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There is HOPE: A Public Health Approach to Violence Reduction for the City of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County

The recent surge in youth violence is the product of the social conditions that exist in Black communities across the nation. We have more crime because we have more poverty; we have chronic unemployment not only because of economic conditions, but because of serious racial disparities and inequities. This problem is going to persist until we have a salient urban policy that directly addresses the needs of the young people in this country, and specifically the needs of Black youth.

We desperately need well-designed intervention strategies that effectively assist young people, particularly urban youth. Youth need hi-quality education and school-to-work skill training. They need jobs that offer living wages. They need recreational and cultural activities that will enrich their lives. Community services in these areas are under-funded, irrelevant, and/or non-existent. What we are experiencing today is a direct result of increasing levels of poverty, social neglect and deprivation, and family misery, compounded by the unbridled influx of drugs and guns in our communities.

When one looks at this region's school drop out rates, the crime index, the homicide rate, and the incarceration rate of Black men, it becomes obvious that there is something amiss. Past strategies and tactics used to mitigate these issues have been ineffective and lacking sustainable impact. These problems are going to get worse unless there is a paradigm shift in thinking about how best to resolve what has now developed into a seriously escalating social disease. We urgently need concentrated governmental and social interventions to effect massive improvements in the lives of our youth and future generations.

In order to break the cycle of violence, service providers, academicians, and public officials must come out of their silos, share information, resources, and develop an interdisciplinary and scientifically sound strategic plan. Based on my assessment, the only viable solution is to collaboratively address violence based on a public health paradigm—an intervention system focused on prevention, rehabilitation, and development. This strategy will engage community residents in positive ways, empower them to take ownership, and sustain much needed resident commitment for long-term public safety.

I am not suggesting the reinvention of the wheel, only the identification and development of evidence based solutions. Unfortunately, the new Pittsburgh Initiative for Reducing Crime (PIRC) will not work by itself. Over reliance on law enforcement for controlling violence invites further affliction of our youth in the Greater Pittsburgh region. As we have seen in the past, community

residents will definitely be resistant to an insensible suppressive plan that simply increases vulnerability of family members.

Over 30 years of criminal justice research have shown that forces of police vigilance and tougher sentencing will not control crime nor sustain public safety. Waves of brutal crime are a symptom of contagious sickness of communities, instead of inherent or deliberate viciousness.

Violence (a preventable circumstance), is a symptom of a larger social and economical set of conditions. Contrary to some opinions - murder and mayhem do not come naturally to or are inherent in one group of people. Black or otherwise, violent behavior is facilitated by the environmental conditions that people find themselves in. Filled with disparities in education and lack of opportunities, paired with substance abuse and underemployment, violence springs from the hopelessness felt by people living in overwhelmingly dreadful systemic conditions. Many of them are distressed with the fear that things will definitely get worse-- not better.

To stop the violence, politicians have to be committed and dedicated to creating enforceable policies that will increase quality education and employment opportunities, thereby working towards the elimination of poverty. But we cannot stop there! Now more than ever, all of us (faith-based and community based organizations, universities, schools, community residents, political leaders, parents and youth) must take responsibility and work together towards ending youth violence. Our communities can no longer suffer the sorrow and pains beget by the violent death of family members, friends and loved ones.

Community Empowerment Association, Inc., located in the Homewood section of Pittsburgh, has developed a collaborative approach to violence reduction and prevention that not only addresses the root cause, but also demonstrates a plan of action that will provide sustainable solutions. The plan, ***“A Public Health Approach To Violence Reduction for the City of Pittsburgh and Allegheny County,”*** has been released to the public officials of the Commonwealth of PA, Allegheny County and City, school superintendents, the African American Leadership within this region, local and national foundations, the media as well as the Office of the Chancellor, Graduate School of Public Health, and the School of Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh.

It is hoped that a forum will be scheduled early in 2009 to discuss the adequacy, utility, and feasibility of the proposed plan. Serious discussion needs to occur on how such a comprehensive plan can be implemented and sustained.

“Youth violence is preventable, not inevitable. It is a predictable behavior in the unsafe environments where people live. Rooted in a complex set of underlying issues, violence is a learned behavior that can be unlearned or not learned in the first place.” (UNITY, 2008)

Veteran community activist, T. Rashad Byrdsong founded Community Empowerment Association, Inc. (CEA) in 1994 to address the impact of violence on families and communities. CEA is located in the Homewood section of Pittsburgh. For more information or to obtain a copy of the booklet please call 412-371-3689 or email us at ComEmpAsoc@aol.com.