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Final Edition

**Obama pal part of fed probe; Programs funded by state Health Dept. under Whitaker are targeted**

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E-mails and other records of Dr. Eric Whitaker -- one of President Obama's best friends -- have been subpoenaed by a federal grand jury, the Chicago Sun-Times has learned.

The investigation involves "faith-based initiatives" and health-awareness campaigns funded by the Illinois Department of Public Health when Whitaker ran the agency for former Gov. Rod Blagojevich, according to copies of subpoenas obtained under the state's Freedom of Information Act.

Obama has said he recommended Whitaker for that job, which Whitaker landed in April 2003. The president's friend resigned in October 2007 to join Obama's wife, Michelle, as an executive at the University of Chicago Medical Center.

On Friday, Whitaker defended his work as the state's former top health official, saying he developed "new methods" to help "African-American and other minority communities" get better medical care.

"The faith-based outreach programs at issue in this inquiry were recognized during my tenure by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and others as national models for increasing awareness and preparedness planning for minority populations," Whitaker said in a statement. "The programs were functioning well when I left the department in 2007."

All told, Gov. Quinn's administration turned over copies of six subpoenas sent to four state agencies that show authorities have been seeking information about a variety of health-awareness grants and programs that have cost taxpayers millions of dollars.

One sent to the health department seeks "any and all records" involving "faith-based initiatives" on subjects including "emergency preparedness," "HIV/AIDS," "cervical/breast cancer" and "pandemic flu" (see related story).

Five subpoenas came from a federal grand jury in Springfield, while the sixth came from a grand jury in Chicago. The most recent is dated March 30.

The U.S. attorney's offices in Springfield and Chicago declined to comment, as did the White House.

Whitaker and his former chief of staff, Quin Golden, are named in a Nov. 23, 2009, subpoena in which authorities asked state officials to produce their "e-mail and other electronic storage accounts" from "January 2007 to present."

Nothing in the subpoenas suggests Whitaker or Golden are targets of the investigation, and a spokesman for the two said they have not been subpoenaed personally or questioned by authorities. Like Whitaker, Golden left her state job to work for the University of Chicago.

Five of the subpoenas seek details about the Let's Talk, Let's Test Foundation, an AIDS-awareness group that the Sun-Times revealed last September was the subject of a federal criminal probe.

In an interview for that story, Whitaker acknowledged he had reservations about awarding state money to that foundation, which state officials have since alleged improperly spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on staff bonuses, football tickets and other items.

"They had the same credentials as the AIDS Foundation of Chicago when they started; it's a nascent organization that needed support," Whitaker said last September. "Did I have concerns about giving money to a new organization? Sure."

But, Whitaker added, "If you look over the landscape of black-directed HIV organizations, there was no obvious alternative."

Besides Whitaker and Golden, authorities have sought e-mail from Louanner Peters, a former Blagojevich deputy governor who now works for U.S. Rep. Bobby Rush, and the state's current health chief, Dr. Damon Arnold.

Two other people acknowledged Friday they've been subpoenaed as well: state Rep. Connie Howard (D-Chicago), who founded Let's Talk, Let's Test, and attorney Roxanne Jackson, who was the health department's human resources director in 2003 and 2004 under Whitaker.

"My attorney has advised me not to deal with interviews on this until the investigation has been completed," said Howard, who did not identify her lawyer and previously has said that Let's Talk, Let's Test has done nothing wrong.

Jackson, too, referred questions to an attorney, who declined to comment.

Whitaker, 45, of Chicago, met Obama when the two were in graduate school at Harvard. He often traveled with the president on the campaign trail and has vacationed with him in Hawaii.

In 2003, Obama -- then an Illinois state senator, gave a "glowing" reference for Whitaker to Tony Rezko -- the now-convicted political fixer who helped Blagojevich find people to run state agencies.

Obama has said that's the only time he can recall talking to Rezko -- who was a major campaign fund-raiser for him and for Blagojevich -- about getting anyone a state job.

"Somebody who I do remember talking directly to Tony about was Dr. Eric Whitaker," Obama told the Sun-Times in March 2008. "He and I played basketball together when he was getting his master's in public health at Harvard, while I was in law school there. He had expressed an interest in that job. I did contact Tony, or Tony contacted me, and I gave him a glowing recommendation because I thought he was outstanding."

**Subpoena details**

Here are some of the organizations named in recent federal grand jury subpoenas sent to four state agencies. All started getting state funding when Dr. Eric Whitaker headed the Illinois Department of Public Health.

--Brothers and Sisters United Against HIV/AIDS (BASUAH): A $2.5 million "social marketing effort" announced by former Gov. Rod Blagojevich and Whitaker in September 2005 to fight AIDS in the African-American community. BASUAH was run by the health department, which a spokeswoman says is "fully cooperating with the subpoenas."

--Let's Talk, Let's Test Foundation: AIDS-awareness group founded by state Rep. Connie Howard (D-Chicago) that has gotten more than $1.9 million in state money since 2006, including $1.2 million from the health department and $500,000 from the commerce department. State officials now are trying to recoup hundreds of thousands of dollars from the defunct not-for-profit, claiming the money was improperly spent. Its former executive director, Lloyd Kelly, couldn't be reached.

--National Black Nurses' Association, Chicago Chapter: Nursing group that puts on health fairs and sponsors scholarships has received more than $905,000 in state money since 2006, including more than $391,000 from the health department. The group didn't return a message seeking comment.