Chicago giving group $1 million grant to help curtail violence
By Jeremy Gorner, Kristen Mack and ex W. Huppke
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Faced with a surge in homicides, the city of Chicago has taken the unprecedented step of giving the anti-violence group CeaseFire a $1 million grant in hopes an organization staffed largely by ex-felons can help police curtail summer violence.

It's an unlikely marriage that has both sides wary.

CeaseFire workers have always kept police at arms length as they mediated potentially violent disputes among gangs. And many police officers long have been suspicious of a group whose “violence interrupters” are often former gang members.

But a high-ranking city source said Mayor Rahm Emanuel, frustrated by the rise in violence in the city, pushed the police and CeaseFire to come to an agreement.

“The mayor told them to figure this out, because police can’t do it alone,” the source said. “We know that CeaseFire has had some success.”

Under a one-year pilot program announced by city officials on Tuesday, CeaseFire will hire 40 workers who will be assigned to two police districts, Ogden and Grand Crossing, that have experienced some of the worst of the increased street violence.

“The amount of gun violence in our city is simply unacceptable,” First Deputy Police Superintendent Alfonza Wysinger said at a news conference on the South Side. “We’re not talking about numbers. We’re talking about people.”

Police officials have tried to tamp down criticism over the rising numbers of homicides. But city data show that as of Sunday there have been 250 homicides in Chicago compared to 182 through the same date last year, an increase of 37 percent. Shootings are up about 11 percent from 2011.

CeaseFire’s work was chronicled in the 2011 documentary “The Interrupters,” which raised the organization’s national profile and was seen by Emanuel.

The pilot program is being administered not by the police department but by the city’s Department of Public Health, a nod to CeaseFire’s philosophical underpinning that crime is a public health epidemic. Tio Hardiman, executive director of CeaseFire Illinois, said the group won’t be operating any differently under the pilot program than it has in the past. He also stressed that the group’s workers will not be acting as “informants” for police officers.

“Everybody understands that at CeaseFire we have a proven model. The model works the way it is, and we’re not going to change the model,” Hardiman said. “If we did, we’d be ineffective.”
As part of the agreement, CeaseFire will be expected to maintain the confidentiality of any sensitive information it may get from the police or city’s health department to help workers mediate a dispute. CeaseFire workers will also be expected to attend beat meetings and meetings held by the police department’s Community Alternative Policing Strategy office, and meet regularly with district commanders to assess the progress of the partnership.

“The CeaseFire program managers have always met with police commanders and talked about how to strategize everything from responses to shootings — like community marches — to getting data relating to hot spots where we might help,” Hardiman said. “We won’t be sharing data about any individuals or individual incidents.”

Police Superintendent Garry McCarthy was not at Tuesday’s news conference. In the past, he has said he is “not a big fan” of the way CeaseFire works.

Earlier this month, referring to CeaseFire in a speech at the Union League Club of Chicago, McCarthy said: “When an event occurs when people are trying to do damage and somebody comes in and tries to interrupt that particular dynamic, and they tell people, ‘Well, don’t talk to the police. We understand you can’t trust the police. But look at us. You can trust us,’ they’re undercutting that legitimacy that we’re trying to create with the community.”

Fraternal Order of Police President Mike Shields said Tuesday that he’s frustrated to see the city directing money for crime-fighting to an organization other than the police.

“The city will tell you every single day that every penny counts,” Shields said. “Clearly it does not when it goes into the hands of ex-gang bangers.”

But Wysinger said it’s important for CeaseFire and the police department to set aside their differences and work together to reduce shootings and homicides.

“What we’re trying to do from this point forward is to not look back at the way things were in the past,” Wysinger said. “This is just one of the tools that we’re putting down in our toolbox to help tamp down some of this violence.”

Emanuel met with McCarthy, Wysinger and Hardiman on May 5 to discuss how CeaseFire and the police could work together, according to the city source, and it took well over a month for an arrangement to be worked out.

The $1 million grant for the pilot program is coming from Emanuel’s anticipated haul of $8.5 million from people who owe City Hall money. The city now has the ability to intercept state income tax refunds from people across Illinois who have outstanding parking tickets, red-light citations or administrative hearing fines that date back to 2005.

If CeaseFire fails to meet specific performance guidelines, the city can get out of the contract early, an administration source said. CeaseFire’s effectiveness will be evaluated through the police department’s CompStat system, a data-driven approach championed by McCarthy that measures the success and failure of crime-fighting strategies in each district.
This is the first time CeaseFire, which is part of the Chicago Project for Violence Prevention at the University of Illinois at Chicago, has received funding from the City of Chicago. Since the program launched in 2000, most of its money has come from state, county and federal grants.

But funding sources have been inconsistent, forcing CeaseFire to shrink and build its staff repeatedly over the years and making it hard to establish continuity in violence-plagued communities.

Since its inception, CeaseFire has used police data to show quantifiable reductions in shootings and homicides in the neighborhoods where it works. In 2008, a 229-page report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Justice and conducted by Wesley Skogan, a faculty fellow at the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University, found that the anti-violence program has led to “distinct and

Arthur Lurigio, a professor of psychology and criminal justice at Loyola University Chicago, said he believes the police and CeaseFire can both function effectively without getting in each other’s way.

“I think they just need to say, ‘We’re different groups, we come from different backgrounds,’” he said. “‘But now, we have the same goal. ... We can both take credit for achieving the same end.’”