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Quinn didn't know pol's husband got windfall, aide says

By Dave McKinney

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Gov. Pat Quinn's administration Monday said he was unaware that Cook County Circuit Clerk Dorothy Brown's husband made a six-figure windfall from the governor's now-disbanded $54.5-million anti-violence program.

A top Quinn aide also hit the top Senate Republican for her searing criticism that the husband's payday amounted to "pure cronyism."

Senate Minority Leader Christine Radogno, R-Lemont, who has pushed for a federal criminal investigation into the program, shot back Monday, describing the governor's office's sensitivity to her statements as "an overreaction" and proof Quinn is "vulnerable" politically from the program.

The Chicago Sun-Times reported Monday that Benton Cook, Brown's husband, made $146,401 in salary and fringe benefits over two years from Quinn's anti-violence program - once dubbed the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative - to help distribute $2.1 million in state funds in the West Garfield Park neighborhood. Radogno called Cook's involvement "outrageous."

In the governor's office's first response to the disclosure, a key Quinn aide called Radogno's remarks "malicious" and "irresponsible." Cook has denied making that much, even though state records obtained by the Sun-Times show that he had in 2011 and 2012.

"I was shocked to read Leader Radogno's comments in the paper [Monday], which are just plain false and malicious," Quinn spokeswoman Brooke Anderson said in a prepared statement, referring to the Cook story.

Anderson said the administration had no influence in the decision by Chicago Area Project - the not-for-profit the Quinn administration put in charge of earmarking state anti-violence dollars to the West Side neighborhood - to make Cook its program coordinator for the initiative.

"The state and other public entities have long worked with the organization, the Chicago Area Project - a highly reputable and widely respected group - for decades," Anderson said. "The state of Illinois had no role, involvement or awareness of the hiring of this organization's staffer."