

1/29/2012

Greetings Members of the Bipartisan Task Force on Gun Violence Prevention and Safety-Mental Health Workgroup.

My name is Andrew Woods and I'm the Executive Director of Hartford Communities That Care, located here in Hartford. We've been in existence since 1998, providing youth development, workforce development, afterschool and summer enrichment programs, 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 also been discussed about mental health screening of those who seek to purchase or are in current possession of firearms, I would suggest we consider youth in urban areas who don't seem to fit, once again, within the current debates here and nationally.

As it stands, there's 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 someone, there must have been a psychological reason for their actions and when youth of color kill, the reason must be criminal in nature.

As the point person for the City of Hartford charged with responding to homicides and shooting 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.

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 State of Connecticut.
- 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 Youth Promise Act sponsored by Congressman Bobby Scott-VA and co-signed by over 235 members of congress, including Congressman John Larson. Also, supported by over 15 members of the U.S. Senate and over 250 national, state and local organizations. 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.