Group Violence Intervention (GVI) strategy which typically results in a 35 to 60 percent decrease in gun homicides

Reducing gun violence saves the state money. The Giffords Law Center asserts that, “Averting a single gun homicide saves taxpayers an average of $464,000”

The Project Longevity Group Violence Intervention (GVI), strategy attempts to reduce violence in a city by focusing law enforcement, community, and social services at the small number of people driving a disproportionate amount of violence otherwise known as street groups or gangs.

Only 0.3% to 0.7% of a city’s population is associated with 65% to 80% of the gun violence that occurs in cities like Hartford, New Haven, and Bridgeport.

44% - 80%

Since implementation, Project Longevity sites have experienced significant decreases in gun-related homicides. Non-fatal shootings have decreased by as much as 24%. Sustained decreases require funding supports.

The GVI strategy, also referred to as Focused Deterrence or Ceasefire, has been studied for years and has been proven effective through a strong formal evaluation record that presents evidence derived from more than 60 peer reviewed studies, and four systematic meta-reviews.

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Please accept my sincere appreciation to Co-Chairs Walker and Osten, Vice Chairs Hartley, DiMassa, and Horn, and members of the Appropriations Committee for the opportunity to share my remarks on behalf of Project Longevity regarding urban community level gun violence. My name is Brent Peterkin, and I am the Statewide Coordinator of Project Longevity which is a Group Violence Intervention (GVI) strategy being implemented in Bridgeport, Hartford, and New Haven. In addition to my role as Statewide Coordinator, I currently serve as Co-Chair for Bridgeport’s Mayor’s Gun Violence Intervention Task Force, a member of the Hartford Youth Violence Prevention Initiative, a member of the Bridgeport Mayor’s Initiative for Reentry Affairs, and a board member of three organizations which include CT Against Gun Violence, EMERGE, and the Phoenix Association. I’m writing to request your support for the increase in funding to Project Longevity’s budget. I am in opposition to Governor Lamont’s proposed reductions noted in the FY 19/20 - 20/21 Biennial Budget. I commend the efforts of Governor Lamont, the Connecticut General Assembly, along with state and local public administrators who are working ardently to bring the state out of a fiscal crisis and spur sustainable economic development. However, gun violence is not only a criminal justice and public health issue with many moral considerations it is also a socioeconomic issue for which we must consider the cost savings associated with violence reduction, prisoner reentry support, and community outreach along with the mitigation of other structural causes as part of our public policy focus. Governor Lamont has proposed a total of $573,750 in funding to implement Project Longevity in three cities, Hartford, Bridgeport, and New Haven. During FY 17/18 - 18/19 Project Longevity struggled under multiple funding rescissions imposed by the state and the implementation team, which includes myself, continued to work during the 2017 budget impasse without funding and compensation for 7 months. Our commitments as public servants is evident. Project Longevity was never adequately funded. For an optimal effort we are seeking a total of $1.2 million to fund gun violence intervention work in Hartford, Bridgeport, and New Haven.
I felt personally compelled to focus on reducing the gun violence-related tragedies and trauma suffered in urban communities as it is relative to my personal experiences. At the age of 13, I was the target of a shooting for which, fortunately, I survived unharmed. I’ve received personal threats of gun violence. I’ve lost multiple friends during my teenage and adult years to street group perpetrated gun violence, I’ve had numerous friends incarcerated for gun and drug offenses, and experienced several negative unprovoked and unsubstantiated encounters with law enforcement. I’ve witnessed my personal friends struggle through arduous journeys towards redemption, personal development, attempts to gain employment, and overall well being after being involved in the criminal justice system. I’ve stared into the eyes of despondent parents who have lost loved ones to gun violence and empathized with their pain. The process of removing one’s self from street life and gaining integrity in the public’s eyes is both a precarious and challenging endeavor.

