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Brown vote sent money to husband's employer; didn't abstain from $5 million decision

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD - Not long after taking over the budget committee of a state agency, Cook County Circuit Court Clerk Dorothy Brown voted by proxy to channel $5 million to a West Side nonprofit to help continue funding Gov. Pat Quinn's now-disbanded Neighborhood Recovery Initiative.

That vote by Brown came at the same time the nonprofit Chicago Area Project employed her husband, Benton Cook III, to oversee millions of dollars in Neighborhood Recovery Initiative programming. The organization subsidized his paycheck with state anti-violence grant money.

It's not clear whether any of the grant funds Brown authorized for Chicago Area Project's use in September 2012 trickled into Cook's paycheck since the nonprofit says he left its payroll in October of that year.

But her decision to proceed with a vote on the matter instead of abstaining sparked criticism Thursday from Quinn's office and a call from the top House Republican that she resign her chairmanship of the Criminal Justice Information Authority's budget committee, through which state anti-violence grants are disbursed.

Quinn's office was not aware of Brown's vote until after the matter was raised by the Chicago Sun-Times this week.

"If that's the case, it's unacceptable," Quinn spokeswoman Brooke Anderson said of her vote. "Potential and actual conflicts of interest should always be disclosed by public officials and their designees. They should recuse themselves from decision-making on any matter involving a member of their family.

"The governor's office has asked the authority's chairman to look into this matter and act appropriately to address any conflict-of-interest issues," Anderson said.

A Brown spokeswoman did not respond Thursday to questions from the Sun-Times about the circuit clerk's vote, though she has abstained routinely whenever her committee votes to allot grant dollars to her own office.

Meeting minutes from the Sept. 7, 2012, Criminal Justice Information Authority meeting show a unanimous vote for the Chicago Area Project allotment. Brown's vote was cast on her behalf by Wasiu Fashina, records show.

Material presented to board members, including Brown, indicated that the $5 million grant had been appropriated to the agency solely for Chicago Area Project's use, but there were no directions from lawmakers in 2012 on how exactly that money should be spent, records from the meeting show.

The minutes indicate that the agency's staff brokered an agreement with Chicago Area Project's executive director, David Whittaker, to devote half of the $5 million "to continue support for NRI."

"That brings a much-needed boost to NRI," the minutes read.

A spokesman for Chicago Area Project did not respond to requests for comment Thursday afternoon.

The governor has said the program, targeting 23 of the most crime-prone neighborhoods in Chicago and adjoining suburbs, originally was a response to a spate of shootings, including one in Roseland on the city's South Side in which 13-year-old Robert Freeman Jr. was shot 22 times on his bicycle.

But by 2012, aware of the growing problems with the $54.5 million anti-violence program, Quinn's office began disbanding the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative between June and September of that year, shutting down the agency that had administered the program and transferring its duties to the Criminal Justice Information Authority.

Quinn has been on the defensive over his one-time anti-violence showpiece, which Republicans have criticized as a taxpayer-subsidized, get-out-the-vote "slush fund" launched one month before the 2010 election when he was trailing in some polling during his race that year for governor.

In February, Auditor General William Holland released a damning audit of the program that outlined "pervasive" mismanagement of the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative by Quinn's administration. Since then, federal investigators and Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez have opened separate probes into the program.

Alvarez, who is a voting member of the Criminal Justice Information Authority Board, has issued a pair of subpoenas to the state for Neighborhood Recovery Initiative records, including those involving Chicago Area Project, whose grants are also under review now by Quinn's office. (Like Brown, Alvarez voted for the $5 million Chicago Area Project allotment in September 2012.)

Brown and Cook's names have surfaced in a series of Sun-Times reports outlining his hiring at Chicago Area Project, which used state grant dollars to pay him more than $146,000 in salary and benefits over a two-year period, and how a nonprofit Cook formed wound up itself getting Neighborhood Recovery Initiative funding.

Cook's nonprofit, Dream Catchers Community Development Corporation, listed Brown as its fiscal manager on documents submitted to the state when Chicago Area Project opted to pull the plug on what had been a $10,000 allotment to his organization because of conflict-of-interest concerns. Brown herself appears to have signed one of those state documents.

Last Sunday, the Chicago Sun-Times reported that Chicago Area Project hired Cook to oversee millions of dollars in Neighborhood Recovery Initiative programming despite him having a 1999 felony conviction in Tennessee for writing bad checks. Chicago Area Project acknowledged it had not performed a criminal background check on Cook before hiring him.

State law stipulates that Brown, as Cook County circuit clerk, must sit on the Criminal Justice Information Authority board. But she serves as chairwoman of the important budget committee, a post she has held since March 2012, entirely at the pleasure of the authority's chairman, Peter M. Ellis, who is a gubernatorial appointee.

House Minority Leader Jim Durkin, R-Western Springs, called for Brown to resign from that post because of the vote she took and the litany of other questions surrounding her and her husband's roles in the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative debacle.

"There clearly is a major conflict from what we've learned over the last week, particularly with money going toward her husband," Durkin told the Sun-Times. "Having failed to abstain from voting for that reason, she should immediately resign from the position as budget chairman."

In her only public comments about her husband's involvement in Quinn's Neighborhood Recovery Initiative, Brown told reporters last Saturday that she is the target of a racially motivated "political witch hunt," though she didn't identify who she thought was behind it.