

= Joseph Berrios =

Joseph " Joe " Berrios (born February 14 , 1952) is a Democratic politician who is the Assessor of Cook County , Illinois and a Illinois state government lobbyist . One of seven children of Puerto Rican native parents , and raised in the Cabrini @-@ Green public housing project , he became the first Hispanic American to serve in the Illinois General Assembly and the first and only Hispanic American to chair the Cook County Democratic Party . He was a Commissioner on the Cook County Board of Review , a property tax assessment appeal panel .

Throughout his career , Berrios combined government sector jobs , elected office , unpaid political party leadership positions , and private sector proprietorships in lobbying , consulting and insurance sales . His political campaign strategies included ballot access challenges to potential opponents . He has been the focus of investigations into allegations of ethics violations and political corruption with respect to campaign fund @-@ raising and nepotism . In the press and in the courts , Berrios has repeatedly defended his right as an elected official to hire relatives and to accept campaign contributions from those with business before his office .

= = Early life , education , and early political career = =

Berrios was born on February 14 , 1952 , oldest of seven children . Berrios ' parents were Puerto Rican natives . When he was six , his family moved into the Cabrini @-@ Green public housing high @-@ rises . At 13 Berrios got a job as a dishwasher in the Tower Club , a private restaurant on the 39th floor of the Civic Opera House , worked there for seven years , and eventually become a waiter . Berrios graduated from Lane Technical College Prep High School in Chicago , and received a bachelor 's degree in accounting from the University of Illinois Chicago .

Berrios ' first political role was the unpaid position of a precinct captain in the 31st Ward political organization of Alderman Thomas Keane , Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley 's chief ally on the Chicago City Council . Berrios first met Keane when as student at the University of Illinois Chicago , Berrios was ticketed for speeding on the Kennedy Expressway and called on his alderman and committeeman Keane . In October 1974 , Keane was convicted of conspiracy and mail fraud for using his elected office to profit from illegal real estate deals . His wife , Adeline succeeded him as alderman and Edward Nedza as committeeman . In 1978 Nedza won the Illinois state Senate seat from the 5th Senate district , which encompasses the Humboldt Park neighborhood of Chicago , and much of the 31st ward . Nedza , a Polish @-@ American , recognized the growing Puerto Rican population in his district , and groomed Hispanics within the Democratic Party . Nedza 's political proteges included Alderman Miguel Santiago of the 31st ward , the only Hispanic on the Chicago City Council at the time , and Berrios .

= = Illinois State Representative = =

Chicago @-@ area Latino groups contested the legislative district map of the Illinois General Assembly in United States federal court . The panel of judges that decided the case ordered a new map that gave Hispanics a majority in two Illinois House of Representatives districts in Chicago , the 9th , which is predominantly Puerto Rican , and the 20th , which is predominantly Mexican American . In 1982 , Nedza sponsored Berrios , at the time chief clerk to Cook County Board of (Tax) Appeals Commissioner Harry Semrow , in the 9th district . Berrios was one of three candidates who filed nominating petitions to run in the Democratic primary , but Berrios ran unopposed when the petitions of the other two candidates were successfully challenged . Republicans fielded no candidate in their primary , so Berrios ran unopposed in the general election , and at the age of 30 became the first Hispanic American to serve in the Illinois General Assembly . Berrios ran for re @-@ election unopposed in the Fall 1986 general election . He won re @-@ election twice , serving three two @-@ year terms .

Berrios maintained his job in Chicago as chief clerk of the Cook County Board of (Tax) Appeals while serving part @-@ time as a legislator in the state capital in downstate Springfield , Illinois . In

December , 1985 he was one of 21 state legislators criticised for holding a second , taxpayer @-@ salaried government job in a report issued by the Coalition for Political Honesty , founded by Board of (Tax) Appeals Commissioner Patrick Quinn , later Illinois Treasurer , Lieutenant Governor and Governor .

= = Democratic party posts = =

= = = 31st ward Democratic committeeman = = =

In March 1987 then former State Senator Edward Nedza , Berrios ' mentor , was indicted in a federal investigation of bribes allegedly paid to city licensing officials . In April , 1987 Nedza resigned his position as committeeman of the 31st ward in Chicago and named Berrios as his replacement . In August , 1987 , Nedza was convicted on federal charges of using his political office for illegal financial gain .

Berrios allied with Alderman Edward Vrdolyak , during Chicago Mayor Harold Washington 's first term , the Council Wars era . In 1987 Raymond Figueroa , with Washington 's backing , defeated Berrios 's candidate for alderman , Miguel Santiago , which helped close the Council Wars . A year later Figueroa defeated Berrios for committeeman . In 1991 , Figueroa decided not to run for re @-@ election as alderman , and left the committeeman 's job the following year . Berrios regained the committeeman 's post , a role he has held ever since .