The amalgamation of these issues and personal experiences spurred varying degrees of introspective and retrospective reflection, and internal reconciliation that fostered the philosophical and practical perspectives that made the work that I’m involved with both appealing and sensible. The attempt to bridge divides amongst law enforcement and community level individuals to reduce gun violence through focused interventions has a credible track record. This is not mere conjecture. The GVI strategy, also referred to as Focused Deterrence or Ceasefire, has been studied for years and has been proven effective through a strong formal evaluation record that presents evidence derived from more than 60 peer reviewed studies, and four systematic meta-reviews. Project Longevity has been cited as an impactful model by the Giffords Law Center, Yale University, and the John Jay College of Criminal Justice.

The model has withstood the test of time and challenge of efficacy. Going as far back as the nineties, throughout the country, cities have reduced street group gun violence significantly by implementing the Group Violence Intervention (GVI) strategy which typically results in a 35 to 60 percent decrease in gun homicides and a proportional reduction in non-fatal shootings. As a corollary measure of impact, Project Longevity’s efforts have helped Bridgeport experience as much as a 55% decrease in non-fatal street group shootings and a 17% decrease in street group homicides, while New Haven has experienced as much as a 80% decrease in homicides and a 24% decrease in nonfatal shootings, and Hartford has experienced decreased homicides as high as 44% and a 7% decrease in nonfatal shootings. Intermittent reductions are less favorable to precipitous decreases in gun violence but sustained investments from the state are requisite for continued and long term progress. Funding shortfalls has been the Achilles heel of many violence reduction strategies including GVI efforts such as Project Longevity, and others like Cure Violence, and Hospital Based Interventions. Project Longevity has integrated aspects of these strategies and conducts outreach interventions in hospitals, corrections facilities and throughout communities with high levels of gun violence. We go wherever the evidence and data leads. We will make our way the hospital, state or federal prison, or your living room to communicate a cogent and respectful anti-gun violence message and offer support.
Connecticut is the only state in the country actively implementing GVI statewide across multiple major cities, with strategic continuity and cohesion, positioning Connecticut to serve as a national model for statewide implementation. I have been called upon on many occasions to provide strategic consultation to many jurisdictions across the country and international jurisdictions who seek to achieve declines in gun violence and are either launching a GVI effort or aspiring to enhance their implementation. Just last year I’ve also met with stakeholders in Waterbury regarding an opportunity to introduce this work in their city. This approach works, however, without a sustained effort supported by funding, the reductions in all cases are temporary. I urge you to ensure that you will work with your colleagues in the General Assembly to ensure that the necessary appropriations are made.

We conduct a problem analysis semi-annually and the outcomes indicate that 0.3% to 0.5% of a city’s population consists of street group involved individuals but an even smaller percentage are consistently linked to up to 70% of shootings and homicides in Hartford, Bridgeport, and New Haven. The primary metric of GVI is to reduce fatal and non-fatal shootings overall but specifically amongst individuals who have associations with active violent street groups. The aim of the GVI model is to dramatically impact peer dynamics in the street groups that promote violence by creating a culture of collective accountability that fosters internal social pressures to deter violence. We challenge the street code with a code of collective accountability. Put another way, the model holds street group involved individuals accountable to reduce violence amongst themselves. The model also seeks to establish clear community standards against violence, and in partnership with community-based organizations that provide services to offer street group members an “honorable exit” from committing acts of violence, through providing a supported path for those who want to change. We directly challenge the moral relativism embedded in the street code that has taken too many lives prematurely in our most challenged communities. To be clear the goal is to reduce street group homicides, shootings, and as a product of targeted outreach and support, we hope to reduce arrests. The moral conviction that we hold in highest regard is that our communities will not tolerate the loss of our young men, women, and children to senseless gun violence. We will help but they have accept the help in order to receive it. I speak from experience as along with my colleagues I have been involved with over 130 outreach interventions. On many of these occasions mothers are given a sense of relief when they find out that myself or my colleagues and a police officer are not there because their son has been involved with a violent crime but because we want to offer help before something goes wrong. During these encounters it is critically important that we share that their loved one’s chances of becoming a victim are alarmingly high due to his or her relationships in the streets but also because of those relationships they are credible messengers who have conversations with friends about the impact of gun violence and incarceration. We have to break the cycle, and we work with those who are closest to being impacted.
The initiative consists of a criminal justice consortium which includes a non-law enforcement operational team, the US Attorneys Office, CT Office of Policy Management, and three police departments with grant administration supported by three state designated fiscal agents for each site. The implementation team consists of a Statewide Coordinator and site level managers. The operational team and the public safety agencies operate on the theory that through the direct communication of the certainty of the dreadful impacts associated with gun violence that individuals who are tethered to violent social networks or street groups will likely make rational decisions to refrain from gun violence and implore their peers to follow suit, and disassociate themselves from violent actors to reduce their risk of becoming a victim of gun violence and being placed amongst instigators of violence. When a homicide is committed, the most violent street groups associated with causing homicides and gun injuries will be under the increased scrutiny of an alliance of law enforcement agencies. Known street group individuals also receive ongoing direct outreach from a cadre of police officers and civilians in an effort to preempt violence by conveying potential consequences along with a genuine offer to receive help in departing from street life and pursuing their personal prosperity.

