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**Ex-aide to Obama pal pleads guilty**

By Chris Fusco and Dave McKinney

Staff reporters

A former chief of staff for the Illinois state public health department pleaded guilty Thursday to stealing hundreds of thousands of dollars in taxpayer money through a kickback scheme that began when Dr. Eric E. Whitaker, a close friend of President Barack Obama's, headed the agency.

Whitaker brought in Quinshaunta R. Golden, a niece of U.S. Rep. Danny Davis, D-Ill., as his top aide in 2003 after then-Gov. Rod Blagojevich hired him as public health chief.

Their spouses - Dr. Cheryl S. Rucker-Whitaker and Victor Golden, who is now an $111,432-a-year administrator with the Illinois Lottery - went into business together in January 2004, but their company was dissolved a year and a half later, according to records obtained by the Chicago Sun-Times.

In her plea agreement, Golden, 45, of Homewood, agreed to cooperate in possible future government investigations. There was no indication that Whitaker or the company his wife formed with Golden's husband, Wellness Vending LLC, is under investigation.

When Golden was indicted last summer, Whitaker said he "had no firsthand knowledge" of any criminal conduct by her. He also said he had been "fully cooperating" with federal authorities.

Marj Halperin, a spokeswoman for Whitaker, said Thursday that Whitaker's wife and Golden's husband "took initial, start-up steps" to form a company that would operate vending machines selling healthy snacks, but, "as far as Cheryl knows, nothing came of the business."

Golden appeared Thursday before U.S. District Judge Sue E. Myerscough in Springfield to plead guilty to a charge of bribery and theft and also obstruction of justice.

She admitted she accepted kickbacks involving state deals between July 2007 and April 2008 and then tried to cover up the scheme. In all, prosecutors said Golden stole $433,000, though, in her plea, Golden said she believes the amount is "less than $400,000."

She faces a maximum sentence of 30 years in prison, but prosecutors agreed to recommend no more than 10 years and one month when she is sentenced Aug. 18.

According to her plea, the scheme included getting kickbacks from a security company that employed Roxanne B. Jackson, an attorney who worked under Whitaker and Golden as the health department's human resources director.

Jackson, who declined to comment Thursday, left the state agency in 2004 and became "director of legal services" for V.I.P. Security, which got about $2 million in state money starting in 2006 to do criminal-background checks on nursing-home residents.

Golden's plea identifies the company only as "Security Firm A," but details within it make clear that the company is V.I.P. Security. The plea also cites an unnamed "Individual A" who was "an associate of defendant Golden" and a "paid consultant" to the security firm.

Golden admitted steering the nursing-home work to V.I.P. and getting a kickback for each background check it did. Federal authorities say each kickback was about $35 to $40, for a total of $109,500.

Golden also admitted steering state grant money to not-for-profit health care groups controlled by Leon Dingle Jr., a South Side businessman who is fighting federal charges that accuse him, his wife and two associates of stealing $3.7 million in grant funds. Individual A - who also worked for Dingle as a consultant - paid kickbacks to Golden from those grants, according to Golden's plea.

Golden admitted having met Individual A in 2012 and encouraging that person "to create a false story by stating that Individual A used the grant and contract funds for gambling and other personal expenses."

"She's sorry for this conduct. She's accepting responsibility in pleading guilty," said J. William Roberts, an attorney for Golden.