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Final Edition

Secret deals enrich Jones stepson's firm; Work for gov's budget office as subcontractor valued at $700,000

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A technology company owned by Illinois Senate President Emil Jones' stepson has landed more taxpayer-funded business -- a fact that has gone largely unnoticed because the firm's latest deals are buried in the fine print of state contracting documents.

Synch-Solutions stands to make more than $700,000 as a subcontractor to two consulting companies Gov. Blagojevich's budget office hired to streamline government operations, records show.

There is nothing illegal about Synch-Solutions' subcontracting role, though it comes amid growing concern by lawmakers in Springfield about members of Jones' family getting government deals.

Synch-Solutions CEO John D. Sterling asserted that his powerful Democratic stepfather "has in no way, shape or form influenced any business that Synch-Solutions has ever earned." Jones' spokeswoman, Cindy Davidsmeyer, agreed, saying, "President Jones has no knowledge of Synch-Solutions' business dealings."

Still, Synch-Solutions' work for the governor's budget office has largely been a secret. The state doesn't track payments its vendors make to subcontractors. So it's almost impossible to know what firms are being hired as subcontractors -- let alone what they're being paid.

"Does it make you suspicious? Yes," said Jay Stewart, executive director of the Better Government Association. "There doesn't appear to be much of a requirement to ensure that the public knows who the subs are. . . . There's just no political will to do it."

'ABHORRENT AND IRRESPONSIBLE'

The latest revelation about Synch-Solutions is rekindling questions about nepotism for Jones. Besides the firm's government business, Jones' wife, a psychologist, boosted her state human services salary by more than $70,000 through a 2005 promotion. A son, Emil Jones III, got a $57,360-a-year state commerce job in April, despite lacking a college degree.

"The governor signed an executive order in February of this year barring anyone from his family from entering into any state contracts. If it's good for his family, why isn't it good for the legislative leaders?" said Rep. Jack Franks (D-Woodstock), chairman of the House State Government Administration Committee.

"At a time when we're under-funding our pensions, when we're not meeting our other obligations -- to find contracts like this that are personally beneficial to relatives of legislators is abhorrent and irresponsible," said Sen. Pamela Althoff (R-Crystal Lake).

Davidsmeyer declined to comment on Franks' and Althoff's statements.

Blagojevich's budget office stressed it had no role in the decisions by Deloitte Consulting and Public Financial Management to pair up with Synch-Solutions. The two firms, a spokeswoman said, outbid others for their roles in the government-streamlining effort, which the administration says should help save taxpayers money.

'WE WELCOME . . . TRANSPARENCY'

Synch-Solutions' involvement first surfaced in a Sept. 1, 2006, contract, obtained by the Chicago Sun-Times. The firm's share of the $4.5 million contract awarded to Deloitte was pegged at $550,000.

Synch-Solutions' work for Public Financial was estimated at $151,176, records show. Michael Nadol, a Public Financial managing director, said he wasn't aware of Synch-Solutions having ties to Jones until the Sun-Times contacted him.

"I think our selection for that work was entirely on the merits," Nadol said, adding he wouldn't balk if asked by Illinois lawmakers to make information about subcontractors more easily available.

"We welcome that kind of transparency," Nadol said.

Besides the governor's budget office, Synch-Solutions has done work for other state agencies, including Central Management Services and the Illinois Tollway. Synch-Solutions has worked for other public entities, too, including the CTA, Chicago Public Schools and Cook County Forest Preserve District.

In May, the Sun-Times and NBC5 reported that Synch-Solutions was employed by the parent company of Commonwealth Edison at the same time Jones was backing ComEd in its fight against lower electricity rates. Jones at that time said he was unaware of the relationship between ComEd's parent, Exelon, and his stepson's firm, which also recently won $45 million in no-bid technology work from the City Colleges of Chicago.

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