The federal criminal complaint against the seven people arrested in Chicago last week for federal bribery conspiracy is 42 pages long. Former state Senator Rickey Hendon is mentioned 21 times in those 42 pages, although never by name.

It's pretty clear from the complaint that the U.S. attorney has been looking at Hendon (D-Chicago) for at least the past four years.

In July 2008, the *Chicago Tribune* published a major exposé on state grants steered to local groups by Hendon. The *Tribune* claimed that half of the 48 grant recipients "were running dubious programs, or declined to show how they spent the money."

Conveniently, that very same month, the feds busted a Chicago police officer during a probe of gun-trafficking and public corruption. The cop quickly offered to cooperate to reduce his sentence. It doesn't take too much reading between the lines to see that the corrupt cop might have been given the task of helping the feds nab Rickey Hendon.

One of the police officer's longtime friends was Dean Nichols. Nichols and Hendon are close friends.

Just a month after that Chicago cop was busted, the FBI recorded Nichols talking about another Hendon pal, Reggi Hopkins. A partial transcript provided by the U.S. attorney purports to show that Hendon and Nichols had steered a $170,000 state grant to a group that Hopkins ran, but only on the condition that Hendon's nephew and Nichols shared the spoils.

Nichols was recorded by the feds quoting Hendon telling Hopkins: "Whatever you're gonna do, I

want you to include" the nephew. Nichols was recorded as saying that Hendon's nephew would "split the salary part" of the grant.

Hopkins' group received another $20,000 grant from the state in 2008, and the feds say the group submitted a budget showing that Hendon's nephew was getting $3,250 in salary.

On June 23, 2010, Hopkins was recorded by the feds telling the Chicago cop that he had been "donating 15 percent" of what he made off the grants to Hendon's campaign: "I just do it as a donation." But the feds acknowledge in the criminal complaint that state campaign records "do not show significant contributions from Hopkins."

A few months after that conversation with Hopkins was recorded, a federal grand jury subpoenaed state records of grants that Hendon had steered to various West Side groups from 2006 to 2008.

Hendon abruptly resigned from the Senate four months after the grand-jury subpoena was issued, but the feds were apparently still interested.

In September 2011, seven months after Hendon resigned, the FBI recorded Reggi Hopkins complaining that Hendon's nephew and Dean Nichols "literally did nothing" for the money they were given from the state grant he'd obtained.

The following month, a Hendon pal named Elliott Kozel told the federal mole that he had received a state grant via Hendon and that Dean Nichols had been paid "a couple of grand."

So what do we have here?

Well, what appears to have been a big break for the feds in 2008 obviously didn't have any immediate benefits. Nobody was busted, after all. The 2010 subpoenas of Hendon's grants – issued after Hopkins' admission that he paid Hendon's nephew – haven't yet produced any

high-level indictments, either.

But then in July 2011, five months after Hendon resigned, the feds decided to set up a sting. They had the police officer tell Dean Nichols that he'd "run into a friend" who could dole out $25,000 federal grants almost at will in exchange for $5,000 off the top. Nichols brought Hendon friends Reggi Hopkins and Elliot Kozel into the scheme along with four others. The seven were all arrested last week on charges of bribery conspiracy.

Sometimes, when standard investigations don't work, and moles don't work, and subpoenas don't work, the feds resort to setting up smaller players for a fall with the hope that they'll flip on the higher-ups. The way the federal report is written, it's obvious who the U.S. attorney's office either really wants, or desires to publicly shame if they can't get him. The feds are extremely careful about how they say things, so it seems almost impossible that they would put Hendon in the report 21 times for no reason at all.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax *(a daily political newsletter) and CapitolFax.com .*