

July 26, 2012 Thursday

Rep. Dan Burke's scholarship records subpoenaed

By Dave McKinney and Robert C. Herguth

SPRINGFIELD - College tuition waivers awarded by a member of one of Chicago's best-known political clans are under criminal investigation by a federal grand jury probing possible abuses in the state's soon-to-be-dismantled legislative scholarship program.

The grand jury in Chicago subpoenaed State Rep. Dan Burke (D-Chicago), brother of Ald. Ed Burke (14th) and brother-in-law to Supreme Court Justice Anne Burke, making the veteran House Democrat at least the third known current or former lawmaker whose waivers are being probed by the feds.

The March 21 subpoena, released by the Illinois House in response to an open-records request by the Chicago Sun-Times, seeks "all information" about "Representative Daniel J. Burke's procedures for the establishment, awarding and operation of the Illinois General Assembly Scholarship."

The federal government's request to Burke also seeks records "pertaining to receipt of any funds or gift in connection with the award of the scholarship."

Burke has not been charged with criminal wrongdoing. Messages left on his cellphone and at both of his legislative offices went unreturned Wednesday.

Burke's subpoena follows a joint investigation last August by the Sun-Times and Better Government Association into his awarding of tuition waivers to a young, Downstate woman Burke once described as a member of his state government "family."

Sarah Rae Dowis got nearly $70,000 in tuition set aside by Burke under a program beset for decades by cronyism, insider dealings and sleight of hand. Earlier this month, Gov. Pat Quinn signed legislation that abolishes the program on Sept. 1.

Records show that Burke awarded Dowis tuition waivers while she attended Southern Illinois University between 2003 and 2008. She is the daughter of his onetime legislative secretary in Springfield, Judy Dowis, who worked for him for a six-year stint ending in early 2003 and now is the Springfield secretary for State Sen. Maggie Crotty (D-Oak Forest).

In sworn paperwork submitted to the State Board of Education, Sarah Dowis listed her permanent residence as a small bungalow in the 5700 block of South Homan Avenue in Burke's district.

Neither she nor her family owns that property. Instead, it's home to the elderly parents of Burke's Chicago-based legislative secretary, Teresa Sanchez, whose mother told the Sun-Times and BGA that Dowis used to show up occasionally.

State law requires that legislative scholarship recipients live within the boundaries of the awarding lawmaker's district.

In an interview last year, Burke described Dowis' time at the South Homan address as "sporadic" and said "delicate and private" personal issues confronting the young woman necessitated her move from Downstate to the South Homan Avenue home in his legislative district.