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Lawmaker's wife, son also do well on state's dime

By Carol Marin, Dave McKinney and Chris Fusco

A firm headed by the stepson of Illinois Senate President Emil Jones stands to be paid up to $45 million from a no-bid tech deal it recently won from the City Colleges of Chicago.

The contract, awarded three weeks ago, comes on top of $55 million that John Sterling's company, Synch-Solutions, already has been paid by the college system since 1999.

"The new contract was awarded based on past and current performance of Synch-Solutions in a bid-exempt process . . . under state law," City Colleges Chancellor Wayne Watson said in a written statement.

But the hefty dollar amount awarded to Synch -- as well as the firm's ties to the powerful state Senate president -- is raising red flags with government watchdogs.

Jones in the past has controlled state grant money to City Colleges. In 2002, he steered at least $4.5 million to the colleges for computer upgrades at the same time his stepson's information technology firm was winning no-bid contracts from City Colleges trustees.

"It's amazing how well those who are related to the powerful do with government contracts," said Jay Stewart, executive director of the Better Government Association.

Jones vehemently denied ever helping his stepson get government work.

"John Sterling is a successful businessman who worked for major companies doing technology before starting [Synch-Solutions]," Jones said in a statement Wednesday. "I have never interfered in his business, and he has never sought my counsel or advice in reference to securing business."

$70,000 raise

The new three-year deal for the stepson's firm comes amid several recent disclosures about Jones' family and state jobs.

Gov. Blagojevich's administration hired Jones' son Emil Jones III for a $57,360-a-year state commerce post April 3. His hiring came around the same time Sen. Jones emerged as a top advocate for a contentious new business tax pushed by the governor.

Also, the Senate president's wife, psychologist Lorrie Jones, has seen her state pay increase more than $70,000 under Blagojevich, who promoted her to state mental health chief.

Jones' stepson's firm was formed as a minority-business enterprise.

Sterling said that's because of his firm's track record, not its ties to Jones.

"I understand that my father is a public figure and fair game for public scrutiny," he wrote in response to an interview request. "I believe, however, that the 120 employees who work for Synch-Solutions -- and who provide for their families with hard-earned money for good, honest work -- do not deserve to have negative implications made about their company."

**ALL IN THE FAMILY**

A look at state jobs and government contracts tied to relatives of Illinois Senate President Emil Jones:

Lorrie Jones: The Senate president's wife, a psychologist, has seen her state salary increase from $116,460 to $186,000 under Gov. Blagojevich, who in 2005 promoted her to head the Department of Human Services' mental health division.

The Blagojevich administration rescinded its rule that the state's mental health chief be a medical doctor just before Lorrie Jones got the job.

Emil Jones III: Jones' son, hired April 3 as manager of real estate development for the Blagojevich administration's Commerce Department. Earns $57,360 in his new post -- a 7 percent increase over his previous state job, which he held from 1999 to November 2006.

John Sterling: Jones' stepson and CEO of Synch-Solutions, a consulting and technology firm whose client list includes Exelon (ComEd's parent company), the CTA, Chicago Public Schools, Illinois State Toll Highway Authority and Cook County Forest Preserve District. Jones has been a staunch ally of ComEd in its fight against freezing electricity rates.

Contributing: NBC5 producers Katie Ernst and Don Moseley