Big talk, slow progress from Mayor Lightfoot on anti-violence programs

February 17, 2023

Faced with surging violence, Mayor Lori Lightfoot boasts about investing big money in big ideas — more than $400 million for social programs to battle crime at its roots.

But when it comes to the city’s actual spending and execution, there have been more promises than progress.

An Illinois Answers Project investigation found:

- The city had spent about 6% of the money — roughly $25 million, by a generous estimate — a year into the five-year plan to use a one-time federal windfall and borrowed money to reduce violence, city figures show.
• Many of the city’s programs took months to launch, while a few had yet to start by the end of the year, City Hall reported.

• While the city has marketed its initiatives as innovative, several programs involve traditional services recast as anti-crime efforts. The city, for instance, has earmarked tens of millions of dollars to create more pickleball courts, rehab and sell vacant lots and speed up its response to 311 calls.

• In some cases, the city failed to cite evidence that its programs could work — even when the federal government has asked for it. And the Lightfoot administration has shown few clear plans to evaluate the programs. Experts say city officials are missing a chance to collect valuable data that could help them decide what’s worth continuing.

• A key part of Lightfoot’s plan is funding an array of street outreach groups that specialize in interrupting violence. Some of those groups have little or no experience. In one instance, a group initially rejected for city funding still found ways to get cash. The group is run by a man subject to an order of protection for putting a gun to his ex-wife’s head and threatening to kill her, records show.

The city’s sluggish progress has come as its public safety leadership is in upheaval. The office tasked with coordinating anti-violence programs hasn’t had a permanent director since October; the prior one left without explanation after an Illinois Answers investigation found she had inflated her accomplishments. In four years, the city has had four deputy mayors for public safety.

Experts on anti-violence initiatives say Chicago is doing the right thing by funding a range of programs aimed at helping people in need and fixing neighborhoods instead of depending entirely on police and prisons. But they said the city must spend the money efficiently. During budget hearings and in interviews, aldermen complained the city has moved far too slowly.

“We need to do a better job,” said Ald. Matt Martin (47th), vice chairman of the
City Council subcommittee that has overseen the pandemic recovery plan. “We need to do this ASAP. That’s what we told folks we were going to do as part of a holistic plan to address community violence.”

And the way the funded initiatives are executed matters.

“There’s an art to suturing a wound, right?” said John Roman, a senior fellow who studies crime policies at the research group NORC at the University of Chicago. “You can’t just put some thread through there and hope it was good enough.”

A group of street outreach workers from The Restorative Project walk west along South 63rd Street in the Englewood in October last year as part of their violence prevention efforts. (Credit: Trent Sprague/For Illinois Answers Project)

Lightfoot’s ambitious rhetoric about addressing the root causes of violence clashes with the small-scale spending so far. She has, for example, compared her plans to the Works Progress Administration, the Great Depression-era federal program that gave 8.5 million people jobs and built tens of thousands of hospitals, schools and bridges.

“We simply cannot just arrest our way out of this problem. We can and we must invest our way out of this problem,” she said in an address in December 2021.
City spending, though, tells a different story.

In June alone, the city paid nearly $10 million more in overtime to the Police Department – $34.4 million – than it spent on the package of anti-violence programs over the course of a year. The city classifies 26 programs as anti-violence initiatives, and it has yet to report spending any money on eight of them. Those programs are supposed to be diverting children from jail, healing victims of gun violence and housing the mentally ill.

The city has limited time to change course, as two-thirds of the money for the anti-violence programs comes from federal COVID-19 relief funds that must be awarded by 2024 and spent by 2026, or the U.S. government could try to claw them back.

Lightfoot’s plans have moved slowly even as violence has spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic. While many factors that drive violence — including abundant handguns — are largely outside the control of any mayor, City Hall often takes credit for a drop in shootings in 2022, as Lightfoot did in a candidate debate last month. She said, “My primary goal is to make sure that Chicago is the safest big city in the country, and we’ve made progress year over year, ending down 14% in homicides, 20% in shootings.”

But that’s by comparison with 2021, the most violent year in a quarter-century. There were more than 3,500 shootings and about 700 homicides last year – worse than seven of the last 10 years.

