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Quinn's troubled program: Brown helped manage group that got state anti-violence grant

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SPRINGFIELD - Cook County Circuit Court Clerk Dorothy Brown had a direct managerial role in a nonprofit group that got an anti-violence grant from Gov. Pat Quinn's now-disbanded Neighborhood Recovery Initiative, state records obtained by the Chicago Sun-Times show.

The group, Dream Catchers Community Development Corp., was founded by Brown's husband, Benton Cook III. It was asked to return unexpended grant money after having its contract terminated in 2011 by Chicago Area Project, a larger nonprofit that had been overseeing organizations that had received money through the Quinn anti-violence initiative.

Dream Catchers was supposed to be paid as much as $10,000 by Chicago Area Project to distribute anti-violence literature between February 2011 and November 2011.

The group initially was awarded $3,333 of the $10,000. But Chicago Area Project ended the deal after only a few months, in May 2011, saying it learned of the potential conflict of interest posed by Cook also being paid tens of thousands of dollars by Chicago Area Project to oversee other Neighborhood Recovery Initiative programs.

On March 26, 2012, Chicago Area Project asked for $1,797 in unexpended state grant money to be returned from Cook's organization. Dream Catchers complied in early April of that year.

Dream Catchers was allowed to keep $1,536 for work it had done distributing Neighborhood Recovery Initiative literature, said John Holden, a Chicago Area Project spokesman.

Records submitted to the state by Chicago Area Project don't make clear whether it was Cook, Brown or someone else within Dream Catchers who received that money.

A February 2012 "closeout" report turned over to the now-disbanded Illinois Violence Prevention Authority bears Brown's signature, listing her as Dream Catchers' "fiscal manager." It's the first time she herself has been directly linked to a particular group that was paid through Quinn's anti-violence program.

The report bearing Brown's signature was signed off on 10 days later by officials at Chicago Area Project, including Brown's husband, Cook, who received $146,401 over two years from Chicago Area Project to oversee $2.1 million in Neighborhood Recovery Initiative programming within West Garfield Park.

Contacted Monday, Cook declined to explain his wife's involvement in Dream Catchers. "I'm not going to comment to you at all because you've been misrepresenting what's going on," Cook said.

"You've been very . . ." he said, pausing and then cutting off his sentence. "You'll have to deal with my attorney."

Asked the name of his lawyer, Cook hung up.

Brown's spokeswoman Jalyne R. Strong-Shaw would not confirm that Brown actually signed the Dream Catchers document submitted to the state in February 2012. "This question is not related to the operations of the office of the clerk [of] the Circuit Court of Cook County," she said.

On her 2012 county economic-interest statements, Brown did not list any affiliation with Dream Catchers, though the forms require disclosure only if $1,200 or more was derived from her involvement with the nonprofit if she had any type of "advisory capacity" or proprietary stake with the organization.

Asked to explain Brown's duties with Dream Catchers, Strong-Shaw said, "Clerk Brown provided voluntary accounting work for Dream Catchers" and noted it was "not required to be disclosed on the county statement of economic interest."

Asked specifically if Brown had received any Neighborhood Recovery Initiative money through Dream Catchers, Strong-Shaw repeated herself: "Clerk Brown's work with Dream Catchers was voluntary, and that is why it was not included on the county statement of economic interest."

On Sunday, the Sun-Times reported that Cook was convicted in 1999 on a felony charge in Tennessee after writing two worthless checks totaling more than $3,700.

After that story broke, Brown faced questions about her husband's financial crime at a weekend event and insisted she was being victimized by "a political witch hunt." She declined to say whom she thought was waging the alleged witch hunt.

In response to the story, Quinn's administration vowed to launch an "internal review" of Chicago Area Project's state grants and questioned why the nonprofit employed Cook given his criminal background.

In March, Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez subpoenaed records from the state about Quinn's Neighborhood Recovery Initiative and, specifically, Chicago Area Project. Another subpoena was received by Quinn's administration last week.

Also, federal investigators have sought similar records from the state comptroller and the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, where Violence Prevention Authority records relating to the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative are archived.