

EM

Madam Chair/ Mr. Chairman and members of the committee:

My name is Rio Comaduran, I live in West Hartford Connecticut, I am a graduate level student getting my Master's degree in Social Work at the University of Connecticut with a focus in Community Organizing, and I will be speaking today in favor of the Raised House Bill No. 6676. I am here as a student in Dr. Catherine Medina's Political Advocacy course at the University of Connecticut's School of Social Work.

Unlike many people testifying today, I do not have much personal experience with violence, especially gang-related violence. I was born in Oakland, California and I have heard my parents tell me how much they loved the Bay area and could have stayed there their entire lives, however, due to the increasing gang violence at that time, they decided to move their new, young family to safer grounds and this forever changed the course of our lives. This is my only personal experience with gang violence, however today, I proudly represent the social worker's voice in regards to this initiative, the potential that it holds, and the impact that it can make.

I mention potential, because like all initiatives, there is a certain delicate and naïve idealistic quality that exists before it is put forth into the 'real' world. One advantage that this initiative holds is that it has already been rather successful in various communities around the state and the country and this is why I am for the bill being passed - in order to implement Project Longevity on a state-wide basis. According to an Office of Legislative Research report put out recently, Hartford leads the way in juvenile convictions for weapons-related charges – we cannot afford NOT to implement this initiative. As a future social worker, I feel proud to be included as one among the key players to the success of this initiative and I want to commend Gov. Dannel P. Malloy and his administration for making this a real priority. How very bold of him to say outright that, "we are working to regain the trust of the African American and Latino communities. We need their help. The lives of these young people are too valuable not to act."

That being said, this point about communities should not be taken lightly. Anti-crime stances are to be commended, however, we should stay very sensitive to the fact that in so initiating this program and others like it, you will be inadvertently targeting certain neighborhoods and thus certain ethnic minorities – this will surely cause some discomfort and skepticism, even resentment and pushback. It is all about how you approach the communities and neighborhoods and how you market this effort –who will benefit from it, who is vital to its success, what are the goals and objectives, and so on.

The NAACP most recently has made an excellent point, that in implementing this initiative, "the program could unfairly target and disrupt minority communities." Let us heed this warning, as extreme as it might be, let us reflect on the idea that it could be true – how could it be mitigated, how could this impact be lessened if it indeed holds even a kernel of truth? Know that there is a great potential to have a very real "impact on those who are not directly associated with these gangs, but because of familial or neighborhood association may also become targets."

This initiative is an innovative approach to gang related violence, is a multiprofessional, interdisciplinary strategy which will surely make it a richer, more holistic solution to our collective social problems, especially related to gun violence – it might even serve as a model to other communities around the nation if done properly. I've seen the advantages and benefits of working in an interdisciplinary environment in order to provide holistic care to our asylum seeking clients at the Law School's Asylum and Human Rights legal clinic. This approach provided thoughtful and comprehensive care of which our clients benefited much and were

very grateful for. I believe in this approach to create innovative solutions to problems and I believe this initiative has the same potential. However, just as creating solutions to issues had to be client centered at the legal clinic, this approach must be community centered and community driven in order to have the greatest and most sustainable impact.

For the past year and a half I've also been involved with a Hartford community program that seeks to integrate immigrants into their communities more fully by way of getting them more civically engaged and participating in processes that directly affect their communities. It has not been an easy task – finding the community leaders and engaging them and convincing them of the process and that they will ultimately benefit from the effort is difficult. Bringing the city, service providers, immigrants, and even USCIS to the same table to discuss immigrant integration issues is also no simple task for every agency has their own motives and agenda and thus, viewpoints – however, the long haul has been worth it and we are really starting to see service agencies, service providers, law enforcement, local leaders, and immigrants and immigrant communities coming together to share in a dialogue, engaging in the arduous process of shaping the communities we all live in together and going forth with one vision. This grassroots, community organizing is worth the effort because in the end, the communities will be fully invested and will have a sense of pride in having played a real part in the shaping of their own future; this is self-determination at its best.

Project Longevity is a great initiative in that it targets repeat criminals, creates alternatives for potential gang members and rallies neighborhoods against violence. In so doing, we should take care not to forget to be compassionate in our understanding of violence and why it manifests in the first place –part of this holistic approach should be to act compassionately towards gang members and their motivations, their circumstances, their lack of choices and opportunity – to address the cause as well as the symptom. Let us heed the warning of the potential harmful effects that this very noble initiative can have – let us go in with our eyes wide open, monitoring and evaluating progress and challenges along the way, gauging the community's perspective each step along the way. Let us employ strategies such as community dialogues, public action forums, town hall type dialogues, create coalitions, task forces and working groups, gauge and assess the community's needs, perceptions, frustrations often with appreciative inquiry. Lastly, let us employ social workers to work directly with the trauma and vicarious trauma that occurs with gun violence, gang-related violence, and those working with these populations – the fear that deeply shapes people's lives should not be minimized - it can drive all other decision making processes, as I have seen with my own eyes, the trauma that affects asylum seekers and other undocumented immigrants in this country.

I thank the Judiciary Committee for your time, in allowing me to speak today.

Rio Comaduran

MSW candidate 2013

rio252@hotmail.com