City Hall declined requests for interviews with Lightfoot and Budget Director Susie Park, and their spokespeople answered only a few of Illinois Answers’ detailed questions about the programs.

Park’s office said in a statement that work on some programs is ahead of the spending totals. Billing for at least one initiative will come when the project is done, and the city’s reimbursement process can lag months behind the work, the statement said. The statement noted that more money has been awarded through contracts than spent and added that the cash “was never intended to spend all in one-year but rather over five years through 2026.”
But even if the city speeds up its spending, initiatives such as fixing up parks won’t address the needs of the growing community of people grieving murdered loved ones, said Camiella Williams, a 35-year-old mentor for the youth organization GoodKids MadCity. Williams said she has lost more than 50 friends and family members to gunfire.

“If you lost somebody to violence and you’re not getting no help and your mind is cloudy, you don’t care about no trees,” she said. “You don’t care nothing about no parks.”
borrowed money to create the Chicago Recovery Plan, which is designed to fund programs ranging from grants for artists to neighborhood broadband. About $410 million of that is going toward programs City Hall describes as supporting its anti-violence plan, “Our City, Our Safety.”

Illinois Answers revealed in August the new city office that was funded by the money and was designed to quarterback Lightfoot’s anti-violence efforts, the Community Safety Coordination Center, had done little of substance while its leader, Tamara Mahal, had exaggerated her accomplishments rolling out the city’s COVID-19 vaccines. Mahal left her job 2 ½ months after the story was published. City Hall has refused to explain her departure, and Lightfoot has not named a permanent replacement.

As she seeks reelection, Lightfoot has heavily marketed her spending on programs she categorizes as fighting crime. She often speaks about the money as though it has been spent, as she did in an August budget speech when she said, “Through the 2022 budget, we’ve made $400 million in other investments that address the root causes of violence.”

To assess what the city has accomplished, Illinois Answers combed through more than a thousand pages of city reports, filed more than 40 records requests and conducted dozens of interviews.

The $25 million spending figure for 2022 is a generous estimate. The city has been opaque about some of its spending, provided at times inconsistent figures and failed to answer questions clearly about the money.

The city has promised increased spending in the coming years, but at the rate the city spent in 2022, it would take until 2038 to spend the $410 million.
Starting a host of new programs and expanding others is, of course, a daunting task, and the city reported laying groundwork by designing programs, seeking contractors or awarding funds to be spent.

Still, many programs took months to start operating. The city reported to the federal government at the end of September that nine programs had “not started.” As of the end of the year, three still had not.

One program that has been slow to start is the long-promised attempt to replace the Juvenile Intervention and Support Center, a police facility that was supposed to route kids away from the courts and towards services, but instead often functioned like a typical police station that happened to be for children, advocates said. Former Inspector General Joseph Ferguson’s office wrote in 2020 that its record-keeping was so bad it was impossible to tell if it was useful.

A well-run youth diversion center could prove helpful in neighborhoods of color, as Black and Hispanic children get arrested far more often than white ones, and studies have shown that the programs can reduce recidivism.

But none of the $10 million Chicago allocated for the program had been spent as
of last year. A recent report on the program listed two accomplishments: receiving community feedback and putting out a request for proposals from groups hoping to run it.

Susan Lee, Lightfoot’s one-time deputy mayor for public safety, was involved in trying to fix the program until the summer of 2021. She thought it would be revamped and working sooner.

“The only thing we were waiting for was money, which is why when I saw the $10 million… I was like ‘Oh, great, finally, we’re gonna move forward,’” she said. “But then I find out now when I look at the recovery spending, zero of those $10 million have been spent to set up the system.”

The city’s plan to remake the program is mysterious even to some who helped with the effort. Garien Gatewood, director of the nonprofit Illinois Justice Project, is on the advisory council appointed to guide the changes, but he learned the project was in line for federal dollars only when an Illinois Answers reporter told him. He said he had not heard from city officials about the reform effort since July.

“It would be great to know what’s happening with the youth and how we can help,” Gatewood said.

The scant spending hasn’t stopped Lightfoot from touting the programs in campaign email blasts, with one January email crediting her with “investing $25 million to launch the first ‘citywide strategic plan’ to address gender-based violence and human trafficking.”

By the end of 2022, the city had spent less than 1% of the money.

