

## PREVENTING VIOLENCE BEFORE IT OCCURS

### Youth violence is preventable

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.

Prevention is a *systematic* process that promotes safe, healthy environments and behaviors, reducing the likelihood or frequency of an incident, injury, or condition occurring. Ideally, prevention addresses problems *before* they occur, rather than waiting to intervene after incidents occur. This is called *primary* prevention. Over the last generations, we've seen dramatic improvements in health status from primary prevention efforts related to other injury and illness. These include traffic safety crash reduction (e.g. child restraints, DUI, and helmet laws), smoking prevention, immunizations, and reducing blood-lead levels in children. Similarly, programmatic and policy efforts in violence prevention have a demonstrated track record.

*Preventing violence before it occurs* involves comprehensive and multifaceted efforts to address the risk factors associated with violence, and builds on assets in youth, families, and communities. It contributes to empowerment, educational and economic progress, and improved life management skills while fostering communities in which young people can grow in dignity and safety. By focusing on prevention, institutions can be more inclusive and receptive in responding to community needs. Success in preventing violence requires investment in and commitment to leadership, planning, collaboration, and resources.

### Violence is a Public and Community Health Issue

For the most part, as a society, we have treated violence as a criminal justice issue *after the fact* without also prioritizing what can be done *before*. Increasingly, law enforcement professionals are insisting that we cannot arrest our out of this problem. Acknowledging the invaluable contribution of law enforcement efforts, a public health approach recognizes that law enforcement efforts, by mandate, are largely aimed at containment and suppression and further, that law enforcement alone cannot prevent violence. This is because the underlying contributing factors –poverty, hopelessness, oppression, mental health problems, substance abuse, victimization history, etc.– are beyond the scope of law enforcement efforts. Rather, they span the mandate of multiple stakeholders. Law enforcement has an important prevention role to play including advocating for prevention resources, data collection, making appropriate referrals, and building a perception of safety. An effective public health

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approach, focused on *preventing violence before it occurs*, can help free up law enforcement to focus on the most urgent, dangerous, and persistent problems.

Treating violence as a public health and community issue arose from the awareness that criminal justice alone could not and has not solved the problem. The violence prevention movement is actually broader, both in concept and in participation than public health, but is based on some fundamental public health tenets, including:

- primary prevention orientation - efforts designed to prevent violence before it occurs;
- data-driven - approaches based on data which describes the nature of problem as well as contributing risk and resilience factors;
- collaborative - multiple partners from public health, law enforcement, education, recreation, economic development, mental health, substance abuse, business, and others working together to produce change, including;
- general population based - seeking community wide or 'environmental' solutions.

Utilizing these public health principles promotes broader, more lasting solutions to the violence problem. The movement towards a public health approach to violence prevention was largely initiated about 25 years ago by Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith, a Boston physician at the time, now with the Harvard University School of Public Health and UNITY Co-chair. She transformed community concern into widespread public exposure. As an emergency room physician she had become frustrated by cleaning the wounds of and sewing up so many young people. Reasoning that if violence had become learned as acceptable in this culture then alternatives could also be learned, she developed the first significant violence prevention education curriculum in the U.S. Her curriculum was important not only for what it taught young people, but also because it served as a tool to educate America that this problem was not inevitable and that we could and must do something about it.

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## Violence is a National Issue

Despite efforts by residents and elected officials, many cities across the country still grapple with violence. Young people around the country are severely impacted by violence and those who live in urban areas are disproportionately affected. For example, according to the 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, among students in urban schools, 7.6% of students reported feeling too unsafe to attend school, 17% reported carrying a weapon, 9.8% reported being intentionally hurt by a boyfriend or girlfriend, 10.6% reported being forced to have sex, and 18.1% reported making a suicide plan.<sup>1</sup>

According to Prothrow-Stith, “Violence is not the problem of one neighborhood or group, and the responses and solutions are not the responsibility of one sector of the community or of one agency, professional group, or business. Coming together and owning this problem and the solutions are central.” Cities can take action to prevent violence *before* it occurs, and they need help and support to be more effective. We need to support our nation’s urban communities and leaders in enhancing and coordinating their efforts, as well as sustaining them.

