



Testimony of Randall Sims, Regional Director for Philadelphia Youth Advocate Programs to the City of Philadelphia Council Committee on Public Safety

March 28, 2016

Youth Gun Violence and the Philadelphia Youth Advocate Programs (PYAP)

Good morning. My name is Randall Sims and I'm the Regional Director for Philadelphia Youth Advocate Programs, or PYAP.

I'd like to thank you for inviting us to share our expertise with the City Council's Committee on Public Safety. As Advocates for our young people, we very much appreciate the light you're signing on this critical issue. We are acutely aware that every fatal gun encounter among our young people leads to the end of one life and the complete destruction of another.

We support the Resolution introduced by Councilman Kenyatta Johnson to create a Commission on Youth Gun Violence. The youth gun violence statistics in Philadelphia are devastating:

- Nearly half of the 1,378 gun violence victims are under the age of 25¹
- The rate of firearm possession in Philadelphia is among the highest in the nation²
- The gun homicide rate in Philly is 13.6%, compared to 11.2% in Pennsylvania and 10.6% nationally³
- 81.4% of gun violence victims and 82.4% of perpetrators are African-American⁴.

Researchers have found that young people under age 25 die every 70 minutes from gun violence. One physician who studies gun violence estimated that 1 million years of potential life are lost annually due to gun homicides⁵.

¹ The Childrens Hospital of Philadelphia, Center for Injury Research and Prevention, Gun Violence Statistics, <https://injury.research.chop.edu/violence-prevention-initiative/types-violence-involving-youth/gun-violence/gun-violence-facts-and#.VvUtyOIrLIW>

² *Council Looks to Create a Commission on Youth Gun Violence*, <http://www.phillymag.com/citified/2016/02/09/council-looks-to-create-a-commission-on-youth-gun-violence/#efJ1AcsqQMWbACXg.99> February 9, 2016

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Cox, Elaine M.D., *Ending the Epidemic of Youth Gun Violence: A teenager in 2015 is more likely to die of a gunshot wound than of all other diseases combined*, October 19, 2015, <http://health.usnews.com/health-news/patient-advice/articles/2015/10/19/ending-the-epidemic-of-youth-gun-violence>

Today, I'd like to share with you our insights about youth gun violence and what our expertise tells us will work best to reduce and stop it.

First, let me provide a brief overview of the scope of our work and expertise. PYAP is the Philadelphia program of Youth Advocate Programs (YAP)⁶. YAP's mission is to keep young people out of institutions, including youth and adult prisons, by providing intensive community-based services. PYAP currently provides alternative to detention programming for up to 250 young people and their families at any given time in the City of Philadelphia. Nationally, YAP is located in myriad other counties in Pennsylvania and in 18 other states and provides services to 13,000 young people and their families. Most of the young people in our programs are young men of color. We provide an array of services in some of the nation's toughest cities, including anti-violence programs and juvenile justice programs.

PYAP has been providing services to high-risk, high-need young people and their families in this city for 39 years. Many of the young people in PYAP have firsthand experience with gun violence, both as victims and perpetrators. Almost all know someone who is incarcerated, injured or was killed as a result of gun violence.

We know our model has worked to reduce youth gun violence among the youth we work with and we believe that if properly scaled, YAP, and specifically PYAP, could significantly reduce youth gun violence in Philadelphia.

Successfully Curbing Gun Violence Among High-Risk Young People

Across the country and right here in Philadelphia, YAP has safely engaged young people affected by and involved in gun violence. I'd like to share some information with you about our Chicago program, which was founded specifically to work with young people and their exposure to violence.

In the 2008-2009 school year, 36 Chicago Public Schools students were murdered, most by gun violence. The school system commissioned a study that looked at all its students, ranking as "ultra-high risk" the top 250 young people 20 times more likely to be victims or perpetrators of gun violence.

Chicago Public Schools contracted with YAP to engage and support those 250 young people. Over the course of three years, the Chicago Youth Advocate Program worked with 650 "ultra high-risk" and high-risk young people, achieving safety and educational outcomes that were highlighted in multiple

⁶ Youth Advocate Programs was founded in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1975 to remove young people from the adult prison at Camp Hill. YAP has been recognized for its expertise by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Federal Office of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention, and the John Jay School of Criminal Justice. In 2015, YAP was awarded the prestigious Gloria B. Jenkins award by the Annie E. Casey Foundation for outstanding work in juvenile justice reform. You can learn more about YAP at www.yapinc.org

publications including the NY Times Magazine⁷, the Chicago Tribune⁸ and the NY Times Best Seller, *How Children Succeed*.

Some key outcomes of that program include:

- 94% of the kids in our program were kept safe, despite predictions that they would be victims or perpetrators of violence
- YAP staff conducted over 1,000 gang conflict mediation sessions
- 46% decrease in major school infractions that otherwise would have led to suspension or expulsion
- 32% of youth chronically truant were re-enrolled in school
- 87% of HS Seniors in our program graduated with 41% of them going to college
- 300 youth employed via our supported work programs (subsidized employment)

Today, our Chicago staff just started operating a new program that targets youth charged with gun-related crimes. While it's too soon to provide you with outcomes of this new program, the early results are promising and I'll be happy to share outcomes as the program progresses.