**Intervention booming but a few groups have red flags**

A showpiece of Lightfoot’s plan is funding high-visibility outreach groups that intervene in violence.

The city’s $410 million includes $16.1 million for street outreach programs. That spending is being augmented by additional money from Illinois and Cook County. All told, more than $127 million in city, state and county money is committed to Chicago groups, along with tens of millions more from private donors. The money is to pay for workers to defuse retaliation and mediate conflicts, help victims seek
financial aid and intervene in the lives of people most at risk of killing or dying.

These groups are an alternative to Chicago police, who have a long history of harming people of color while failing to make many parts of the city safe. These anti-violence workers - often previously incarcerated people themselves - do grueling, dangerous work intended to save lives.

Some early research tentatively suggests it is working in Chicago. Northwestern University professor Andrew Papachristos, whose research center is evaluating the city’s street outreach programs, said that his early estimates suggested that from 2018 to 2021 seven violence interruption groups may have prevented 383 non-fatal shootings and homicides.

“It’s clear that those communities that got investments in outreach did better than they would have, especially through the pandemic,” he said.

But some smaller groups with tight budgets say the city’s delayed reimbursements make it difficult to operate at times.

Envision Community Services, a Brighton Park group that was awarded $500,000 from the city to do street outreach, twice had to furlough its staff of five due to cash shortages created by lagging city payments.

“Lines of credit can only go so far,” said Roberto Montejano Sr., Envision’s president. “We find ourselves in the difficult position of having to make a decision whether it’s going to be staff or participants. It can’t be both.”

The spending has also been marked by the inclusion of groups with questionable leadership or simply no track record of dealing with violence.

One group, Public Equity, runs out of boarded-up storefront in a strip mall in West Englewood, a community area that has suffered more than 500 shootings during the pandemic. City officials rejected the group’s application, which failed to answer questions about its finances or plans to train and protect employees, city records show.
The Public Equity office operates out of a boarded-up storefront in a strip mall at 2019 W. 63rd Street in Englewood. (Credit: Trent Sprague/For Illinois Answers Project)

Later, Public Equity received funding from Metropolitan Family Services, which has an annual budget of more than $100 million and has city and county contracts worth up to $46 million to fight violence. A network of street outreach groups including Public Equity are subcontracting through MFS, which in addition to doling out the money provides human resources support and other services to the organizations. In total, Public Equity is in line to get more than $2.8 million from the county, city and state.

The group’s director, Tony Woods, is subject to an active order of protection barring him from seeing his ex-wife and his children stemming from a 2018 conviction for putting a gun to her temple, putting a round in the chamber and threatening to kill her in front of his two small children, according to court records. As his family tried to pull Woods off his ex-wife, he pistol-whipped and kicked her, the records show.

In October, a judge in his divorce case extended the protection order through 2024, saying Woods “refuses to take full accountability for his own actions.” The
judge also wrote that Woods was “dishonest about being fired” from his job at Noble Schools, where he worked as a dean.

The grant money, Woods said, allowed him to grow his staff to 15 people, buy Thanksgiving turkeys and Christmas gifts for the community and lease a new Ford F-150 pickup truck he uses to deliver goods in the neighborhood and to take home.

Woods collects a $175,000 salary from Public Equity, according to state records. He declined to discuss the court case but told Illinois Answers his own struggles make him more relatable to the people he hopes to serve.

“It’s never too late to redeem yourself and get on the right track,” he said. “Any mistakes I have made, I think this is a shot at redemption.”

Vaughn Bryant, who oversees street outreach for Metropolitan Peace Initiatives, a division of MFS, and wrote a letter of recommendation for Woods when he applied for the city, said he was unaware of the restraining order until contacted by Illinois Answers.
Vaughn Bryant, who oversees street outreach for a division of Metropolitan Family Services, speaks at an violence prevention convention in Chicago earlier this month. (Credit: Casey Toner/Illinois Answers Project)

“Everybody we deal with has some engagement with the criminal justice system,” Bryant said. “Part of our work is restorative. We want to make sure people have the ability to reengage in society in a meaningful way.”

The Illinois Department of Human Services, which funds Public Equity, said in a statement that it "holds the organizations responsible for the vetting and performance of their employees." County officials declined to comment, and city officials did not respond to a question about the group.

