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Questions about lawmaker's scholarships

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD-State Sen. Annazette Collins' parents once owned a red-brick home in the 3500 block of West Walnut Street in East Garfield Park. That was the residence the Chicago Democrat listed early in her legislative career.

It's also the address that five college students listed to qualify for coveted legislative scholarships, worth tens of thousands of dollars, that Collins has handed out during her 11 years in the Statehouse.

Between 2003 and 2009, the five students listed the West Side residence as their home address to qualify for a series of the tuition waivers, which, under Illinois law, can be given only to students who live within a legislator's district.

Three of those students had other addresses - outside of Collins' legislative district, which would have disqualified them for getting the tuition waivers from her - listed on their driver's licenses, state records show.

In all, a dozen college students to whom Collins has given legislative scholarships gave addresses within a two-square-block radius in her old neighborhood. Four other nearby homes had multiple legislative scholarship occupants who appear to have rotated in after getting the scholarships from Collins despite listing out-of-district residences on other forms of state identification.

On those state IDs, 10 of Collins' scholarship recipients listed home addresses in places outside her district that included Bolingbrook, Flossmoor and Norridge.

Collins says the scholarships were all awarded properly.

"There is no rule that says you can't give everyone on Walnut Street a scholarship," she said in an interview.

The West Side legislator said she hasn't knowingly given the scholarships to students who live outside her district. Sometimes, college students move, she said.

"I can't help if the kids move or don't tell us if they move," she said.

This latest disclosure about the scandal-tainted legislative scholarship program follows a string of reports by the Chicago Sun-Times and the Better Government Association on apparent abuses with the program, which Gov. Pat Quinn is pushing legislators to abolish.

While serving in the Illinois House, Collins also awarded a four-year tuition waiver to Torrance Giles, the son of former Ald. Percy Z. Giles, to attend Northern Illinois University, state records show. The first of Torrance Giles' waivers came in 2001 shortly after the former alderman's 1999 bribery and extortion convictions in "Operation Silver Shovel," the federal investigation of city contracting fraud, drug trafficking, illegal dumping and organized crime.

The former alderman couldn't be reached, and his son didn't respond to a request for comment.

Collins also gave a scholarship to current Ald. Jason Ervin (28th) before his 2011 election to the Chicago City Council. Ervin said he got his legislative scholarship from Collins in 2004 to finish his master's degree at Governors State University.

Ervin said he previously had done campaign work for Collins. He is the treasurer of Collins' campaign fund and has endorsed her in her Senate primary against former mayoral candidate Patricia Van Pelt Watkins.

"There wasn't anything underhanded about it," Ervin said. "I live in the district."

Collins said she couldn't recall giving Ervin a tuition waiver.

"I didn't know I gave a scholarship out to Jason, and I'm stunned," she said. "If we gave it to Jason, he must've needed it."

Neither Ervin nor Giles was among those who gave the address of the former Collins home to qualify for the scholarships.

Among those who did was Dannie Bell. Collins gave Bell a tuition waiver in 2007 to attend Northern Illinois University. State records show Dannie Bell has gotten legislative scholarships from three different legislators since 2002 using four different addresses on the West Side and the South Side.

Bell has had a Maywood address - outside of Collins' district - listed as his home address on his Illinois driver's license since 2001, state records show. He could not be reached for comment.

In 2009, two Southern Illinois University students gave Collins' old house as their primary address to qualify for legislative scholarships she gave them, though each lived in River Forest, according to their driver's licenses.