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Feds probe tuition waivers by state senator

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD - The U.S. attorney's office has opened a criminal investigation into a series of legislative scholarships awarded by state Sen. Annazette Collins - marking an expansion of a federal probe into the scandal-tainted tuition-waiver program.

The Chicago Sun-Times on Tuesday obtained a copy of a June 1 federal subpoena issued by then-U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald's office that seeks an array of records regarding the waivers the West Side Democrat handed out during an 11-year career as a state representative and senator.

The query follows Sun-Times reports in March about a series of questionably legal waivers Collins gave to five students who listed her former home as their official residence even though some had driver's licenses or voter registrations linked to addresses outside her district. State law requires that legislative scholarship recipients reside in the awarding lawmaker's district.

Reached Tuesday evening, Collins referred questions about the matter to her attorney, Michael Monico, who maintained his client's innocence.

"This is a grand jury matter so it's really not for us to comment on it at this point. We don't believe that senator did anything criminal or that would arise to a federal criminal violation," he told the Sun-Times.

The subpoena delivered to Collins' district office asked that she "produce all information" concerning her "procedures for the establishment, awarding and operation of the Illinois General Assembly Scholarship" program.

It also asked for "all records pertaining to receipt of any funds or gift [sic] in connection with the award of the scholarship" from any recipient's "relatives, agents or entities associated with the recipients/nominees."

The subpoena's disclosure comes on the eve of [Gov. Pat Quinn's](http://www.nexis.com/search/XMLCrossLinkSearch.do?bct=A&risb=21_T21308900326&returnToId=20_T21308957834&csi=11064&A=0.34883279282647206&sourceCSI=162599&indexTerm=%23PE000A4UW%23&searchTerm=Gov.%20Pat%20Quinn's%20&indexType=P) planned signing Wednesday of a law abolishing the scholarship program after he proposed doing so in 2009. He renewed his calls to eliminate it after a series of reports by the Sun-Times and Better Government Association about possible wrongdoing in the century-old program.

"In combination with news reports continuing to shed the light on the abuses taking place and the governor's continued advocacy in pushing this forward, reform and sunshine will come," Quinn spokeswoman Brooke Anderson said.

Before Collins became mired in controversy over her tuition waivers, Quinn tabbed the veteran lawmaker to be his torchbearer for a constitutional amendment that would allow voters to bypass the General Assembly with ethics initiatives. The plan went nowhere last spring.

Collins later lost her Democratic primary to Patricia Van Pelt-Watkins, who made the legislator's tuition waivers a cornerstone of her campaign.

Beyond reporting on the five students who listed Collins' former residence as their home, the Sun-Times disclosed ahead of her primary that she also awarded a four-year tuition waiver to Torrance Giles, the son of former Ald. Percy Z. Giles, to attend Northern Illinois University. The first of Torrance Giles' waivers came in 2001 shortly after the former alderman's 1999 bribery and extortion convictions in "Operation Silver Shovel," the federal investigation of city contracting fraud, drug trafficking, illegal dumping and organized crime.

Collins also gave a scholarship to current Ald. Jason Ervin (28th) before his 2011 election to the Chicago City Council. Ervin, who campaigned for Collins in the past, said he got his legislative scholarship from her in 2004 to finish his master's degree at Governors State University.

Reached late Tuesday, Ervin told the Sun-Times he had not been contacted or subpoenaed by federal investigators about his tuition waiver.

Asked if he believed there might be anything criminal in the way his legislative scholarship was awarded, Ervin offered only a one-word answer before declining further comment: "No."

The subpoena to Collins marks the second known foray by federal investigators into the program. The Sun-Times first reported last August about a pair of subpoenas to the state Board of Education about waivers former state Rep. Robert Molaro (D-Chicago) granted, including to the four children of an Oak Lawn real estate broker who donated to his campaign.