

Group tied to Santorum campaign gets 250G grant

By WILL BUNCH
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A faith-based Philadelphia group at the center of a flap over whether tax-exempt religious groups are aiding the re-election campaign of U.S. Sen Rick Santorum has won more than \$250,000 in federal grant money pushed for by Santorum over the last three years.

The group, the Urban Family Council - founded by well-known local conservative religious activist William Devlin - also has reaped a \$10,000 grant from a controversial charity founded by Santorum, the Operation Good Neighbor Foundation.

The news of the financial support linked to Santorum comes just one day after a Washington-based watchdog group - Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington, or CREW - sent a letter of complaint to the IRS about the Urban Family Council and three other groups with tax-exempt status.

The controversy centers on a training session held earlier this month in Valley Forge by an ad-hoc group calling itself the Pennsylvania Pastors Network, which pushed a church-based get-out-the-vote drive for November. Santorum addressed the group by videotape; he was the only candidate featured.

Barry Lynn, the executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, charged that the connections between the senator and the Urban Family Council "creates a gigantic conflict of interest - an inappropriate meshing of the interests of the Urban [Family Council] and the interests of Senator Santorum."

But Betty Jean Wolfe, the president of the Urban Family Council, said last night that the criticisms of her group are "a reach" - that the Valley Forge session and Santorum's involvement were merely the result of like-minded views on issues such as stopping gay marriage and abortion.

Wolfe also stressed that the federal grant money earmarked by Santorum and his GOP Senate colleague Arlen Specter for abstinence-based sex education, and the donation from Santorum's charity, are just a small part of the money that the Urban Family Council gets from foundations and other donors on all sides of the political spectrum.

Santorum's spokeswoman, Virginia Davis, did not return an e-mail and a cell-phone message seeking a comment. Earlier this week, Santorum aide Robert Traynham told the *New York Times* that the senator's involvement was "a generic video greeting," although it focused on same-sex marriage.

The Urban Family Council is best known locally for its aggressive efforts to try to block city benefits for the gay partners of Philadelphia municipal employees. In an online chat on Washingtonpost.com last year, Santorum cited the Philly group as one he'd worked with on "a variety of programs such as fatherhood programs trying to strengthen the bond between children and fathers."

In 2003, Santorum and Specter successfully fought to earmark \$3.1 million in federal funds for abstinence programs in Pennsylvania, including \$126,000 for the Urban Family Council. Wolfe confirmed that the group later received a second grant of approximately the same amount.

Devlin, who didn't return cell-phone calls, was one of several speakers at the March 6 Valley Forge conference.

Rick Cohen, the executive director of the Center for Responsive Philanthropy, was troubled by the use of charitable funds for a group that appears to offer political support. Unlike political contributions, money given initially to a charity like Santorum's can come from corporations, has

no limits, and is tax-deductible.

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