

September 17, 2014 Wednesday

Expert: Quinn's handling of subpoena request 'stinks'

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD - Despite having a new criminal subpoena in hand, Gov. Pat Quinn's administration dragged its feet in releasing the politically sensitive public document - a delay one expert called a gaming of the state open-records laws that "stinks."

On Tuesday, the governor's office finally released the federal grand jury subpoena dated Aug. 27 that sought records related to Quinn's failed Neighborhood Recovery Initiative anti-violence program, but it did so only selectively.

After the end of business on Sept. 3, the Chicago Sun-Times submitted an Illinois Freedom of Information Act request seeking "any state or federal subpoenas" received by the governor's office dating back to Aug. 1, a time period that covered the latest query from the U.S. attorney's office.

Last Thursday, Quinn associate general counsel Nellie V. Ridsdale responded with a request for five additional business days to comply with the request.

In her letter to the Sun-Times, Ridsdale cited two exemptions allowed under state law to justify the delay for a response until Thursday. She indicated a "routine search" within the governor's office failed to turn up the document and that without the benefit of extra time, looking for it any further would "unduly" burden the governor's staff.

Quinn's administration released a copy of the two-page grand jury subpoena Tuesday to the Chicago Tribune. When a Sun-Times reporter called to complain about the selective release, the administration finally provided a copy, even though the Sun-Times' subpoena request had been in the administration's open-records pipeline for nearly two weeks.

One of the state's preeminent experts on the Illinois Freedom of Information Act said those justifications by the administration don't hold muster.

"We're talking about two pieces of paper. It's not a complicated subject. They know the rules about release of federal subpoenas, and they're playing games with you," Springfield attorney Donald Craven said.

"Then, they further play games when they pick and choose who they release records to. For Mr. Openness and Transparency," Craven said in a barb at the governor himself, "it stinks."