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# Prothonotary Hough under fire for use of background check database

- [Mike Jones](#)

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Mike Jones/Observer-Reporter

Washington County Prothonotary Laura Hough points to sign boards being held by her row office staff during a 2021 commissioners meeting.

Washington County Prothonotary Laura Hough is being accused of using a background check database to search for information on two dozen local people for unknown reasons before county officials revoked her privileges last fall when they suspected she used the system beyond the scope of its official purpose.

Hough was granted access upon her request in the summer of 2020 to use the LexisNexis database to search addresses to send out civil court documents filed through the prothonotary's office, but her search history included "prominent political figures" in Washington County, including the three commissioners.

Hough made multiple searches for Commissioners Diana Irey Vaughan, Nick Sherman and Larry Maggi, along with her prothonotary office's attorney, Sean Logue, and former county chief of staff John Haynes that appeared to go beyond merely searching for property addresses, according to a Dec. 6 letter sent by county officials notifying Hough that her credentials were terminated.

"Please be advised that recent review of reports of usage of the Account indicates potential improper access of the Account by you using your personal log in credentials to access information not required for the business of your office," according to the letter obtained by the *Observer-Reporter*.

The LexisNexis database can be used by law enforcement and government entities to search for background information on people, and there are additional features that allow a user to find personal and financial details, such as credit history and driver's license records. It's unclear how or why Hough apparently had access to features beyond address searches.

The letter to Hough stated that a "review of this Account usage by all registered users clearly shows access to potentially confidential information of certain individuals," which names the commissioners, Logue and Haynes and alludes to "several other prominent political figures, all of which are clearly known to you along with where they can be located."

The letter informing Hough that her credentials to the LexisNexis database were suspended was first made public Wednesday by WJPA-Radio in Washington.

While Hough's account was found to have mostly searched for local people, she also looked up information on Pennsylvania Republican Party Chairman Lawrence Tabas. It's unknown what official business Hough would have in searching for Tabas, who is a Philadelphia-based attorney and does not appear to have any civil cases before the Washington County Court of Common Pleas. A phone call to the state Republican Party's headquarters in Harrisburg was not returned Thursday.

In a statement released Thursday morning, Hough called the situation a "last-minute hit piece" by Democrats in an attempt to influence the May 16 primary, and she claimed to use the database for its intended purposes. Hough, who was elected to office in 2019, is being challenged in the Republican primary by Kevin Hill, and the winner of that GOP race will likely face Democrat Sandy Sabot in the November general election.

"Lexis Nexis is not a law enforcement software, but rather a search engine resource from a company dictated by the County," Hough said in an emailed statement. "At the end of the day, it was a tool used for legitimate Prothonotary office activity."

She did not respond to a follow-up email asking why she used the database to search the three commissioners, along with Logue, Haynes and Tabas.

Her solicitor, Logue, who also serves as chairman of the Washington County Republican Party, said Hough was using the database while trying to find or confirm addresses for people as part of a court directive in 2020 to quickly move paperwork through the office during the court backlog at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

"This is just a political hit by the Democrats just a couple of weeks before the primary over a topic that is almost six months old," Logue said.

However, he had no explanation why Hough would need the database to look up his address, or that of the commissioners, Tabas and any of the other local people included in the search history.

"I don't have an answer for you on that," Logue said.

Some searches of other people apparently were legitimate and within the scope of the prothonotary's duties to locate addresses and send civil court filings.

A statement Thursday from the Washington Court of Common Pleas questioned the claim that Hough needed to use LexisNexis to search for addresses.

"The Court has never directed Prothonotary Hough to utilize LexisNexis," the court's statement read. "On occasion, the Court has reminded Ms. Hough to timely serve court orders and notices using the mail. Ms. Hough is only required to use the addresses provided by parties or attorneys in court cases. If the Court is made aware of a new or different address than filed for a case participant, it has provided that information for the Prothonotary's use."

Hough's search history began raising suspicions within county government last fall, prompting county officials to terminate her credentials and send her the letter on Dec. 6 when she questioned why she could no longer access the network. After learning about Hough's more invasive search history, county officials worked with LexisNexis in an attempt to see what exactly she searched for, although they're unsure what information was provided to her.

It's unclear whether a formal criminal investigation was ever launched into Hough's use of the database, or if the search history could ultimately lead to civil litigation.

The *Observer-Reporter* submitted an open records request to the county Thursday asking for the full list of people for whom Hough searched last fall while using the LexisNexis database.

County officials released a joint statement Thursday afternoon that they were working on a “mechanism” to help people determine whether they were searched, but they have not decided yet on how that process would work.

“This matter remains under investigation,” county officials said in their statement. “The county is preparing a mechanism that will allow citizens to make an inquiry if they believe their name may have been searched by the prothonotary.”

Maggi, a retired state police trooper and former Washington County sheriff, said the use of the search database by Hough was worrisome. The Democratic commissioner questioned why she would need to search him since he has no business before the court that would necessitate her using it to locate his address, which can easily be found on public websites.

“Every bit of information about me is out there, and I don’t know why I was being searched,” Maggi said. “It’s a little concerning for someone to search me for no reason, especially a government official.”

Sherman, who is running for reelection in the Republican primary, declined comment Thursday, while Irey Vaughan, who is chairwoman of the board of commissioners, issued a brief statement.

“This is a terrible invasion of privacy and misuse of her office,” Irey Vaughan said of Hough.

The LexisNexis website describes itself as “a leading global provider of content-enabled workflow solutions designed specifically for professionals in the legal, risk management, corporate, government, law enforcement, accounting, and academic markets.” The company’s website also says it offers a variety of services to various other entities.

“LexisNexis helps uncover the information that commercial organizations, government agencies and nonprofits need to get a complete picture of individuals, businesses and assets with industry-leading data and analytic solutions,” according to the Q&A section on the company’s website.

A spokesperson for the California-based company said they could not discuss issues involving their customers.