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Ex-state rep in scholarship probe;

Robert Molaro gave campaign contributor's 4 children $94,000 in tuition waivers, records show

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SPRINGFIELD-Federal investigators have opened a criminal probe into legislative scholarships that lobbyist and former state Rep. Robert Molaro awarded as a lawmaker, the Chicago Sun-Times has learned.

Two rounds of subpoenas related to Molaro's scholarships have been delivered to the Illinois State Board of Education since April, one as recently as July 20, records show.

The first subpoena from U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald's office, dated April 26, sought paperwork concerning tuition waivers worth more than $94,000 that Molaro awarded to four children of his campaign contributor Phil Bruno, an Oak Lawn real estate broker.

The subpoena from two weeks ago casts a broader net, seeking "all documents relating to the Illinois General Assembly Legislative Scholarships nominated/issued from former State Representative Robert S. Molaro."

Molaro says he did nothing wrong in awarding the legislative scholarships.

"Obviously, I think nothing was not above-board," Molaro told the Sun-Times. "These subpoenas are news to me. . . . Obviously, it's not good news when I hear someone is looking into my scholarships, as opposed to anybody else. I've got to look at what this means."

The U.S. attorney's office would not comment on the subpoenas. Nor would Bruno.

Between 2004 and 2008, which was Molaro's last year in the General Assembly, he handed out tuition waivers to Melissa M. Bruno, Frank J. Bruno, Erica A. Bruno and Michelle B. Bruno, state rec-ords show.

Michelle Bruno was given a four-year ride at Illinois State University to study nursing. Her brother and sisters were given waivers with shorter durations to attend the University of Illinois, either in Urbana or Chicago. Records show her two sisters also planned to study nursing, while their brother planned to study math.

Their father gave more than $1,100 to Molaro's campaign fund between 1994 and 2004, state records show.

Frank J. Bruno said, "No comment, sorry," before hanging up on a reporter.

Attempts to reach his three siblings were unsuccessful.

The century-old legislative scholarship program lets legislators hand out two four-year scholarships annually, or break those up into smaller increments.

The program has survived repeated efforts to abolish it after disclosures about abuses. Last year, lawmakers passed legislation that would bar legislators from giving the tuition waivers to family members of anyone who made a campaign contribution to the awarding legislator any time in the previous five years. But Gov. Pat Quinn vetoed that measure, saying it didn't go far enough and that he favored abolishing the program.

Last month, the Sun-Times reported on the unusual revocation of a legislative scholarship that state Sen. Martin Sandoval (D-Cicero) said he had awarded "in error" to the son of three-time felon and reputed mobster Michael C. "Jaws" Giorango.

The home on Chicago's Southwest Side that Giorango's son listed in his scholarship application as a "permanent address" was owned by a paid Sandoval campaign aide and longtime 14th Ward precinct captain, and state records showed the younger Giorango actually lived in Orland Park, outside of Sandoval's district.