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Another blunder for anti-violence program? Teen paid to spread message for Gov. Quinn's Neighborhood Recovery Initiative charged in connection with several break-ins

By Dave McKinney and Frank Main

Sun-Times staff reporters

SPRINGFIELD - When Gov. Pat Quinn invested millions of state dollars into his now-tainted Neighborhood Recovery Initiative, one aim was to steer kids away from crime while putting a little spending money in their pockets.

Shaquille Wilson allegedly didn't get that money the way Quinn's administration envisioned when rolling out the 2010 anti-violence program with a promise of "economic opportunity" for young people in the city's most violent neighborhoods.

During the program's first full year in 2011, Wilson underwent NRI-funded mentoring through a West Side legal advocacy organization, the Lawndale Christian Legal Center, and was given a state-funded, part-time job to tout a message of anti-violence in North Lawndale, state records show.

But in December of that year, Wilson, then 17 and a student at Westside Holistic Leadership Academy, was arrested and accused of being part of a burglary ring that hit six homes in Riverside and North Riverside, state and court records show.

One state record described Wilson as the "alleged mastermind" of the crimes, though the young man's lawyer aggressively denies that characterization and insists his client, whose case is pending, is innocent.

After being charged with four burglaries, including one instance in which $16,000 in cash allegedly was stolen, Wilson was shifted into Lawndale Christian Legal Center's re-entry program and has been represented in Cook County Circuit Court by the organization.

The group received nearly $86,000 in NRI funding from Quinn's administration, though Wilson's lawyer said that none of that money has been used in his defense.

The Better Boys Foundation, which controlled about $2.1 million in NRI-funded programming in North Lawndale including Lawndale Christian's work, held up Wilson as an example to help "illustrate the great strides made toward establishing a continuum of NRI services among program components," state records show.

But Wilson's charges, if proven, would represent another blemish in a Quinn grant program designed to keep the streets safer and kids out of trouble, but that time and again stumbled in meeting those fundamental objectives.

The program now is under federal criminal investigation and being probed by a legislative panel after a February audit by Auditor General William Holland found "pervasive" mismanagement of NRI. The governor moved to abolish the program in late 2012.

"While it's unfortunate that Mr. Wilson may have committed any crime at all, no program designed and targeted for a large population of at-risk youth in our most violent communities has a 100 percent guarantee to eliminate an individual's bad choices," Quinn spokeswoman Katie Hickey told Early & Often, the Chicago Sun-Times' political portal.

"To blame the program for one youth who went astray is preposterous. What about all the youth who did benefit and go on to a better path?" she said.

But a leading Republican critic of NRI countered that the facts surrounding Wilson show an indisputable failure with Quinn's program.

"The measure of success that we hope to see through these programs is keeping youth from committing violent acts, not from simply giving them an attorney for the bad acts that they've committed," said state Sen. Jason Barickman, R-Bloomington, the ranking Republican on the Legislative Audit Commission that is probing NRI.

"The measure of a strong program would be a program that keeps youths from committing these crimes in the first place," Barickman said.

Wilson's lawyer, Clifford Nellis, vouched for his client's character, noting that he was a high school graduate and honor student without a previous arrest record who has taken community college coursework. He participated in a youth mock trial program sponsored by his organization and has held several part-time jobs since his arrest.

"We believe that he will be found not guilty of the charges that have been brought forth against him. Since he has been arrested and charged with this, while on home detention, he graduated high school and began college classes," said Nellis, executive director and lead attorney for Lawndale Christian Legal Center.

Wilson marks the second instance in which an enrollee in NRI's Mentoring Plus Jobs component, which offered mentoring and part-time jobs to 3,700 youth, went on to allegedly commit a serious crime.

In March, the Sun-Times reported on the case of Jermalle Brown, a gang member and part-time foot soldier in Quinn's battle on violence who was paid with NRI funds to distribute anti-violence literature in South Shore. He now stands accused of murdering a fellow Mentoring Plus Jobs participant, and his case is pending.

The chief executive of the Better Boys Foundation, Mary Visconti, did not respond to an email seeking comment about Wilson's case.

As overseer of NRI spending in North Lawndale, her organization first notified the state of his arrest in May 2012. In a November 2012 update to the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority, a former Better Boys Foundation administrator described Wilson as the "alleged mastermind" of the burglaries, a claim Nellis denied.

The December 2011 burglaries Wilson has been charged with weren't the first contact he and the others charged in the ring had with Riverside authorities, police said.

About a month earlier, police stopped the teens when they were going door to door on a Sunday asking for a girl named Ashley. Suspicious residents contacted police because no one by that name lived at their homes. Police interviewed the teens and released them without charges.

The daughter of the elderly homeowner who had $16,000 in cash stolen expressed frustration that her mother never got her money back and now lives in fear after having her personal space violated.