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Anti-violence effort: An architect of Quinn's troubled program now running Rahm's

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The head of a new city alliance with business titans to reduce gun violence in Chicago was one of the architects of the governor's scandal-plagued Neighborhood Recovery Initiative.

Toni Irving, the head of Get In Chicago, was a deputy chief of staff for Gov. Pat Quinn when the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative was formed in 2010.

Irving acknowledged she helped come up with the ideas for the program, which is now under investigation by federal and Cook County prosecutors. An audit by the state's auditor general slammed the program earlier this year, concluding Quinn's administration didn't "adequately monitor" how state grant dollars were spent; community organizations that hired people with those grants weren't maintaining time sheets, and city aldermen dictated where the money was to be steered.

But she insisted, "I had nothing to do with the implementation of the program," despite emails from 2010 obtained by the Chicago Sun-Times that show her playing a key role in planning who would get grant money.

Irving, a former faculty member at the University of Notre Dame, became the executive director of the Chicago Public Safety Action Committee in August 2013. The committee was later renamed Get In Chicago.

The organization was formed in response to the murder of 15-year-old Hadiya Pendleton, who became a national symbol of Chicago's problem with gun violence when she was killed just a mile from President Obama's Kenwood home.

Hadiya's death prompted Mayor Rahm Emanuel to challenge the business community to raise $50 million over five years to save the lives of at-risk kids.

On Wednesday, Get In Chicago awarded $1.7 million in grants to 11 organizations. Irving, Emanuel and Allstate Insurance CEO Tom Wilson visited a West Side social-services agency where the awards were announced.

At an unrelated news conference Wednesday, Emanuel sought to distinguish Get In Chicago from Quinn's troubled Neighborhood Recovery Initiative, which was launched during the governor's closely contested campaign in 2010. Republican critics have blasted the Quinn initiative as a political "slush fund" created to generate support for Quinn.

"First of all, this is private money. Totally different," Emanuel said.

"If you were doing it only one-year and around the campaign season, I understand why people would get cynical. But given that it's also in the years that there is no campaign, but it's about safety, I would say look at the consistency over the four-year time."

In an interview, Wilson gave Irving a vote of confidence and downplayed her role in the now-defunct $54.5 million Neighborhood Recovery Initiative, which was plagued with mismanagement, according to a state audit released in February.

Wilson said tighter controls are in place over Get In Chicago's funding.

"I read the auditor's report of the governor's thing," he said. "We have a much more highly focused, comprehensive, measurement-based approach. We're trying to reduce violence. It's the right way to allocate money. There is no political influence."

Wilson said he talked to Irving about her involvement in the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative prior to her 2013 hiring and learned that "she was not actively involved in that process."

Noting that Allstate contributed $5 million, Wilson said: "If we weren't fully confident, we wouldn't be donating to it."

Irving, meanwhile, told the Sun-Times she helped come up with the concept for the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative, but "I had absolutely nothing to do with the implementation of the program."

Still, internal emails dating to September 2010 - a month before the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative's launch - show Irving played a key role from within the governor's office in planning the program, including one discussion about making Chicago Area Project the main conduit for state anti-violence grants in West Garfield Park.

In one exchange, Irving corresponded with the head of the now-defunct Illinois Violence Prevention Authority, Barbara Shaw, in what appears to be a discussion about selecting the main social-service agency through which Neighborhood Recovery Initiative funding would pass in West Garfield Park, state records show.

In an email on Oct. 18, 2010, Irving wrote Shaw to tell her that she had spoken three days earlier with former Rep. Annazette Collins, D-Chicago, who with former Ald. Ed Smith (28th) had made recommendations about providers for West Garfield Park and East Garfield Park.

"She indicated Chicago Area Project," Irving wrote Shaw, alluding to Collins and her apparent choice for West Garfield Park.