

May 29, 2014 Thursday

Panel lashes governor's anti-violence program

By Dave McKinney

Springfield bureau chief

SPRINGFIELD - Republicans vowed Wednesday to keep pressing ahead on a legislative probe into Gov. Pat Quinn's failed 2010 Neighborhood Recovery Initiative after gaining little clarity from an administration official about how the governor's $54.5 million anti-violence program unraveled.

"To me, what's clear is we've only scratched the surface on how this total waste of taxpayer dollars happened," said Sen. Jason Barickman, R-Champaign, co-chairman of a legislative panel that spent Wednesday poring over a scathing February audit of Quinn's program.

The bipartisan panel heard testimony for the first time on Auditor General William Holland's audit of the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative. Holland called it a "hastily implemented" election-year program that had scant oversight over how millions of state grant dollars were spent and little to no effect on curbing street violence.

Even Democrats on the bipartisan panel joined Holland in condemning the program.

"There isn't anybody on this commission that doesn't agree with the auditor general that this program during its entire existen . . . had a myriad of problems that cost taxpayer dollars [and] did not do what it was supposed to do in communities," said Rep. Frank Mautino, D-Spring Valley, co-chair of the audit commission.

Quinn's now-disbanded anti-violence program is under state and federal investigation and threatens to be a damaging political weight in the governor's re-election bid against Republican Bruce Rauner.

This year, the Chicago Sun-Times has laid out a series of serious shortcomings with the program, focusing on those who were able to pocket state grant funds - from clout-heavy social-service providers to gang members to the spouses of an Illinois lawmaker and Cook County Circuit Clerk Dorothy Brown, who herself appeared to be part of an organization that got money from the Initiative.

The only witness before the audit panel Wednesday was Jack Cutrone, executive director of the state Criminal Justice Information Authority that in early 2013 absorbed the state agency Quinn put in charge of his anti-violence program.

But Cutrone shed little light on the thinking within Quinn's administration as it was quickly launching the program in the late summer and early fall of 2010, only weeks before the November gubernatorial election, which Quinn narrowly won.

Cutrone was asked why one of the main social-service providers in the program, Chicago Area Project, was allowed to continue receiving state grant money when it owed the state funds from earlier grants. Since Holland's audit and several Sun-Times reports, Quinn ordered a internal review of all of Chicago Area Project's state grants.

"We certainly didn't get the answers we need to have," Barickman said after the hearing. "It wasn't my decision to have Mr. Cutrone sent. The governor's office chose to send him here. Clearly, he has no idea how this program was created. He has no idea how the decisions were made. But that's the questions we've got to get answers to."

Mautino said he wasn't clear when the panel would next meet, though he hoped it would be soon to focus on how to prevent future missteps and to help keep the issue from devolving into campaign fodder.

"Something like this is better to do sooner rather than later," Mautino said. "This is a screwed-up audit. We know it's screwed up."