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Administration blocked $350,000 grant bid

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD - Gov. Pat Quinn's administration put the brakes on an effort by the husband of Cook County Circuit Clerk Dorothy Brown to win a $350,000 grant late last year from a state agency Brown helps oversee.

Dr. Benton Cook III applied for grant funds from the Criminal Justice Information Authority, but his bid on behalf of a nonprofit he formed was rejected when he didn't participate in a required webinar conducted by the agency, officials told the Sun-Times.

"It shows that when proper grant controls are in place, taxpayers are best protected," said Brooke Anderson, spokeswoman for Gov. Pat Quinn, whose administration has been shaken by state and federal investigations into the governor's 2010 Neighborhood Recovery Initiative anti-violence program.

Aiming to crack down on state grant fraud, Quinn's office is pushing legislation sponsored by Rep. Fred Crespo, D-Hoffman Estates, that passed the House but appears snagged in the Senate. The legislation would use federal disclosure rules for applicants.

Through his nonprofit, Dream Catchers Community Development Corporation, Cook was seeking the state dollars for after-school programs at alternative high schools in Roseland and Lawndale operated, in part, by Magic Johnson Enterprises, a company owned by the former Los Angeles Lakers star.

"It was for an opportunity for our students to experience some mentoring opportunities," said Cory Gold, program director for the Magic Johnson Bridgescape Academy campus in Lawndale.

But the plan didn't pan out.

"All potential grantees were required to register to participate in an informational webinar we hosted on the proposal and grant requirements," said Cristin Monti Evans, spokeswoman for the Criminal Justice Information Authority.

"Dream Catchers didn't register for the webinar and therefore became ineligible."

Cook's wife, the circuit clerk, is a member, by statute, of the governing board of the Criminal Justice Information Authority. Brown also is chairwoman of the board's budget committee, through which all grants are disbursed.

Cook has been subpoenaed to appear before a grand jury as part of an investigation into Quinn's Neighborhood Recovery Initiative.

Cook was hired by Chicago Area Project, a social service provider, to oversee more than $2 million in Neighborhood Recovery Initiative programs in West Garfield Park.

In his role as program coordinator, Cook received more than $146,000 in salary and fringe benefits over a two-year period.

One of the West Garfield Park programs that got Neighborhood Recovery Initiative money through Chicago Area Project was Dream Catchers; he is executive director and his wife was identified in state documents as "fiscal manager."

In 2012, Brown voted by proxy on the Criminal Justice Information Authority board to approve $5 million in state anti-violence grant funding for Chicago Area Project while her husband was being paid by the group with state dollars.

The more recent, $350,000 grant application Grant submitted on his own last year to the Criminal Justice Information Authority for work at the Magic Johnson Dreamscape Academy included $52,000 for his salary, state records show.

Cook, who has not been accused of criminal wrongdoing, did not respond to a message left on his cellphone by the Sun-Times.