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5 more charged in sweeping public corruption investigation that ensnared politicians last year

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Five more people have been charged in a years-long corruption investigation that already ensnared a former state Assemblyman and a Jersey City school board president, officials announced Friday.

The new defendants allegedly gave a total of \$239,000 to political parties and candidates before being secretly reimbursed by a law firm, the attorney general's office said in a press release. The firm then claimed it had made no reportable contributions in towns where it sought lucrative contracts.

New Jersey law prohibits political donations on behalf of others.

"We are determined to hold individuals accountable if they seek to distort the political process," state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said in a statement.

"New Jersey's campaign finance and pay-to-play laws are designed to ensure that law firms and other contractors cannot purchase an unfair advantage in the competition for public contracts by making undisclosed or overly large campaign contributions."

A partner at the firm, 47-year-old Elizabeth Valandingham, was charged last month for allegedly lying about contributions tied to contracts in Bloomfield and Mt. Arlington between 2012 and 2017. Some contributions broke donation limits, according to the release.

Through her lawyer, Valandingham previously denied wrongdoing.

The five people charged Thursday allegedly received tens of thousands of dollars from Valandingham's firm after writing personal checks to candidates and committees. Each was charged with fourth-degree concealment or misrepresentation of contributions.

Vanessa Brown, 40, and Christopher Brown, 37, both of West Caldwell, Ricardo Balanzateguimaldo, 40, of Bogota, Erin O'Reilly, who is also known as Erin DeMauro, 41, of Lincoln Park, and Suzanne P. Gayet, 63, of Boonton all face up to \$10,000 in fines and up to a year-and-a-half in prison if convicted, officials said.

It was not immediately clear if they had lawyers. Messages left with numbers listed for the Browns were not immediately returned. Calls made to numbers listed for O'Reilly and Gayet were disconnected after several rings. Balanzateguimaldo could not immediately be reached.

Valandingham, the law firm partner charged in June, worked with Matthew O'Donnell, the attorney who reportedly acted as an undercover informant to help investigators charge five current and former public officials and political candidates late last year with taking bribes.

The group, including former state Assemblyman Jason O'Donnell, was accused of illegally accepting envelopes, bags and even a coffee cup stuffed with cash. O'Donnell's lawyer previously disputed the charge.

The five charged Thursday were not directly connected to the bribery accusations.

The investigation was conducted by the state's Office of Public Integrity and Accountability, which is under the attorney general. Public corruption can be reported online or by calling 1-844-OPIA-TIPS, and tips triggering convictions can lead to rewards of up to \$25,000.