

May 7, 2014 Wednesday

TROUBLED ANTI-VIOLENCE PROGRAM: Gov rips Brown, husband over ‘clear conflict’

By Dave McKinney and Elise Dismer

Sun-Times staff reporters

SPRINGFIELD - Cook County Circuit Court Clerk Dorothy Brown's partnership with her husband to tap into Neighborhood Recovery Initiative grants is "troublesome," and her spouse's dual role as an overseer and provider of anti-violence programming represents a "clear conflict," Gov. Pat Quinn said.

In slamming Brown and her husband, Benton Cook III, Quinn Tuesday ramped up his defense against the growing political fallout from his self-acknowledged, botched Neighborhood Recovery Initiative in 2010 that is now under state and federal investigation.

Asked how he learned of Brown and Cook's previously undisclosed roles in the program, which were first reported by the Chicago Sun-Times, the governor made clear it wasn't from his staff when the $54.5 million Neighborhood Recovery Initiative program was launched in October 2010.

Rather, he said, it came from "reading the paper."

"I had no idea that either of those people were involved with that particular organization. And we have to look into it - all of us do - to make sure there was nothing wrong going on," the governor told reporters after paying tribute Tuesday to fallen firefighters at the state Capitol.

The governor also blamed Chicago Area Project, the West Side nonprofit that hired Cook and that Quinn's administration chose to participate in the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative, for "letting all of us down" by neglecting to perform a criminal background check on him before giving him a supervisory role in overseeing $2.1 million in anti-violence programming in West Garfield Park. Such a check might have found Cook's 1999 felony conviction for writing bad checks in Tennessee.

The head of the Chicago Area Project in his first public comment since the scandal broke said the organization was unaware of Cook's criminal past when he applied for the job.

"During the application process, during the interview process, none of that came out," David E. Whittaker, the organization's exectuive director, said in an interview with WTTW's "Chicago Tonight." "Nothing that was in his background would have led us to believe he was not qualified for the position."

Aiming to score politically from the growing storm over Quinn's now-disbanded anti-violence program, Republicans successfully pushed through a vote Tuesday giving a state audit panel authority to subpoena witnesses to testify about how the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative was hatched and carried out under the governor's office's control.

By a 10-1 bipartisan roll call, the Legislative Audit Commission voted to arm itself with broad subpoena powers as it attempts to sift through a damning February analysis of the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative by Auditor General William Holland, who turned over his findings to federal investigators.

"We have to get to the bottom of this," said Sen. Jason Barickman, R-Champaign, the audit commission's co-chairman who pushed for the unusual authority to compel witnesses involved in the anti-violence program to testify.

Cook's nonprofit, Dream Catchers Community Development Corporation, was to have received $10,000 in Neighborhood Recovery Initiative grant money through Chicago Area Project until that organization, citing Cook's conflict of interest, terminated the deal after paying Dream Catchers $3,333.

Chicago Area Project had chosen Cook to be its Neighborhood Recovery Initiative program coordinator, a job that came with more than $142,000 in pay and benefits that were funded through the anti-violence grant.

After pulling the plug on the Dream Catchers deal, Chicago Area Project asked for and collected $1,797 in unspent funds from Dream Catchers but let Cook's organization keep $1,536 in state grant money. It's unclear whether those funds went to Cook, Brown - who identified herself as Dream Catchers' fiscal manager - or someone else within Dream Catchers, which is registered in state corporation documents as being based in the home Brown and Cook share.

"Yes, I am surprised. I don't know all the details," Quinn said when asked his reaction about Brown's previously undisclosed, direct involvement in Dream Catchers that was the subject of a Monday report in the Sun-Times.

"But we're going to take a whole look at grants given to this organization," he said of Chicago Area Project, through which Dream Catchers got its state money. "All grantees have to be accountable. We expect them to do that. If they don't, there will be consequences."

Of Cook's dual roles with the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative, Quinn said, That's obviously a conflict that needs to be reviewed and looked into. I think it's important that we have a total review of whatever went on there."

Quinn also was highly critical of Chicago Area Project for allowing Cook and Brown to have a role in the program and, particularly, for not doing a criminal background check on Cook to learn about his felony check-writing conviction, which was the subject of a Sun-Times report Sunday.

"I saw some things over the weekend that certainly were troublesome," Quinn said.

Of Chicago Area Project, Quinn said, "I'm disappointed in them. The purpose of the [Neighborhood Recovery Initiative] program to fight violence was to make sure that we had programs, especially for young people after school so they would have positive things they could do to avoid gangs and protect the public safety. That was the purpose of the program. Anybody who lost sight of that . . . they're really letting all of us down."

A spokesman for Chicago Area Project didn't respond to a Sun-Times request for comment to Quinn's remarks. Nor did a representative for Brown.

Meanwhile, the only no vote at Tuesday's Legislative Audit Commission meeting came from state Rep. Frank Mautino, D-Spring Valley, the commission's co-chairman and a member of Democratic House Speaker Michael Madigan's leadership team.

"To me, it's a bad precedent that was set today, and, I think, for what the audit commission is designed to do," Mautino said. "It's a power that already exists and is used sparingly."

There is a tug of war between Mautino and Barickman about when the audit commission should hold its hearing on Holland's audit.

Barickman advocated for a hearing at some point this summer, which perhaps not coincidentally would be closer to the Nov. 4 election between Quinn and Republican Bruce Rauner, who has attacked the governor for the NRI debacle.

Mautino, however, thinks a hearing could be held as early as next week.