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Probe of anti-violence program: Rauner accuses Quinn of 'corruption'

By Dave McKinney and Natasha Korecki

Sun-Times staff reporters

SPRINGFIELD - Republican gubernatorial candidate Bruce Rauner on Wednesday accused Gov. Pat Quinn of having "engaged in significant corruption and patronage" after his administration acknowledged turning over records to a Cook County grand jury investigating his 2010 anti-violence grant program.

Rauner, who also continued his assault on Quinn for a separate state hiring probe at the Illinois Department of Transportation, had the governor on the defensive all day with a potentially potent issue that threatens to severely undermine the Chicago Democrat's efforts to portray himself as a reformer and ethics champion.

The Chicago Sun-Times reported Tuesday that Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez has opened a criminal investigation into Quinn's now-disbanded, $54.5 million Neighborhood Recovery Initiative, a massive, election-year grant program that faced a scathing state audit in February and that has been the subject of a series of Sun-Times reports.

The Cook County subpoena 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 news this week that Gov. Pat Quinn is being investigated by Anita Alvarez for criminal investigation of corruption in his Neighborhood Recovery Initiative, his anti-violence program, and the news the inspector general is investigating corruption and patronage in the Department of Transportation just highlights how broken our culture is in Springfield and how our current governor, Pat Quinn, just like his predecessor, Rod Blagojevich, has engaged in significant corruption and patronage," Rauner told reporters in Springfield.

"We have career politicians who are fundamentally corrupt and engaging in patronage cronyism and failing the people of our state, and we've got to dramatically change that culture," Rauner said.

Quinn's campaign charged back, raising Rauner's ownership of "hundreds of nursing homes across the country and saw the opportunity to make a buck by slashing the care of residents," in a statement on Wednesday. The alleged practices were the subject of TV attack ads against Rauner in the Republican primary.

Alvarez's subpoena is the first evidence that a law-enforcement agency is actively investigating Quinn's tainted anti-violence program.

Brown acknowledged little on Wednesday when the Sun-Times posed a series of questions.

When asked if she or her husband had been asked to turn over information to law-enforcement authorities and whether she cooperated with authorities, Brown responded, through a spokeswoman: "These questions are not related to the Office of the Clerk of the Circuit Court."

Brown acknowledged that her husband, Benton Cook III, worked for the Chicago Area Project and referenced a letter to the editor to the Sun-Times in which he "relates how he obtained the job after he was asked to apply for it by one of CAP's directors."

When asked about the Chicago Area Project, which is under scrutiny, Brown said through a spokeswoman: "Clerk Brown believes that neither she nor her husband were involved in any wrongdoing."

Last month, Auditor General William Holland agreed to a Republican request to turn over his files from a February audit of the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative to federal prosecutors in Springfield.

In early March, the Sun-Times reported about grant funds that paid two South Side gang members to distribute anti-violence pamphlets, but the pair allegedly broke into a home in Grand Crossing, a shooting ensued, and one of the gang members is dead and the other faces a murder charge.

In a follow-up, the Sun-Times reported that Brown's husband pocketed $146,401 in salary and benefits - paid through Neighborhood Recovery Initiative funds - to oversee which groups in West Garfield Park received $2.1 million in anti-violence funds from the state.

Cook denied receiving that much, but records submitted to the state from the Chicago Area Project - the group that employed him to oversee its involvement in the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative - indicate otherwise.

Beyond Cook's pay and benefits, a nonprofit corporation he founded received $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.

On Wednesday, Cook County Inspector General Patrick Blanchard confirmed he has an "open investigation" into Brown regarding at least in part property that a Brown donor allegedly gave to her husband for free. He then put her name on the deed and transferred it to their joint company, Sankofa LLC., according to a Better Government Association and Fox News investigation last fall.

Beyond the Cook situation, earlier this month, the Sun-Times also reported that more than $137,000 in salary and benefits, paid through the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative, went to the spouse of state Rep. Will Davis, D-Homewood, to coordinate anti-violence work in Thornton Township.

Responding to Rauner's subpoena-driven attack Wednesday, Quinn pledged to cooperate with any state or federal inquiry into the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative and defended his administration's handling of the program, which he launched in the month before his 2010 election and later suspended while also abolishing the agency that oversaw it, the Violence Prevention Authority.

Asked if he thought Cook was a target of the Alvarez probe and to explain why he received money, Quinn answered, "I have no idea."

Natasha Korecki reported from Chicago, and Dave McKinney reported from Springfield.