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BAD CHECK PAST: Despite a felony conviction, Circuit Court Clerk's husband oversaw millions tied to Quinn's troubled anti-violence program

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Sun-Times staff reporters

The husband of Cook County Circuit Court Clerk Dorothy Brown was given oversight over millions of dollars in programs in Gov. Pat Quinn's scandal-plagued anti-violence initiative despite having a felony conviction for a financial crime, according to court records obtained by the Chicago Sun-Times.

Benton Cook III pleaded guilty to a Class E felony in Tennessee in 1999 after writing more than $3,700 in worthless checks to a man who imported and sold artifacts from Africa, the records show.

Cook has said he was hired by a not-for-profit group - called Chicago Area Project - to work on Quinn's Neighborhood Recovery Initiative through his affiliation with a West Garfield Park church that lists him as a member of its "pastoral team" responsible for "community development programs."

New Mount Pilgrim Missionary Baptist Church got $192,000 in state funding during 2009 and 2010, the first two years of the Quinn anti-violence program, records show. That was among $2.1 million in state anti-violence money Cook and two other Chicago Area Project officials were supposed to make sure was spent properly on the West Side.

Chicago Area Project spent a total of $146,401 over two years on Cook's salary and fringe benefits for his work as an NRI program coordinator overseeing subcontractors and certifying how the grant money was spent, records show.

Another not-for-profit organization - Dream Catchers Community Development Corp., which Cook ran from his home - got $3,333 from the Chicago Area Project under the anti-violence program. But the Dream Catchers deal was canceled and money returned because of the "potential conflict" posed by Cook's organization being awarded NRI money, Chicago Area Project officials say.

Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez is investigating the entire $54.5 million state anti-violence effort, which Quinn launched a month before his 2010 election in response to a wave of killings and other violence in Chicago that summer.

Separately, federal authorities in Springfield have sought records from the state comptroller's office about the program, which Republicans have ripped as a taxpayer-funded, get-out-the-vote effort by Quinn at a time some polls showed the Democratic incumbent lagging behind GOP challenger Bill Brady.

Late Friday, Quinn's administration disclosed it has received a second subpoena from Alvarez and a telephone request from the U.S. attorney's office in Springfield for records related to the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative.

Quinn has said he didn't know until recently that Cook - who has been married to Brown, the Democratic court clerk, since 2009 - had been hired by Chicago Area Project. The group was one of the not-for-profits tapped to help award and oversee millions of dollars in state anti-violence grants.

Quinn spokeswoman Brooke Anderson said Friday the governor's office will do "an internal review" of Chicago Area Project's state grants, which totaled $22 million in 2009 and 2010.

"We're troubled by the fact that Mr. Cook was even on the payroll at this organization, and there are serious questions that need to be answered," Anderson said. "We've launched an internal review into existing grants to this organization."

John Holden, a spokesman for the Chicago Area Project, declined to say whether the organization's officials knew about Cook's felony conviction.

"There was nothing revealed during the application and interview process that would have barred Dr. Cook from working on the initiative," Holden said. "CAP completes thorough criminal background checks for employees whose responsibilities may bring them into direct contact with children but not for employees whose positions are administrative."

New Mount Pilgrim church officials couldn't be reached for comment.

Chicago Area Project officials said they were unaware the church describes Cook on its website as community-development leader on the church's pastoral team.

But CAP's Holden said, "Neither Dr. Cook nor any other program directors played any role in determining who received subcontractor grant funding. Their job was strictly to make sure that the contracts were being properly administered."

Holden described the program as a success.

"The number of participants enrolled in the [New Mount Pilgrim] program exceeded the contract target goals," he said. "Eventually, more than 100 parents and grandparents were engaged to organize community meetings and peer-to-peer mentoring focusing on youth violence prevention."

Regarding the $3,333 in state money that went to Dream Catchers, Holden said, "Cook was not listed as an officer of Dream Catchers in its state contract application. After it was discovered by CAP that there may be a potential conflict with Dream Catchers, CAP cancelled the contract and recouped funds in March 2012."

Cook's 1999 criminal conviction in Tennessee followed charges that he wrote two bad checks totaling $3,727 in 1996, according to authorities in Davidson County, Tenn. A warrant was issued in April 1996, and Cook was arrested more than two years later, in May 1998.

Cook pleaded guilty in June 1999 to one of two charges he initially faced. A judge ordered him to repay the money and sentenced him to two years of probation. During his plea negotiation, Cook sought to get the conviction expunged but wasn't eligible to do so "because of a prior criminal charge" in another state, Susan Niland, communications director for the Davidson County district attorney, told the Sun-Times.

Cook didn't respond to written questions. Earlier, in a letter to the Sun-Times, he said he learned of the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative job through his church.

In the summer of 2010, "I had participated in at least 10 funerals of murdered youth, so after much soul-searching, I decided to interview for the position," Cook wrote.

He said after accepting a job offer, he told David Whitaker, CAP's executive director, "that I was married to Dorothy Brown and asked him whether that made a difference. Mr. Whitaker said that he did not know she was my wife, but it did not matter because he was hiring me based upon my credentials."