Another notable person the city is funding indirectly through other contractors: radio host Tio Hardiman, an activist with a tumultuous history with local anti-violence groups. He recently suggested that Chicago could address violence by outlawing ski masks.

Hardiman, who twice ran outsider campaigns for governor, gained fame as the former director of CeaseFire, the group profiled in the acclaimed documentary “The Interrupters” that was once ubiquitous on Chicago streets and raised the national profile for street outreach. The group let Hardiman go after he was charged with misdemeanor domestic battery when his wife reported that he hit her. Prosecutors later dropped the charges. It was his second arrest on domestic violence charges.

Hardiman’s former group, which rebranded as Cure Violence, now maintains only a small presence in Chicago and gets little public money in Illinois.

Hardiman’s new organization, Violence Interrupters, is getting paid by two street outreach groups to train their workers. The city- and state-funded Together Chicago, which Hardiman recommended in a letter to the city, hired Violence Interrupters for $78,000 to supervise their street outreach sites in Austin and East Garfield Park. The state-funded Fierce Women of Faith, based in Englewood, contracted with his organization for $24,000 to teach their workers “non-violent technique, remediation techniques, various affiliation avoidances and self-awareness.”

Hardiman, who has extensive experience in violence interruption work, told Illinois Answers, “People know my track record. Why not fund me with $10
Other groups the city is funding are new to trying to stop violence.

Youth Guidance, which has a $600,000 contract for its street outreach work in the West Pullman neighborhood, noted in its city application that one barrier to providing services was that it had “traditionally been a school-based social-emotional and mental health provider with an expertise in serving adolescent youth.”

A Youth Guidance spokesperson said in a statement that for street outreach they “partner with Kids Off the Block, which has almost 20 years of experience providing on-the-ground services for young people on Chicago’s South Side.”

Public Equity, when applying to the city, offered a brief response to a question about its prior street outreach experience: “non applicable.”

People with experience in the field say they doubt that some of the groups new to anti-violence work are equipped to meaningfully reduce crime.

“I’ve been doing this violence prevention work for almost 30 years...and I’ve never seen this much money in the field,” said Lance Williams, a professor of urban community studies at Northeastern Illinois University. “But it seems like it’s all just going right down the drain and the stuff that we’re doing is not having an impact because we are directing the resources in the wrong areas.”

Bilaal Evans, who runs a state-funded street outreach group in Englewood similar to the city-funded groups, said neighborhoods that have weathered generational neglect need “reparations-style reinvestment,” far beyond what has been announced. Evans, who leads The Restorative Project, said in the absence of that funding street outreach programs are only “giving people jobs for a few years.”
Bilaal Evans, who runs The Restorative Project in Englewood, says neighborhoods suffering generational neglect need “reparations-style reinvestment” and money spent on street outreach isn't enough. (Credit: Trent Sprague/For Illinois Answers Project)

“That’s it,” Evans said. “They aren’t really changing their lives.”

**Limited evidence, city services rebranded**

Some of the spending funds well-established programs.

One of the largest line-items in Lightfoot’s anti-violence plan is $53.8 million for youth jobs programs that are part of One Summer Chicago, a program launched by Mayor Rahm Emanuel in 2011. A 2017 study found that One Summer Chicago participants were less likely to be arrested for violent crimes.

How well other programs will work is less clear. The city - even when federal reports asked for evidence - has not offered research supporting the likely effectiveness of several programs. Those include My CHI. My Future. That program, which uses an app to connect kids with extracurricular activities, is set
to take in $11.2 million.

Tens of millions of dollars Lightfoot describes as addressing violence are dedicated to tackling traditional duties of city government.

Illinois Answers previously reported that the new Community Safety Coordination Center often focused on modest tasks such as pressing other departments to address 311 complaints, despite the city’s optimistic rhetoric about the Center addressing violence at its root. Academics who study crime said the Center’s work might help some people but wouldn’t address the causes of violence in places where poverty and disinvestment have been concentrated for decades.

The city is pouring the most money into fixing a problem that has plagued Chicago for decades — vacant lots. The Lightfoot administration has dedicated $87 million to cleaning and selling its 10,000 or so vacant lots, some of which the city has owned since the 1950s.

