Mary Lee Leahy and the Legacy of Rutan v. Republican Party of Illinois


In 1990, the United States Supreme Court issued the Rutan decision that held that public officials could not use political affiliation as a basis for hiring decisions relating to non-policy-making positions. In the wake of the Rutan decision, Illinois Governors and the Illinois Department of Central Management Services, among others, have issued procedures to create a hiring process based on merit, not political affiliation, for these Rutan positions. In 2009, the General Assembly amended the State Officials and Employees Ethics Act and, among other things, expanded the duties of Executive Inspectors General:

To review hiring and employment files of each State agency within the Executive Inspector General’s jurisdiction to ensure compliance with Rutan, [] and with all applicable employment laws.

As a result of this amendment to the Ethics Act, the Executive Inspector General for the Agencies of the Illinois Governor has reviewed and will continue to review and monitor state agency hiring practices.

“There are many reasons why persons choose a career in law. And, through an attorney’s efforts, the trajectory of a client’s life can often be changed for the better. However, sometimes, a lawyer comes along who not only changes the life of her client but also changes the lives of hundreds if not thousands of others—as Ms. Leahy did with the Rutan case. As one of the agencies whose responsibility includes making certain Rutan’s dictates are followed, we can think of no better way to honor the work of Ms. Leahy than by making certain all state agencies fully comply with Rutan.” – Executive Inspector General Ricardo Meza

The Office of Executive Inspector General issues this Special Edition Newsletter in order to thank and recognize Ms. Leahy for her success in changing Illinois’ patronage-based hiring climate. Her advocacy had and will continue to have a positive impact not only on the lives of citizens seeking state employment, but also on the Illinois citizenry, who necessarily benefit from merit-based hiring decisions. In honor of Ms. Leahy’s legacy, and in keeping with its statutory mandate, the Office of Executive Inspector General will continue to diligently seek to root out all Rutan violations.

Ricardo Meza
Executive Inspector General for the Agencies of the Illinois Governor