

1/25/2012

Greetings,

Members of the Bipartisan Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention & Children's Safety

My name is Andrew Woods and I'm the Executive Director of Hartford Communities That Care (HCTC), located here in Hartford. We've been in existence since 1998, providing youth and workforce development, college and career training, afterschool and summer enrichment programs for school aged youth.

In addition, HCTC is contracted by the City of Hartford to provide crisis intervention and mental health supports for those impacted by homicides and other violent crimes in Hartford.

Since 1998, Hartford has experienced an average of one homicide per week, amounting to over 720 homicides and nearly three times as many non-fatal shootings during this 15 year time-frame.

The vast majority of these homicides have been committed by individuals using handguns versus the much debated use of assault rifles and machine guns used in mass killings such as Columbine and most recently Newtown, Connecticut.

Though much has been discussed about mental health screening and treatment, I would suggest the panel consider the mental health impact violence has on urban youth who have for far too long endured the trauma and grief associated with gun violence.

In addition, there's been a tendency to criminalize first, the behaviors and actions of black and Hispanic youth charged with shooting and or killing others but clinicalizing white suburban youth who shoot and or kill others. In other words, in our society we tend to believe that when a white youth kills or shoots someone, there must have been a psychological reason for their actions and when youth of color commits the same crime, the reason must be criminal in nature.

As the point person for the City of Hartford charged with responding to homicides and shootings and making sure families gain knowledge and access to mental health supports. I can tell you first hand that mental health supports for all youth and families are critical. Further, there are mental health strategies that can identify and intervene in the lives of youth at-risk for harming themselves or others.

In conclusion, I would like to make several recommendations for you to consider:

- 1) It should be a Class A felony for anyone convicted of selling firearms illegally in the United States.
- 2) It should be a Class C felony for gun owners who didn't report a stolen or missing gun which was eventually used in the commission of a crime.

- 3) Trauma Informed treatment strategies should be standard protocol for children who witness, experience or are environmentally exposed to violence such as in urban centers where violence is common place.
- 4) Capacity building, technical assistance and funding should be made available to grassroots and faith-based organizations currently engaged in youth development work that target at-risk youth in high crime neighborhoods.
- 5) The State of Connecticut should strongly look at advocating for the passage and funding of the **The Youth Promise Act** sponsored by Congressman Bobby Scott-VA and co-signed by over 235 members of congressmen, including Congressman John Larson. Under the Youth PROMISE (Prison Reduction through Opportunities, Mentoring, Intervention, Support, and Education) Act (H.R. 2721), communities facing the greatest youth gang and crime challenges will be able to develop a comprehensive response to youth violence through a coordinated prevention and intervention response. Representatives from local law enforcement, the school system, court services, social services, health and mental health providers, foster care providers, other community and faith-based organizations will form a council to develop a comprehensive plan for implementing evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies. The plans can be funded up to four years. The act also enhances state and local law enforcement efforts regarding youth and gang violence.

Lastly, thanks for taking on this challenging but important task and if you have any questions I can be reached at: 860-209-8957 or awoods3976@aol.com.

Sincerely

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