= = = Chairman , Cook County Democratic Party = = =

Thomas G. Lyons , a veteran 45th Ward committeeman who had held the unpaid party position of chairman of the Cook County Democratic Party for nearly 17 years , was seriously ill and announced his retirement in January 2007 , and died on January 12 at age 75 . Democrats met in Chicago on February 1 to fill the vacancy and elected Berrios as their new chairman . Berrios was the first Hispanic to hold the post , which he has held ever since .

? If they want to be independent , go ahead and form your own party , " Berrios said in 2014 , referring to candidates in Democratic primaries running without benefit of slating by the Cook County Democratic Party .

= = Commissioner on the Cook County Board of (Tax) Appeals = =

Berrios ' boss at the Cook County Board of (Tax) Appeals , Harry H. Semrow , died November 23 , 1987 at age 72 . In accordance with state law , the Chief Judge of the Cook County Circuit Court appointed a temporary replacement , attorney Thomas A. Jaconetty , 34 , a deputy assessor with the Board of (Tax) Appeals since 1981 . Jaconetty was a 31st ward resident and the secretary of Berrios ' 31st ward Democratic organization with whom Berrios had been a precinct captain in the 31st Ward under Alderman Keane . Berrios ran for the vacancy with the backing of the Democratic party organization . In the Democratic primary , Berrios won the nomination with a sizable margin over Jeffrey Paul Smith , an assistant corporation counsel with the City of Chicago whose candidacy was sponsored by Quinn , by then a former Commissioner .

When first elected to the Board of (Tax) Appeals in 1988 , Berrios was paid about \$ 56 @,@ 000 a year . In October 1990 , Berrios added a part @-@ time job as a legislative aide to a political ally , Democratic State Representative Miguel Santiago . The job paid Berrios nearly \$ 10 @,@ 000 over the next two years . Also while working at the tax appeals board , Berrios worked as a lobbyist and a consultant to the state government , sometimes in association with his longtime business partner , Sam Panayotovich . From 1988 to 1993 , Panayotovich and Berrios won a \$ 185 @,@ 000 no @-@ bid contract as the Illinois Department of Transportation 's (IDOT 's) liaison with lawmakers and municipal officials .

On March 11 , 1994 FBI agents executed a search warrant to confiscate records from the Cook

Cook County Board of (Tax) Appeals as part of an ongoing investigation . Weeks later , federal agents investigating ghost payroll subpoenaed financial records regarding several past and current employees of the Board , including Berrios and Panayotovich . The US Treasury Department investigated the IDOT contracts with Berrios and Panayotovich , and a federal grand jury subpoenaed the contracts . A federal grand jury in Chicago subpoenaed records documenting the recipients of tuition waivers to state universities request by three current and two former state legislators , including Berrios and Panayotovich . The scholarship program , begun in 1905 , allowed each state legislator to waive the tuition and fees of any of the state 's 12 public universities , for any two students who live within the legislator 's district , without regard to academic achievement or financial need . No charges were filed against anyone in the Cook County Board of (Tax) Appeals . The Cook County Board of (Tax) Appeals was reconstituted and renamed the Cook County Board of Review in 1998 .

= = Hiring of relatives and friends = =

While Commissioner on the Board of Review , Berrios ' sister , sister @-@ in @-@ law , son and daughter worked for the county at annual salaries ranging from \$ 48 @,@ 000 to \$ 86 @,@ 000 . " Let me see , one , two , three ? yeah , four , ? Berrios told the Associated Press . Berrios also hired , as a deputy chief commissioner , election law attorney Jaconetty , who wrote the chapter on ballot access in the courseware of the Illinois Institute for Continuing Legal Education . Berrios responded to criticisms of his hiring of relatives and friends , said ,

What you 're basically saying is that Joe Berrios should get out of politics . If my brothers or whoever wants to come and work in government , they shouldn 't be allowed to work in government . If you want to pass a law that says one individual is in government , then none of their friends or relatives can work in government , then you should pass that law .

= = Political fundraising from tax appeal lawyers = =

Board of (Tax) Appeals Commissioner Berrios regularly accepted hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in campaign contributions from lawyers who appealed property tax assessments before the Board . Berrios controls five personal political action committees , not including the fund for the Cook County Democratic Party , which he also controls . Berrios collected more than \$ 3 million in political contributions between 2000 and 2010 , 64 percent from property tax appeal lawyers . About one @-@ third of Berrios ' campaign contributions in that decade came from the 15 property tax appeal law firms that gained the most for their clients between 2006 and 2008 , contributing almost \$ 1 million to six political action committees controlled by Berrios and his daughter , Illinois State Representative Maria Antonia Berrios , Democrat of the 39th Illinois House district on Chicago 's northwest side . Berrios started 2008 with \$ 1 @.@ 2 million in just one of his several campaign funds , much of it from attorneys who appeared before him .

