



Rauner's new head of Illinois Film Office looks to spur film and TV jobs

By Nina Metz

Published February 24, 2015

The Illinois Film Office has a new director. Gov. Bruce Rauner has appointed GOP political consultant Christine Dudley, who steps into a job that primarily focuses on luring TV and film projects to Illinois.

Dudley takes over for Betsy Steinberg, who ran the office for eight years before being replaced when the new administration took office.

Over coffee Monday afternoon, Dudley said her new role was "something that I had expressed some interest in (to the governor), in a global sense, once the campaign had ended and he won. For me it made a lot of sense, in terms of I wanted to find a role to serve the governor and have a lot of respect for him and worked really hard" on the campaign. (Dudley was head of the women's outreach coalition.)

A former Midwest Regional Political Director for the Republican National Committee and Executive Director for the Illinois Republican Party, she comes to the job with little previous work experience in TV or film production.

That is a departure from her predecessor, who was a vice president at Towers Productions before working for the state. Steinberg would typically travel to L.A. every year or so to meet with decision-makers, and Dudley will likely do the same, if only to introduce herself and establish relationships. Dick Wolf, the executive producer behind "Chicago Fire" and "Chicago P.D." (and perhaps a third spin-off series, "Chicago Med"), will no doubt be high on the list of priorities. That said, "Right now, I want to understand the industry here and understand who the players are here."

The job also entails problem solving; nearly all productions run into a hitch or two that require the help of someone in charge at the state level. "It's a whole new adventure," she said. If Dudley has a strong connection with the governor, that clout might come in handy should she need to advocate on behalf of the local film industry down the road.

"I have a lot to learn on the production side," she said, "but (not) on public affairs and the political side in terms of management of all that and how government can work best when it's most efficient. This governor is very focused, as he should be, on job

production and innovation. We've had a good run here (of TV shows and movies filming in Chicago) and now it's taking it to the next step.

"What else can we do to be more efficient? How do we serve the taxpayers so we can produce more jobs? The film community is tremendous here in Chicago and the state of Illinois. It's a job producer and has had some great success and has grown exponentially. So how do we make that even bigger, bolder, brighter? We'll continue to look at greater efficiencies and greater innovation."

For the most part, the TV and film industry in Chicago is reliant on projects that Hollywood sends here, and the 30 percent tax credit offered by the state, though not as lucrative as incentives offered by Louisiana and Georgia, is a primary driver.

What we don't see right now is a considerable amount of work generated here of its own accord (with the exception of an indie filmmaker like Joe Swanberg), and Dudley said she would like to see that change and head off what she called the brain drain of talent to the coasts.

For example, she referenced "The Imitation Game" screenwriter and Chicago native Graham Moore, who won an Oscar on Sunday.

"We should take advantage of those who came from our community and bring them back," Dudley said. "Why should they have to go to Los Angeles to make their mark? They can stay right here in Chicago. We want to make sure that Illinois is a place where kids are raised and want to stay, and this is an industry that is growing. Think of the talent that we've had (work and train in Chicago). Keep our good talent here (or) bring them back. Let's produce here."

A longtime Chicagoan, Dudley is originally from South Bend, Ind. "I came here to work in 1993. It was in the political space," she said of her worklife, "but I also immersed myself in the cultural aspect by serving on the Shattered Globe (Theatre) board, and I was appointed to the Illinois Arts Council."

As a teenager, she was involved in the local theater community and was part of a television operation called Beyond Our Control. "It was for high school students and they wrote, produced, acted, did everything, sold the time, the whole nine yards, so there was a business component to it." The project she worked on was a sketch show that aired on WNDU, the South Bend NBC affiliate.

Though Dudley is unseasoned in the world of TV and film, her learning curve may not be steep considering her background in politics; the entertainment industry is one in which people frequently say one thing and mean another, and decisions are made at the last minute. "We've heard it time and again: Washington is Hollywood for ugly people. (The entertainment industry) is high-charged, highly emotional, and politics is also very highly emotional. Putting on a show is very similar to running a campaign."

She has certainly kept her eye on Chicago projects, including the short-lived Kelsey Grammer series "Boss" (Starz), which she called "Wonderful. Was it true? Was it realistic? No! It was just the darkest, darkest side of anything! It's like 'House of Cards' – fabulous show! I love it. Is it real? No, 'Veep' is real."

In 2013, the state had a record year of TV and film production. Money spent on wages and services topped \$350 million. The numbers for 2014 will be released later this year and are expected to be down, due to canceled series (including "Betrayal" and "Mind Games") and a lack of major studio films shooting for weeks on end in Illinois.

Right now TV networks are busy lining up their pilot projects; two are already confirmed ("Love Is a Four Letter Word" for NBC, and "Runner" for Fox). We will find out later this month if more are headed to Chicago.