Members of active street groups attend forums known as Call-Ins where they are given a clear and respectful message regarding their value to the community, law enforcement’s prioritization of gun violence reduction and an opportunity to receive support. The message is conveyed by community leaders, returning citizens, social services administrators, family members of victims of gun violence, clergy and law enforcement professionals. Since launching Project Longevity, we’ve launched over two dozen Call-Ins statewide. In addition to conducting Call-Ins, the street group associated individuals may also be visited by a group composed of law enforcement and community members in response to a recent shooting incident to reduce the proclivity for retaliation and future violence. Some retaliation attempts are years in the making. These outreach interventions are known as Custom Notifications, and as stated earlier they are conducted in communities at the residence of the individual of concern, hospitals, and prisons. We’ve grieved with families, broken by tragedy, who’ve lost loved ones and implored young women, barely out of their teenage years, who in being shot have forever lost the ability to have children, to change their associations with young men who are targets of violence and committed to a violent way of life. We implore young men ensnared by the aggrandizement of the fast life to believe that they are valued by their communities and can be proactive participants in the reduction of gun violence. I have also seen individuals hardened by the seemingly insurmountable challenges and the trauma caused by street life and gun violence change their lives and extend a hand to help others change as well. We’ve helped support real change by assisting former associates of street groups to obtain employment, enroll in community college, acquire OSHA 10 and 30 certifications, CDL Class B licenses, housing and relocation support, basic needs items for themselves and their children, and as a concerned ear with an emphatic heart offering sincere counsel through challenging circumstance. Since inception, Project Longevity has supported over 300 individuals in their pursuit of a better life. Some of these individuals have become vocal community advocates and refer others, leveraging their credibility, to build a relationship with our initiative which has resulted in over 50 percent of our case load being composed of peer to peer referrals.
We are not perfect nor do we claim to be. We work hard and we love our communities. The work that we do is not in isolation. We commend the other organizations in our communities that walk the same path and face the same struggles. During 2017, the state of Connecticut was unable to pass a budget which left Project Longevity unfunded from July 2017 through February 2018. Myself and my colleagues worked without compensation. In addition to operating without a budget Project Longevity suffered a nearly 40% cut in its funding during the previous fiscal year and also in the current fiscal year. We are not wealthy, in fact I took on debt to continue this work. We are trying our best but trying and even achieving is not enough without your support. Just helping one person to realize that they are bigger than their circumstances and changing minds towards gun violence is worth the sacrifice and reinforces the commitment. There are fiscal realities as well. The Giffords Law Center asserts that, “Averting a single gun homicide saves taxpayers an average of $464,000” when accepting for the aggregate costs associated with a gun related homicide. Urban violence intervention based efforts are well worth the investment and cost relatively little to fund. Connecticut must remain steadfast in its commitment to achieving progress in community development and public safety. In your commitment to support our efforts you are voicing advocacy for smart criminal justice policies that not only reduce violence but support community-based collaborations in the spirit of our mantra, “Together We Will Save Lives.” Thank you for your time.

Best Regards,

Brent Peterkin

Statewide Coordinator