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NEIGHBORHOOD RECOVERY INITIATIVE: Probe of anti-violence program a major headache for Quinn

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A criminal grand jury has launched a probe into [Gov. Pat Quinn's](http://www.nexis.com/search/XMLCrossLinkSearch.do?bct=A&risb=21_T21308977520&returnToId=20_T21309499407&csi=11064&A=0.17977013095550298&sourceCSI=162599&indexTerm=%23PE000A4UW%23&searchTerm=Gov.%20Pat%20Quinn's%20&indexType=P) troubled anti-violence program, once likened to "a political slush fund" - delivering a major blow to the Democrat as he seeks re-election this fall.

On Tuesday, the Quinn administration turned over 1,000 documents pertaining to the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative to the Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez following a subpoena from her office.

The request was issued to the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity on March 19 and sought records tied to the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative - including those for the Chicago Area Project, a program tied to the husband of Cook County Circuit Court Clerk Dorothy Brown.

The Sun-Times previously reported that almost 7 percent of the $2.1 million in funds given to the Chicago Area Project meant to combat crime in West Garfield Park went to Brown's husband, Benton Cook III.

A copy of the subpoena bore Brown's signature, but it was unclear if she personally signed it or someone else in the circuit court clerk's office did so on her behalf.

The subpoena, however, is not limited to that Chicago Area Project, but asks for extensive information about the overall anti-violence program, including "files, notes, memos and correspondence pertaining to all grants," documents obtained by the Chicago Sun-Times through the Freedom of Information Act show.

Correspondence from Alvarez's office asked for "names and identities of all grantees participating in the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative, including, but not limited to Chicago Area Project."

The subpoena also asked for "copies of all payment instruments issued as grant disbursements, along with all related payment invoices" as well as "names and identities of any and all related DCEO field auditors and/or program compliance monitors."

News of the probe, first reported on Early & Often, the Chicago Sun-Times' political portal, threatens to tarnish the one-term governor's reformer image - not to mention dog him throughout a heated race against multi-millionaire Republican Bruce Rauner.

On Tuesday, Rauner's campaign pounced - looping in a mention of an inspector general inquiry into hiring practices at the Illinois Department of Transportation and tying Quinn to imprisoned former Gov. [Rod Blagojevich.](http://www.nexis.com/search/XMLCrossLinkSearch.do?bct=A&risb=21_T21308977520&returnToId=20_T21309499407&csi=11064&A=0.17977013095550298&sourceCSI=162599&indexTerm=%23PE0009ULK%23&searchTerm=Rod%20Blagojevich.&indexType=P)

"Today we learned of two major pending investigations into [Pat Quinn's](http://www.nexis.com/search/XMLCrossLinkSearch.do?bct=A&risb=21_T21308977520&returnToId=20_T21309499407&csi=11064&A=0.17977013095550298&sourceCSI=162599&indexTerm=%23PE000A4UW%23&searchTerm=Pat%20Quinn's%20&indexType=P) administration," said Rauner spokesman Mike Schrimpf. "That's a troubling low even by Quinn-Blagojevich standards."

Quinn was lieutenant governor under Blagojevich.

The actual subpoena was withdrawn at the request of the Quinn Administration because the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity promised to provide the information. The department turned over information to the state's attorney's office on Tuesday.

"Around April 15, we provided to them more than 1,000 pages of documents - some with just minor redactions for people's personal information. We were advised just today that they were not satisfied with even those limited redactions in there, so we've given them the whole thing," department spokesman Dave Roeder said Tuesday.

The state's attorney's request targeted grants distributed out of the Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, which handled about $10 million in projects under the anti-violence program. The specific mention of the Chicago Area Project makes clear the office is keying in on - but not limiting its probe - of money that flowed into that program.

"The director of DCEO Adam Pollet has no tolerance for any misconduct or misuse of funds by our grantees. We are actively working with the state's attorney's office to provide all the records and information it requests," Roeder said.

The state's Auditor General, William Holland, slammed the governor's anti-violence program in a February audit, saying Quinn's administration didn't "adequately monitor" how state grant dollars were spent or on whom; community organizations that hired people with those funds weren't maintaining time sheets; and city aldermen dictated where funding was to be steered.

During the primary, political opponents likened the entirety of the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative to a "political slush fund."

One of the program's leading legislative critics praised Alvarez's move to investigate but urged that all facets of the program be investigated - not, for example, just the potential piece involving Brown's husband.

"This is appropriate. We have felt all along that law enforcement should be examining what happened in that program," state Senate Republican Leader Christine Radogno told the Sun-Times. "However, that's Cook County. We are hoping the scope of this investigation remains broad and that the money spent everywhere is examined."

A spokesman for Dorothy Brown did not return a message left Tuesday evening on her voicemail, seeking comment on whether the circuit clerk believed her husband might be a focal point in the Cook County criminal investigation.

The Quinn administration has said the $50 million Neighborhood Recovery Initiative was set up in response to a violent summer over 2010. Later, in 2012, the governor supported legislation that moved oversight of the program from the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority to the Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority.

The Criminal Justice Information Authority said it had received no inquiries into the program by authorities.