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Quinn's troubled program: ANTI-VIOLENCE WORKER ACCUSED OF MURDER

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SPRINGFIELD - Both Jermalle Brown and Douglas Bufford were gang members hired to play a small role in helping combat violence on the South Side through a program hatched by Gov. Pat Quinn's administration.

Paid $8.50 an hour with taxpayer funds to hand out anti-violence pamphlets in their South Shore neighborhood, the two low-income teens were part-time foot soldiers in the governor's $54.5 million Neighborhood Recovery Initiative, a program he once described as "a comprehensive and concerted effort to keep our young people safe, off the streets and in school."

Quinn launched that program a month before his 2010 election as an answer to gun carnage in the city - even though murders that year, Chicago Police would later disclose, dipped to a nearly 50-year low.

But instead of embodying a bold new way to fight bloodshed on the South Side, Bufford is now dead, and Brown is charged with his murder, putting a dramatic and deadly new blemish on the onetime Quinn showpiece, which was pilloried last week in a report by Auditor General William Holland.

At the same time they were on the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative payroll, Brown, then 19, and Bufford, 16, allegedly broke into a Grand Crossing home in July 2012 with one other man and announced a robbery in what Chicago Police believe was a gang-related crime.

It's not clear, based on court and police records, what happened next. But Bufford was fatally shot in the back of the head with a shotgun, and Brown and an associate now face murder charges tied to the shooting.

Quinn encountered immediate GOP pushback when he launched the program, facing accusations it was merely a lavish, taxpayer-funded, get-out-the-vote effort at a time in 2010 when the governor was trailing Republican Bill Brady in some Election Day forecasts.

The program came under fire again last week when Holland released a blistering audit that described it as "hastily implemented" and beset with "pervasive deficiencies in ... planning, implementation and management." Republicans called for a federal criminal investigation.

Until being contacted by the Chicago Sun-Times on Thursday, the governor did not know that a participant in his anti-violence program was dead, allegedly murdered by another, an aide said.

In a statement, Quinn's office vouches for the overriding principle behind the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative. But they do not directly respond to the fact his program employed gang members or say anything about the murder.

The statement from Grant Klinzman, a Quinn spokesman, said: "It's critical to have strong anti-violence programs for at-risk youth that provide mentorship and job training in order to reduce the risk-factors associated with violence. Community organizations must provide meaningful opportunities for our youth to keep them off the streets. That's why today CJIA [Criminal Justice Information Authority] partners with programs that focus on preparedness for future employment and job training."

While Quinn may not have been aware of Bufford's death, his administration certainly knew about it two weeks after it happened, according to a series of emails within the now-disbanded Illinois Violence Prevention Authority.

Just days after the fatal home invasion on July 25, 2012, Bufford's murder was brought to the Quinn administration's attention by an incredulous South Shore activist, prompting the now-defunct state agency charged with administering the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative to scurry into damage control.

"First, let me begin by expressing my utter disbelief [t]hat your agency would spend money trying to make scholars out of young adults who terrorize our neighborhoods daily," South Shore resident Gina Olson wrote in an email to an official in the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority.

"The South Shore community [has] some fine outstanding young adults and youth who are not criminals. Why aren't these kind of people selected to represent the South Shore Chicago?" Olson wrote in the email, which was obtained by the Chicago Sun-Times.

"This is preposterous, please do not give these South Shore organizations another penny of my tax money if these are the types of youth they are going to pay. Who [is] responsible for hiring them?" she continued. "They should be ashamed."

The decision to hire Brown and Bufford belonged to the Black United Fund of Illinois, a nonprofit that Quinn's administration put in charge of doling out $2.05 million in Neighborhood Recovery Initiative funds to an array of community groups in South Shore.

The same day that Olson's email arrived within the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority, the agency's then-director, Barbara Shaw, reached out to two Black United Fund of Illinois officials and learned that the teens were part of the Mentoring Plus Jobs program, a component of the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative.

Talmadge D. Betts, senior program officer for Black United Fund of Illinois, said the teens' hiring was made at the "staff level."

"They were getting skills, and they were getting those skills by handing out information, positive messages, engaging with people in the neighborhood," Betts said.