Law firm thief receives eight years in prison
By Pat Milhizer
April 13, 2011

A former law firm office manager has been sentenced to eight years in prison after she pled guilty to stealing $884,299 from the firm.

Cook County Circuit Judge Diane Gordon Cannon issued the sentence Tuesday to Joan M. Sanchez, who took the money from Kelly, Olson, Michod, DeHaan & Richter LLC.

Sanchez, 53, worked at the firm for 24 years and wrote 234 unauthorized checks from October 2002 through April 2009.

She spent $836,500 on unspecified purchases for herself and an additional $47,799 at a lunch club at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange.

The firm found out about the missing money when Sanchez was on vacation in Hawaii.

A $40 check from the firm's bank account bounced even though the internal ledger indicated the account had money. Sanchez got away with the scheme by forging the signature of one of the firm partners on unauthorized checks and recording phony ledger entries to make it look like the money went to legitimate vendors.

The firm contacted police and the investigation was conducted by police and the state's attorney's Financial Crimes Unit, including Assistant State's Attorney Nicholas N. Trutenko.

The firm, at 333 W. Wacker Drive, specializes in alternative dispute resolution, business services, commercial litigation, construction law, employment law, family law, loan documentation, probate and trust administration, property tax, real estate, sports law, and succession and wealth transfer.

A phone message seeking comment from the firm wasn't returned by early this afternoon.

Wesley G. Skogan, a criminologist at Northwestern University's Institute for Policy Research, said these crimes usually start because the offender is in a financial jam. And they can thrive due to the lack of a sophisticated system to monitor money, he said.

"Initially you think you're risking your job. And you learn you're not risking your job," Skogan said.

Arthur Lurigio, a criminology and psychology professor at Loyola University, said white-collar criminals typically gain confidence every time they complete a fraudulent act.
"You also habituate to it. Maybe the first time I did it, my heart's racing. And the second time … it's not as fast," Lurigio said. "The practice makes the situation less novel and therefore, less anxiety-provoking."

Another reality is that the crime usually can't avoid getting discovered, Lurigio said.

"The more times you do something in the criminal arena, the greater the likelihood you're going to get caught. The high-rate offenders, they get away with lots and lots of crime. But they get caught.

"The eventualities are on the side of law enforcement," Lurigio said. "Committing crimes is sort of like gambling. The house wins. And they almost always do."