

March 10, 2014 Monday

GOVERNOR'S NEIGHBORHOOD RECOVERY INITIATIVE;

Brown's husband got 7% of grant cash;

Circuit court clerk's spouse paid as program coordinator

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD - West Garfield Park ranks in the top 20 most violent areas on the city map.

In 2011 and 2012, the West Side neighborhood got more than $2.1 million from Gov. Pat Quinn's administration through his Neighborhood Recovery Initiative anti-violence program, state records show.

But instead of all that public money going toward quelling the shooting and other violence there, a substantial chunk of it - almost 7 percent - appears to have gone into the pocket of the husband of Cook County Circuit Court Clerk Dorothy Brown.

Benton Cook, Brown's spouse, was paid more than $146,401 in salary and fringe benefits from state grant funds to serve as the program coordinator with the Chicago Area Project, the agency the Quinn administration put in charge of doling out anti-violence funding to West Garfield Park, state records show.

While Cook didn't deny receiving the anti-violence grant money, he told the Sun-Times on Sunday he did not remember exactly how much he banked working for the Chicago Area Project. Cook insisted he didn't make anywhere close to that kind of money.

"It wasn't nearly $145,000," Cook said, telling a reporter at his front door to "check your records."

But records that Chicago Area Project turned over to the now-disbanded Illinois Violence Prevention Authority, in fact, tell a different story.

State records obtained by the Chicago Sun-Times show that in 2011 Cook received $67,526 in salary and fringe benefits. Those documents, submitted to the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority, even bear Cook's own signature attesting to his salary and benefits as well as five other Chicago Area Project workers paid with Neighborhood Recovery Initiative funds.

In 2012, the organization told the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority Cook received $78,875 in salary and fringe benefits. State records spelling out that year's totals for Cook and three other employees did not have Cook's endorsement, as was the case in 2011, but they bore the signature of Howard Lathan, the Chicago Area Project's associate executive director.

Lathan did not return multiple messages for him left at the organization's office.

Beyond his pay and benefits, a not-for-profit corporation he founded received another $3,333 in West Garfield Park's Neighborhood Recovery Initiative allotment. That entity, Dream Catchers Community Development Corp., is based in the home Cook shares with his wife.

The new disclosure - following a scathing audit of the program earlier this month by Auditor General William Holland - shows how, in at least some instances, political clout shared equal footing with lofty intentions when it came to the implementation of Quinn's 2010 anti-violence program.

"It's pure cronyism. I think it's what people suspected was going on, and now here's proof," said Senate Minority Leader Christine Radogno, R-Lemont, who has called for a federal criminal investigation into Quinn's Neighborhood Recovery Initiative. "Almost $150,000 to the spouse of a countywide elected official from the governor of the same party, that's outrageous."

Separately, Cook is at the center of a newly opened investigation by Cook County's inspector general into a June 2011 deal in which he was given land on the South Side for free by a campaign donor to his wife.

A Better Government Association/Fox 32 investigation published in the Sun-Times found that Cook, once he'd obtained the land, added his wife's name to the property's deed, conveyed it to a corporation they both own, then sold it for $100,000. Brown never disclosed the transaction on her county economic interest statement.

A Brown aide would not facilitate an interview with her Friday about her husband's Neighborhood Recovery Initiative involvement nor offer any details about what exactly he did with the program to merit a six-figure income.

"This has nothing to do with the clerk's office," Brown spokeswoman Jalyne Strong-Shaw told the Chicago Sun-Times.

The money Cook got from Quinn's anti-violence initiative was more than anyone else received at the Chicago Area Project during 2011 and 2012, the first two years the program was operating, state records show.

The Chicago Area Project, which itself got $1.1 million through the program during that two-year window, did not respond to repeated messages left at its offices Friday. The Quinn administration also did not respond to questions about Cook's involvement in the anti-violence program.

Cook said he worked for the Chicago Area Project for about a year and a half.

Republicans have contended that the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative - which relied on recommendations from city aldermen for groups that then decided how the massive pot of state money should be spent - was a lavish, taxpayer-funded, get-out-the-vote effort by the governor hatched one month before his 2010 election. Shortly before the vote, Quinn was trailing Republican Bill Brady in some election-day forecasts.

On Friday, the Chicago Sun-Times reported how the program employed two gang members on the South Side, who were paid $8.50 an hour to hand out anti-violence literature. One of those teens is now dead, shot in the head with a shotgun, and his colleague is charged with the youth's murder.

Earlier this month, Holland hit the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative in a blistering audit that described the program as "hastily implemented" and beset by "pervasive deficiencies in . . . planning, implementation and management."

On Friday, responding to calls from Republicans for an investigation into his findings, Holland turned over his audit to U.S. Attorney James Lewis, who oversees the Central District of Illinois, and to state Executive Inspector General Ricardo Meza.

One of the Republicans who made the request of Holland to turn over his audit to investigators told the Sun-Times that the latest disclosure involving Dorothy Brown's husband is emblematic of everything that went wrong with the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative.

"This is exactly what everybody is sick of," said state Rep. David Reis, R-Willow Hill. "Maybe [Cook] had an instrumental part in this and did good work for NRI, but you have to sit back and say something doesn't smell right.

"It's not surprising," Reis continued. "It's the Chicago way."