slater said, replied that he did not know what she was talking about and walked away.