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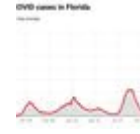
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Operatives tied to 'ghost' candidate scheme told they're targets of Miami prosecutors

By ANNIE MARTIN and JASON GARCIA
ORLANDO SENTINEL | JAN 05, 2022



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Several key figures in Florida’s “ghost” candidate scandal, including the man who orchestrated an advertising blitz that promoted the mysterious candidates in three Florida State Senate races in 2020, are facing the possibility of criminal charges, court records released Wednesday show.

Alex Alvarado, who ran two committees that spent a combined \$550,000 on ads championing the candidates as part of an apparent vote-siphoning scheme, was among those who received what’s known as a “prior to” letter from Miami-Dade prosecutors, which signals that the recipient is a target of investigators.

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Other recipients of the letters include former Democratic fundraiser Dan Newman; Richard Alexander, the chairman of “Grow United,” a nonprofit organization that provided all of the funding for Alvarado’s committees; and “Let’s Preserve the American Dream,” a nonprofit that contributed to more than \$1 million to Grow United in 2020.

The existence of the letters was revealed in records released Wednesday from the criminal case against former state lawmaker Frank Artiles, who is accused of paying a friend to put his name on the ballot in a South Florida state senate race in 2020.

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Artiles' attorneys are trying to shield evidence in the case against the former state senator from public view. The existence of the "prior to" letters was referenced in an exhibit by the attorneys and **was first reported Wednesday by the Miami Herald.**

Eleventh Judicial Circuit Judge Ariana Fajardo Orshan will consider the motion during a hearing Thursday afternoon. Several media organizations, including the Orlando Sentinel, have challenged the Artiles lawyers' request to keep evidence collected in the case, including files on Artiles' laptops, phone and external hard drive, from the public's view.

A "prior to" letter from the State Attorney's Office typically alerts someone they are the target of an investigation and gives them a chance to sit for an interview with prosecutors, said H. Scott Fingerhut, a professor at Florida International University's law school.

It's an investigative tool that helps prosecutors strengthen strong cases and weed out weak ones, he added. Similar to a "target letter" used by federal authorities, it signals that an arrest may be forthcoming for the recipient, but that's not a certainty, he said.

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"The letter might also serve to open the lines of communication between a potential defendant and the state, and in that sense, can be seen as opportunity for resolution as much

as threat to arrest and worse," said Fingerhut, a former prosecutor in the Miami-Dade State Attorney's Office.

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The letters have not yet been released publicly and Wednesday's court filings did not reveal their contents. Ed Griffiths, a spokesperson for the State Attorney's Office declined to comment.

An attorney representing Alvarado could not be reached for comment on Wednesday but another attorney who previously represented him has said he "committed no crime and has done nothing wrong."

Other recipients of the "prior to" letters also said they did nothing illegal. Ryan Tyson, executive director of Let's Preserve the American Dream, said the organization worked with Artiles before the 2020 election but cut ties after his arrest. He said he did not know about the allegations against Artiles prior to his arrest.

Let's Preserve the American Dream "complies with all federal, state, and local laws," Tyson said, adding "the state attorney has not said otherwise in its wide-ranging investigation into the alleged actions of former Senator Artiles where LPAD has voluntarily cooperated with the state attorney's requests."

Newman said Wednesday he planned to tell the State Attorney's office that his fundraising and political work had "always complied

with state and federal law." He arranged about \$1 million in donations to Grow United in 2020, tax records show.

"I have communicated, through my attorney, with the state attorney's office that I am ready and willing to speak with them as they complete their review," Newman said. "I am confident that the work I've done is all legal and above board."

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Alexander, who is listed as the chairman of Grow United on the nonprofit organization’s incorporation documents but who records suggest had no active role in running the entity, has not responded to requests for comment from the Sentinel.

Alexander’s sister, April Odom, sent the Grow United checks to Alvarado, records obtained by the Sentinel show. She and other former employees of Matrix LLC, an Alabama-based political and consulting firm, have worked with Florida Power and Light executives to coordinate political donations in recent years, those records show.

A spokesperson for the energy company has said it did not have any role in the ghost candidate scheme.

Artiles, a former state senator, is charged with paying his friend, Alex Rodriguez, nearly \$45,000 to file as an independent candidate in a South Florida Senate race in 2020 in an attempt to siphon votes from his Democratic opponent. Rodriguez received more than 6,000 votes, while Republican Ileana Garcia defeated Jose Javier Rodríguez by 32 votes.

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The South Florida election was one of three key 2020 state Senate races — including one in Central Florida won by Republican Sen. Jason Brodeur of Sanford — in which so-called “ghost” candidates who did no campaigning appeared to run in order to siphon votes from Democrats.

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Evidence released earlier this year showed Artiles was paid \$15,000 per month plus expenses by Data Targeting, the Gainesville-based firm that oversaw Republican state Senate campaigns last year, to work on South Florida Senate races in 2020, though it's not clear what that work entailed.

Artiles faces four felony charges and has pleaded not guilty. Rodriguez pleaded guilty in August and agreed to testify against Artiles. No one else has yet been charged in the case, though authorities **have said their investigation is ongoing.**

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The new court filings also show the State Attorney's Office has taken statements from several people, including the chief financial officer for Data Targeting and Tyson, the head of Let's Preserve the American Dream and a former vice president for the corporate lobbying group Associated Industries of Florida.

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Abigail MacIver, a former Matrix employee who worked to coordinate the Grow United donation to Alvarado's political committees, also has spoken with the prosecuting office, the records show.

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