Some studies have linked violence with vacant property, and the two certainly coincide in Chicago; more than 50% of the lots are in just seven community areas – including West Englewood and North Lawndale – plagued by shootings.

Lightfoot said last summer, “We know from the data that (it) will lead to a reduction in criminal activity.”

Experts on vacant land do not share her certainty, saying that while some studies might show cleaning up lots can reduce violence, those successes might have hinged on the lots’ location and how those cities dealt with them. The market for the available land determines a city’s success, those experts said, and Chicago’s vacant lots are concentrated in poor areas where demand for land is typically low.

“No city has been able to turn this around in a meaningful sense except when they had a market tailwind,” said Alan Mallach, a city planner and author who studies the topic. “The market factors are just so powerful that it’s really just beyond what any city has been able to cope with.”

Perhaps the most unconventional of the city’s efforts to ease violence?

Pickleball.

The city has earmarked $27.6 million to improve parks, a figure that includes the
installation of turf fields and playing surfaces for the increasingly popular racket sport. The city plans **50 new pickleball courts**, though some will be converted tennis courts. The pickleball part of the budget is $2.6 million, Park District records show.

Retired South Side massage therapist Rick Prewitt plays and teaches the sport, and he said the city needs more courts. He said the sport is a good addition to other anti-violence initiatives, though he added with a laugh that another pickleball booster once approached him about a “guns for paddles” program.

Rick Prewitt, president of Universal Picklers, plays and teaches pickleball at the Kennicott Fieldhouse gym in Kenwood last month. (Credit: Victor Hilitski/For Illinois Answers Project)

“I told him that’s ludicrous. That’s not how it works,” he said.

**Dodgy evaluations and standards**

The answer may be unclear, as reporting from violence intervention groups has been erratic and the city has laid out only spotty plans to evaluate its other programs.

For example, South Chicago-based Claretian Associates reported 704 initial
”mediations” in the first eight months of the year — about 300 more mediations than any other group, city data shows. That’s implausible, according to street outreach workers.

By the city’s definition, a mediation “includes intervention and de-escalation of a violent situation encountered by outreach workers during street outreach” or in response to a notification of a shooting or a murder. But Tevonne Ellis, the group’s program director, said a mediation “can be as simple as ‘we agree not to cross this side of the street.’”

“Our numbers may look high, but that little mediation of ‘us not crossing gang territory’ is a mediation,” she said. “I think the question is how do you define mediation?”

On the other end, the Southwest Organizing Project reported no mediations in those months. The program’s director, Rafi Peterson, said he doesn’t believe they work because the gangs in his region of the city’s Southwest Side are splintered into 25 or 30 cliques without a clear chain of command. Instead, his group focuses on getting people off corners and into jobs.

Beyond street outreach, the city’s stated plans to evaluate its work are limited. For 11 programs, the city told the federal government in December it was not evaluating the results. Even when the city has indicated it might evaluate programs, details were scant. A city report last summer said in identical, vague boilerplate language that 18 programs might be evaluated. Details would be explained later.

The lack of trustworthy evidence has long been a problem in violence prevention, researchers said, and that means public officials looking to spend money on tested solutions lack guidance.

“It is a huge problem because it means we’ll never learn what works and what doesn’t, and when the money runs out in two years, it will be hard to make an argument to your budget director, your alderman, whoever the budget making body is, that it is worth this investment,” said Elizabeth Glazer, the former director of the New York City mayor’s office of criminal justice.
Camiella Williams, a mentor for GoodKids MadCity, says people are skeptical
that politicians will make their lives significantly better. (Credit: Victor Hilitski/For Illinois Answers Project)

One researcher said the federal government was at fault for encouraging but failing to require evaluations

“Ultimately, I blame Chicago a lot less than I blame the federal government for not requiring it,” said Jennifer Doleac, an economics professor at Texas A&M University who studies crime.

If the programs don’t live up to their publicity, it could add to the skepticism some people feel after decades of neglect in neighborhoods where violence remains an everyday burden.

Williams, the youth mentor who said she has lost dozens of friends and family members to gun violence, sees the city’s programs as “politics as usual,” cooked up by elected officials trying to look helpful. She said people are skeptical that politicians will ever live up to their pledges.

She said, “If you just talk to anybody in the community, they’ll tell you, ‘Man, we don’t care. It’s just promises.’”