

Chicago and Cook County allocate the bulk of CARES Act funding to police and jail spending

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28 February 2021

It has recently come to light that both the City of Chicago and the government of Cook County, of which Chicago is the county seat, have chosen to spend the bulk of their discretionary federal COVID-19 relief funding on police and jails. The decision to allocate the bulk of funding toward the repressive apparatus of the state, pushed from the highest levels of the Democratic Party, is a clear sign of the priorities of the ruling class, which has devoted a comparatively miniscule amount towards any kind of relief for workers.

Although city budget director Susie Park had denied last June that relief money was going toward the police, recent attempts by Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot to shuffle budget lines, requiring approval by the city council, led to the discovery that she planned to allocate \$281.5 million on police payroll costs. This figure is 70 percent of the \$403 million in discretionary funding the city received from the federal government and amounts to around one-third of the city's annual police payroll costs of about \$862 million.

Lightfoot claimed criticism of the spending was “just dumb,” and asserted, “We saved taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars by saying yes to the federal government.” She and other Chicago officials claim the city was just taking advantage of a government program that would allow it to be reimbursed for expenses already incurred, and that by not taking the money for police, they would be leaving money on the table, as it were.

Insofar as this is true, it is a complete indictment of the city's spending priorities prior and through the first year of the pandemic. According to the Chicago Civic Federation, the city budgeted \$2.45 billion on the police department and police officer pensions during

the previous fiscal year, over 21 percent of total spending, a figure which does not include health care and other benefit costs, as those costs are not broken out by department. It also does not include \$82.6 million set aside for settling lawsuits and paying judgments resulting from police violence, for which the city has spent \$757 million from 2004 to 2018.

Following the protests in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd last year, Lightfoot rejected calls to “defund” the police, claiming in an October budget address, “In this moment in Chicago, we cannot responsibly enact any policies that make communities less safe.”

Continuing, Lightfoot made clear her priorities, “While we will slow the rate of growth, with a resulting \$80 million in corporate fund savings, on my watch we will never make cuts or policy changes that inhibit the core mission of the police department, which is to serve and protect.”

During the same week in which Lightfoot fought to push through the city council vote approving the relief spending, a group of local investors and CEOs published an open letter in the *Chicago Sun-Times* offering a full-throated defense of Lightfoot's policies, the most notable of which have been the push to reopen schools and the violent crackdown on protesters over the summer saying, “We commend you and your team for your steadfast leadership in navigating the city through this crisis.”

Circulated by the co-CEOs of private investment firm the Vistria Group, who have close ties to former president Barack Obama, the letter was signed by 63 corporate and educational leaders. Among the individuals offering their support were Andrew Clarke

of Mars Wrigley, Chris Kempczinski of McDonald's, Dave Casper of BMO Harris Bank, Roger Hochschild of Discover Financial Services, as well as Tom Ricketts of the Chicago Cubs, Mellody Hobson of Ariel Investments and Valerie Jarrett of the Barack Obama Foundation, among others.

This letter makes it clear that the decision to allocate the bulk of federal relief money to policing is in no way an idiosyncratic decision of Lightfoot, but is rather a position carefully worked out with the representatives of finance capital and the leadership of the Democratic Party.

Just this week it was also revealed that Cook County spent \$181.7 million, or 42 percent of its \$428.5 million in coronavirus relief funding on the sheriff's office, of which \$176 million went to payroll costs. The sheriff's office is responsible for the enormous and notorious Cook County Jail, along with electronic monitoring and policing in certain parts of the county which do not have their own police departments. Currently holding around 3,600 people in atrocious conditions, the Cook County Jail is one of the largest pre-trial detention facilities in the world.

Notably, in July the Cook County Board passed a non-binding Justice for Black Lives resolution calling for the county to "redirect funds from policing and incarceration to public services not administered by law enforcement that promote community health and safety equitably." This resolution received the support of 15 of the 17 commissioners, and at the time Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle spoke in favor saying, "I'm for reducing and redirecting our investment in law enforcement."

Preckwinkle, who is also the chair of the Cook County Democratic Party, ran against Lightfoot in the mayoral race. Despite an undeserved reputation for being a progressive, Preckwinkle lost, largely as a result of her ties to Chicago alderman Ed Burke, who had been charged with extortion as a result of his corrupt practices.

Proving the essential unity of the Cook County Democratic Party on support for police and jail spending, Preckwinkle's deputies offered reasoning similar to Lightfoot's in defense of the decision to direct pandemic relief funds to the police. Cook County Budget Director Annette Guzman claimed the county did not want to be "fighting over things that are

misrepresented," and downplayed it, saying, "This is one part of a whole panoply of things the county did in response to COVID-19 that really went to making sure that our residents were taken care of and secure during a once-in-a-lifetime event. You can't look at things in isolation. You've got to look at them in total."

Criticisms of the spending from some of the pseudo-left aligned members of the Chicago City Council serve merely to illustrate how groups like the Democratic Socialists of America serve to sow illusions in the Democratic Party and the reformability of the capitalist system. A real fight to allocate resources for worker needs must start with the fight for socialism.



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