The Intervention

These outcomes are a result of YAP's unique model that blends "wraparound planning" with local advocacy in order to help young people at high risk of engaging in gun violence or becoming victims of it. The program is driven by several unique service delivery principles, an all-, no refuse intake policy, partnership with families, strength based approach, neighborhood based recruitment of staff, and relentless outreach.

The wraparound planning process means that we work with young people and their families to assess needs and build on strengths to achieve service delivery goals that we establish together by:

- Taking a non-threatening approach
- Ensuring that families have voice, choice and ownership in the process, so we are inclusive and not prescriptive
- Prioritizing crisis and safety planning to get ahead of threats and acknowledge triggers and plan safe responses
- Addressing various life domains, including substance abuse, health, education, legal, financial, etc.
- Meeting kids and families where they are and being available 24/7

⁷ *What Does Obama Really Believe In?* by Paul Tough, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/19/magazine/obama-poverty.html?_r=0 (August 2012)

⁸ *Leading by Example*, by Barbara Brotman, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2011-06-19/news/ct-met-cps-advocate-20110619_1_cps-students-mentors-minivan (June 2011)

The local advocacy piece of our model means that we adhere to what the research says about culturally competent services. The people who work with our kids are recruited for their expertise in the young person's neighborhood, including shared racial and ethnic heritage, but also shared experiences. We call these recruits Advocates, and we pay them and train them in delivering wraparound services and successful engagement with young people and families in need and in crisis.

YAP Advocates understand how to safely navigate through the challenges of their own neighborhoods and also appreciate the assets of the communities they live in. Services to the youth may include life skills, job prep, anger management, substance abuse education.

Most of all they develop a positive trusting relationship with a caring adult who understands them and believes they could do well if they tap into their strengths and follow their plan with lots of guidance and support

Together, the wraparound planning and local advocacy approach results in an intensive program. Each young person in our program receives between 7-22 hours of face-to-face contact a week provided by their advocates.

Sustainability: Redirecting Resources from Youth Prisons to Philadelphia's Communities

Our decades of work in Philadelphia and around the country informs us that to reduce youth gun violence we must reverse the disinvestment that leaves the neediest communities starved of everything that can make it healthy – good schools, safe places to recreate, programs designed for young people to grow and explore their interests, and access good jobs and healthy foods.

As a country, we spend 5.7 billion a year to incarcerate young people⁹. In Pennsylvania, one day of caging a young person costs \$326¹⁰. Perhaps the worst part is that youth incarceration does no good in enhancing public safety, and does nothing to address the underlying needs and challenges that led to delinquent behavior in the first place.

If we redirect the resources currently spent on youth incarceration, and invest these resources into creating a community-based continuum of care, we will see gun violence reduced and more kids in school. This continuum of care needs to include effective culturally competent family and community based programs that are geared toward the youth with the most complex needs.

The continuum of programs must be able to hire local staff who can relate to and understand the youth, offer opportunity for support with education, jobs and career development.

The programs must also be able to address needs related to trauma, substance abuse, mental health,

⁹ The Costs of Confinement, Justice Policy Institute, http://www.justicepolicy.org/images/upload/09_05_rep_costsofconfinement_ji_ps.pdf

¹⁰ Lessons from "Kids for Cash," Part 8: Locking Kids Up Costs Money—Lots of It, <http://www.jlc.org/blog/lessons-kids-cash-part-8-locking-kids-costs-money>

housing, recreation, and employment.

They must partner with families and provide support for the entire family.

By reducing the city's resources now spent on incarceration, and redirecting the funds to build a true community based continuum of care, Philadelphia will reduce gun violence and other youth crimes, create jobs in the City's most marginalized neighborhoods, and opportunities for our most vulnerable that do not exist today.

Recommendations to the Philadelphia City Council Committee on Public Safety

I'd like to close with six recommendations to this Committee and reiterate our support for Councilman Johnson's resolution:

1. Advocate for redirection of dollars from incarceration and residential placement back to Philadelphia's most affected neighborhoods to build strong anti-violence programs and alternatives to detention and state incarceration or confinement;
2. Work with community partners to strengthen or re-establish schools as safe havens for young people;
3. Educate and engage the community in being a part of the solution through recognizing the gifts and capacity of the residents to support and engage young people at risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of gun violence;
4. Support and encourage families to be equal partners in engaging young people in need; almost universally parents want what is best for their young people but have trouble accessing help or expressing their needs;
5. Provide year round job programs for young people to explore their future economic opportunities, since studies show that short-term employment for young people is not enough;
6. Join the Safely Home Campaign, a national movement whose goals include improving community safety, reducing racial and ethnic disparity and ending reliance on institutional placement. You can learn more about the campaign at www.safelyhomecampaign.org.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to share our expertise with you today. Please consider myself, all of PYAP and all of YAP a resources as this Committee continues its important work.

Respectfully Submitted,

Randall B. Sims Sr., MS.Ed
Regional Director
Youth Advocate Programs, Inc.
719 W. Girard Avenue
Philadelphia, PA 19123
P: (215) 599-2174 ext. 202
C: 215-495-7977
rsims@yapinc.org