From: Enyia, Chimaobi
To: Irving, Toni; Weems, Malcolm
Subject: Fw: WBEZ: State antiviolence effort raises eyebrows on West Side
Date: Friday, February 11, 2011 1:34:49 PM

From: Mason, Andrew
Sent: Friday, February 11, 2011 01:31 PM
To: Beach, Kara; Callahan, Brie; Klinzman, Grant; Maggos, William; Mason, Andrew; Matsoff, Mica; Sweeney, George; Thompson, Annie; White, Laurel
Cc: Stermer, Jerome; Enyia, Chimaobi
Subject: WBEZ: State antiviolence effort raises eyebrows on West Side

State antiviolence effort raises eyebrows on West Side

Chip Mitchell February 11, 2011

Some community leaders on Chicago's West Side don't like the way Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn's administration is doling out funds in a $31 million program to combat Chicago-area youth violence.

They wonder why aldermen are involved and why the pastor of Ald. Deborah Graham (29th) is getting the biggest grant in the city's Austin neighborhood.

Quinn's office and a state agency called the Illinois Violence Prevention Authority are overseeing the program, called the Neighborhood Recovery Initiative. Barbara Shaw, the agency's director, says 205 community groups will receive funds to provide everything from jobs to mentoring and counseling.

"This is a very important program to provide a range of very important services that our young people need," Shaw says. "Smaller agencies, larger agencies, the faith-based community—[we're] really trying to pull together the variety of organizations to be a part of being there for kids."

The state's first step was choosing a lead agency last fall in each of 23 city neighborhoods and suburbs targeted for help.

Here's the thorny part. Instead of putting out an open request for proposals, the state asked individual Chicago aldermen to recommend the lead agencies. Shaw says that saved time and will help get the services out faster.

But an alderman's role in Chicago's Austin neighborhood has led to some stark accusations. "It's business as usual," says Mary Russell Gardner, who's running in the 29th Ward aldermanic race. "Award my friends that helped me, and Kibbles 'N Bits for everyone else."

Gardner, who is trying to unseat Graham, is making hay about a $290,000 grant for youth mentoring—the biggest chunk of $1.2 million slated for Austin in the antiviolence program.

The group selected for that grant, Kingdom Community, Inc., has close ties to Graham. It's run by her pastor, Rev. John Abercrombie of Truth and Deliverance International Ministries.

Graham responds that her opponent is making a stink about nothing. The alderman recommended Circle Family HealthCare Network as Austin's lead agency. Graham insists it was Circle, not her, that chose Kingdom Community for the mentoring.

"I had no input on who the sub-agencies would be—none whatsoever," Graham says. "I had no idea that they had been selected before the press release came out."

Who chose Kingdom Community for the big grant? Andre Hines, Circle's chief executive officer, says the decision was made by a community committee her agency formed. That committee chose most of the Austin groups Circle will oversee in the state's antiviolence program.

Hines isn't claiming Kingdom Community will do a better job on the mentoring than any other Austin group would have. "The only thing we can do is look at who applied and select the best candidate based on those applications," she says, insisting the process was fair.

Kingdom Community isn't the only antiviolence grant recipient in Austin that's raising eyebrows. Learning Network Center, a group chosen to help parents become community leaders, is led by Luther Syas, who circulated signature petitions to get Graham on the 29th Ward ballot.

Hines says she had no idea Syas had any ties to the alderman.

Austin resident Steven McCullough, who until last year led a large West Side social-service provider called Bethel New Life, says he takes Graham's word she didn't pull strings for either her pastor or the petition circulator. But McCullough says there's still a problem: "It doesn't look good."

McCullough, now chief operating officer of a citywide group called the Safer Foundation, says the state has no business letting local politicians steer social-service contracts. "What it can lead to is a situation where an organization is perceived to be favored over another organization that delivers similar services or even a higher quality of service," he says.

McCullough says a transparent process would serve the public better.

The ultimate losers, McCullough adds, may include Graham. If her pastor doesn't come through with excellent youth mentoring, he says, "a lot of fingers will be pointing at her."