Several of the most successful property tax appeal law firms in Cook County have strong political connections . From 2006 to 2008 , the tax appeal law firms that received the largest reductions for their clients were those of Representative Michael J. Madigan (the Illinois House Speaker , a Chicago Democrat and close ally of Berrios) , Patrick J. Cullerton (the brother of Illinois State Senator John Cullerton , the president of the Illinois Senate) , and Chicago Alderman Edward M. Burke . Simultaneously , Berrios worked as a registered lobbyist to Illinois state government on issues such as legalizing video poker . Berrios lobbies Madigan and Cullerton in Springfield , while the Assessor is critical to the lucrative commercial real @-@ estate tax appeals practices of law firms , including those of Madigan and Cullerton . " Illinois , thy name is conflict of interest , " wrote Better Government Association Executive Director Andy Shaw in the Chicago Tribune in 2009 . " Even by Illinois 's loose conflict of interest standards , the obviousness of the Madigan @-@ Berrios connection is stupefying , " wrote Chicago Magazine in 2013 .

= = Cook County Assessor = =

= = = Campaign and election = = =

Cook County Assessor James Houlihan announced that he would not seek re @-@ election in 2010 . Within hours , Berrios said he planned to announce his candidacy for assessor . On February 2 , 2010 Berrios won the three @-@ way Democratic primary with 39 % of the vote , in a primary with the lowest turn @-@ out since 1958 .

Berrios ' candidacy was denounced by local editorial boards . The Chicago Tribune editorial board described Berrios as " a terrible candidate for the powerful office of assessor " and called the Democratic Party of Cook County 's slating of Berrios for Assessor a " miserable mistake , " citing " his disregard for basic ethical principles " and " patent conflicts of interest . " The Chicago Sun @-@ Times editorial board called the slating a " tragedy , " describing Berrios as " a fine example , in fact , of why Illinois needs serious campaign finance reform with teeth in it , " and citing Berrios ' lack of transparency on the Board of Review , his record of hiring family and friends , and his " cozy " relationship with Madigan . The Daily Herald editorial board called Berrios " the very antithesis of what the office needs . " A profile in Chicago Magazine described him as " a consummate insider in Illinois politics " and " a vivid example of the clout @-@ infested politics for which Illinois is famous . "

On Monday morning , September 13 , 2010 , while candidate Berrios was at a campaign fund @-@ raising breakfast , the Finance Committee of the Cook County Board met and approved a package of ethics reforms in response to Berrios , including a measure that required candidates for Assessor or the Board of Review to return contributions from property tax appeal lawyers of more than \$ 1 @,@ 500 , and prohibiting public officials from conducting political activities while at work for the county or using county resources . " The law stinks , bottom line , " Berrios said .

Cook County Commissioner Forrest Claypool filed nominating petitions to run as an independent candidate for assessor . Berrios dropped a challenge to Claypool 's nominating petitions after Berrios ' lawyers examined Claypool 's 90 @,@ 000 signatures , 65 @,@ 000 more than required . Berrios prevailed in the November 2010 general election with 46 percent of the vote in a field that also included Republican Sharon Strobeck @-@ Eckersall . Claypool attributed his defeat to his failure to get enough suburban support to offset Berrios ' organization in Chicago .

= = = Campaign fundraising in excess of County limits = = =

Assessor Berrios was investigated by the Cook County Board of Ethics for allegedly accepting excessive political contributions from attorneys who argued property @-@ tax appeals before the Assessor and Board of Review . The Board of Ethics sent letters to 15 tax attorneys , warning that their donations to Berrios during the 2010 election cycle had exceeded the county campaign contribution limits . Berrios ' attorney objected that the regulation was " illegal " , and Berrios sought an advisory opinion from the Cook County State ? s Attorney . In February 2011 , a Cook County Deputy State ? s Attorney wrote an advisory opinion that the County Board lacked the home rule authority to limit campaign contributions to the Assessor and that state campaign finance law prevails . The County Board 's legal counsel issued an opinion that the new contribution limits were unconstitutional . Cook County commissioners scaled back the campaign finance reform law and the Cook County Board of Ethics dropped its investigation of Berrios ' campaign contributions .

