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MONEY FOR NOTHING: State skips free U. of C. crime lab study but pays $498,351 for subpar UIC report on Neighborhood Recovery Initiative

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Sun-Times staff reporters

The state spent almost half a million dollars on a flawed study of Gov. Pat Quinn’s now-defunct anti-violence program - the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative - after officials rejected a more rigorous evaluation that would have been free, auditors say.

The $498,351 study by the University of Illinois at Chicago didn't even examine whether the program helped reduce violence, according to Auditor General William Holland's office.

State Rep. David Reis, R-Willow Hill, said the study leaves taxpayers in the dark about whether the $54.5 million program made an impact in some of the most dangerous neighborhoods in the Chicago area.

"We don't know whether this money was flushed down the toilet," he said.

Auditors learned the state turned down an offer by the University of Chicago Crime Lab to conduct a more in-depth study for free.

Quinn spokesman Grant Klinzman said the governor wasn't involved in any discussions or decisions about the study.

"Those who helped oversee and manage this program are no longer employed by the state," Klinzman added.

Republicans have questioned Quinn's motivation for launching the anti-violence program a month before his tight election in 2010. The troubled program was shut down in 2012.

"I believe this was to put money on the streets to shore up a base that was very loose in a tight campaign," Reis said.

But the governor says he launched the program - targeting 23 crime-prone neighborhoods in Chicago and the suburbs - in response to a spate of shootings here, including the murder of a 13-year-old boy shot 22 times on his bicycle.

After the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative was launched, University of Chicago Crime Lab officials met with Barbara Shaw, head of the now-closed Illinois Violence Prevention Authority that oversaw the program.

The University of Chicago offered to conduct a controlled "outcome evaluation" of the program on a pro bono basis, Roseanna Ander, executive director of the crime lab, said.

That kind of study would have measured the program's impact on violence, she said. "Crime and violence are such important social problems that it is important to take every opportunity to learn as much as possible about what works."

But Shaw decided to award a no-bid contract to UIC to do a less rigorous "process evaluation" at a cost of nearly $500,000, auditors said.

Auditors dumbfounded

The study didn't require researchers to evaluate whether the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative reduced violence.

And that left auditors dumbfounded.

"In a discretionary program as large as the NRI program, simple logic would suggest management would want to know, and should be able to show, whether the $55 million program was having its desired impact," the auditor general's office wrote in a report released in February.

"UIC investigators thought it necessary to warn the reader of the report that any conclusions as to the outcome effects of the NRI component would not be known," the auditors wrote.

The UIC contract required the researchers to document whether agencies receiving state money through the program were meeting goals for providing jobs to youths and low-income parents, counseling services to youths, re-entry services to people released from prison and other "deliverables."

But UIC was having trouble keeping track of those basic statistics, auditors said.

Lorri Jenkins, one of the administrators Shaw put in charge of overseeing the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative, told auditors that the wheels started coming off the study when the original lead researcher, Dianne Rucinski, left about a year into the program.

"She said the project was 'hodgepodge' at that point," auditors quoted Jenkins as saying during their Nov. 26, 2012, interview with her and another ex-Shaw staffer.

Problems acknowledged

Marc Atkins, a UIC researcher, took control of the study midstream.

In an interview with the Chicago Sun-Times, he acknowledged problems.

"We were getting data late and sometimes in a format that wasn't useful," Atkins said. "There was some missing data, particularly in the first year."

Still, Atkins defended his work.

"We inherited the evaluation plan," Atkins, director of the Institute for Juvenile Research at UIC, told the Sun-Times. "We carried it out the best we could under some challenging circumstances and tried to provide as informative reports as we could."

Atkins added that the study did serve a purpose.

It tracked whether people "were getting the services that could have a positive effect down the road," he said.

Subpoena possible

Other documents from the auditor general's office reveal that Shaw selected the University of Illinois at Chicago for the contract even though the governor's office preferred the University of Chicago.

Former Quinn deputy chief of staff Toni Irving - now head of a new city alliance with business titans to reduce gun violence - made that contention in a Sept. 11, 2012, interview with Audit Manager Mike Maziarz and another auditor, Brenda Barker.

"The governor's office wanted the crime lab to do an analysis of the NRI program, but Shaw wanted this contract at UIC," the auditors quoted Irving as saying. It's unclear why Shaw wanted the study done at UIC.

John Theis, a lawyer representing Shaw, declined to comment Friday.

Legislators say they may subpoena Shaw to testify about the program, which is the subject of investigations by Cook County State's Attorney Anita Alvarez and federal prosecutors in Springfield.