= = = Hiring and promoting relatives and friends = = =

Days after taking office , Berrios hired his son , sister and Jaconetty to work for him , bringing them over from the property tax appeals board . The family members received raises in their new positions . Berrios also brought over from the property tax appeals board veteran staff member , Felix Cardona Jr . , the treasurer for Citizens for Maria A. Berrios , Berrios ' daughter 's campaign committee . Asked if the hirings confirmed past criticisms , Berrios said : " I still won the election . "

Patrick Blanchard , the county 's Inspector General , and MaryNic Foster , Executive Director of the Cook County Board of Ethics , the County 's top two government watchdogs , issued a joint advisory memo to County Board President Toni Preckwinkle , all 17 Cook County commissioners , and nine other elected county officials , including Berrios , warning them that hiring relatives violated county ethics laws . The Cook County Board of Ethics initiated an investigation of Berrios . The federal @-@ court appointed attorneys monitoring City of Chicago and Cook County compliance with the Shakman decrees , designed to prevent politics from influencing most personnel decisions , raised objections to as many as 27 hirings and firings in the first month of the Berrios administration of the Assessor 's office . On January 28 , 2011 , to comply with County Board President Preckwinkle 's request for across @-@ the @-@ board 16 percent budget cuts to help close an estimated \$ 487 million budget shortfall , Berrios laid off 53 employees , of which 48 were members of unions , but Berrios ' relatives remained on the payroll . On July 17 , 2013 , the Cook County Board approved \$ 529 @,@ 000 in settlements to 11 former employees of the Assessor 's office that the court @-@ appointed Shakman decree monitor had determined had been fired unlawfully by Berrios for political reasons .

While the Cook County Board of Ethics consideration of Berrios ' possible violations of County nepotism ordinances was pending , reports by WGN @-@ TV , the Better Government Association , and Chicago Magazine questioned Berrios ' relationship to John J. Pikarski , the Board 's chairman , and also a prominent , long @-@ time real estate zoning attorney . Pikarski 's law firm had represented clients before the County Board of Review on which Berrios served , and had donated thousands of dollars to Berrios ' political campaigns . One day after the release of the joint investigations , Pikarski resigned .

In its final determination dated June 20 , 2012 the Cook County Board of Ethics recommended that Berrios remove his son and sister from the County payroll and fined Berrios \$ 10 @,@ 000 total (\$ 5 @,@ 000 for each of two relatives he hired) . " To me it 's not big deal , because I 've been told by the state 's attorney they have no power over us , " Berrios said . A Chicago Tribune editorial called Berrios ' hiring of his relatives " a flagrant violation of the county 's ethics rules . " County Board President Preckwinkle said ,

I 've always said throughout my political career that if you 're in public office , you should not hire your relatives . This is not appropriate . And it leads to the perception that government is only for friends and family . And that 's neither good nor right .

Preckwinkle fired Foster in May , 2013 . " Joe is a political ally , " Preckwinkle said .

Cook County State 's Attorney Anita Alvarez declined to represent Berrios or the Board of Ethics in the nepotism issue , citing conflict of interest . A Cook County Circuit Court judge appointed an outside lawyer to represent Berrios before the Board of Ethics beginning in April 2011 , and the firm billed the county \$ 4 @,@ 773 for its work as of September , 2012 . The Board of Ethics rejected Berrios ' appeal of the final determination . By November , 2012 , 15 members of Berrios ' family were on state or county payrolls or receiving state or county pensions . Berrios topped the " Hall of Shame " category in " Chicago 's Best and Worst Politicians of 2012 " in Chicago Magazine 's December , 2012 issue . The Board of Ethics petitioned the courts for a special prosecutor , and a judge appointed attorney and former Chicago Inspector General David H. Hoffman . By March , 2013 , Berrios had billed the County \$ 24 @,@ 716 for his defense against the Board of Ethics ' ruling . In April , 2015 the judge ruled that the Board of Ethics had no authority to impose fines on the Assessor .

Cook County homeowners are eligible for a property @-@ tax break on their primary residence , but a manager in Assessor 's office was granted the homeowner 's exemption on two homes . In 2012 Cook County Inspector General Blanchard subpoenaed the Assessor 's office seeking documents related to the exemptions . Berrios ignored the subpoena , claiming that the County Inspector General has no authority over him . Blanchard filed suit against Berrios . Berrios is represented in the suit by Cook County State 's Attorney Alvarez . On January , 15 , 2014 , a Cook County circuit court judge ruled that the County Inspector General had the authority to investigate the Assessor and all other independently elected County offices . On August 21 , 2014 , the judge ruled the Assessor must comply with the Inspector General 's subpoena .

= = Business interests and personal life = =

Berrios is a partner with Sam Panayotovich in , and secretary of , a lobbying firm , B @-@ P Consulting , Inc. with offices in Springfield and downtown Chicago . Lobbying clients include the Illinois Licensed Beverage Association and the Illinois Coin Machine Operators Association , manufacturers and distributors of video poker machines . Berrios is President of an insurance agency , J B Insurance - Consulting Inc. with an office in downtown Chicago .

Berrios lives in the Belmont Cragin neighborhood on Chicago 's Northwest Side . He is the father of three children , including former Illinois State Representative Maria Antonia " Toni " Berrios .