In late summer 2007, UNITY convened young people and representatives from cities across the country to prioritize strategies to prevent violence *before* it occurs. City representatives identified a set of key strategies from across the prevention continuum (primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of prevention, renamed by Philadelphia youth and adopted here as *Upfront*, *In The Thick*, and *Aftermath*, respectively) that would support violence prevention efforts in cities and should be prioritized nationally to strengthen violence prevention resources and policies. They are:

**Prioritized Strategies to Prevent Violence**

Primary Prevention <b>UPFRONT</b>	Secondary Prevention <b>IN THE THICK</b>	Tertiary Prevention <b>AFTERMATH</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive early care and education</li> <li>• Positive social and emotional development</li> <li>• Parenting skills</li> <li>• Mentoring</li> <li>• Quality after school programming</li> <li>• Youth leadership</li> <li>• Social connections in neighborhoods</li> <li>• Quality education* (including universal school-based violence prevention strategies)</li> <li>• Economic development*</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental health services**</li> <li>• Family support services</li> <li>• Conflict resolution and interruption (including bystander skills)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mental health services**</li> <li>• Successful reentry</li> </ul>

\* For broad categories which are largely under the purview and mandate of specific agencies, the focus should be on delineating the elements within that category that will specifically address violence.

\*\* e.g. therapeutic foster care

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In addition to identifying specific strategies, city representatives affirmed the need for supporting infrastructure (e.g. collaboration, data and evaluation, staffing, funding) and as such the elements and utility of the *UNITY RoadMap* as a foundation from which to build a solution to violence in cities. The *UNITY RoadMap* answers the question: How can we get to the point of

preventing violence before it occurs? It is for those who recognize that we cannot arrest our way out of violence; rather we must systematically address the underlying contributors of violence, and we must work across sectors and disciplines to do so. In particular it delineates the range of elements that need to be in place for effectiveness and sustainability.

### ***UNITY RoadMap for Effectiveness and Sustainability***

#### **1. Who: Leadership**

- Community Engagement
- Political Will & Support
- Organizational Structure/Collaboration & Staffing

#### **2. What: Prevention**

- Programming, Organizational Practices & Policy
- Communication
- Training & Skills

#### **3. How: Strategy**

- Plans
- Data & Evaluation
- Funding

### **UNITY is Working to Support Cities in their Efforts**

UNITY is a national initiative that was formed two years ago to strengthen and support cities in preventing violence before it occurs and to help sustain these efforts. UNITY is led by Prevention Institute, Harvard University School of Public Health, and the University of California at Los Angeles, School of Public Health, Southern California Injury Prevention Research Center. It is supported by a cooperative agreement from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and in part by a grant from The California Wellness Foundation.

The UNITY National Consortium includes national organizations such as: the American Public Health Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Crime Prevention Council, Forum for Youth Investment, Institute for Community Peace, Kaiser Permanente, the National Association of County and City Health Officials, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, National League of Cities, National Youth Violence Prevention Resource Center, and the State and Territorial Injury Prevention Directors Association. The Consortium also includes local and state health departments, school districts, elected officials, law enforcement, foundations, universities, state coalitions, and community-based organizations.

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#### UNITY's Activities include:

- *Foster effective communication:* People need to be able to communicate about violence prevention to establish effective policies and sustainable solutions. UNITY is developing materials and resources to help frame the violence that affects young people as a preventable condition and not only a matter for the criminal justice system to pick up the pieces after the fact.
- *Conduct an assessment:* We have assessed what cities already have in place and what they need in order to be most effective. This is informing our tools, training, and technical assistance.
- *Develop a roadmap for effective and sustainable youth violence prevention:* From efforts all over the country, we know what works to prevent violence before it occurs. Cities need leadership, prevention, and strategy. We are delineating the elements of a roadmap and identifying tools to help cities implement an effective and sustainable approach. Examples include protocols for data and evaluation; coalition building tools; links to effective programs, policies, and organizational practices; and guidelines for developing a strategic plan.
- *Foster a peer network:* We want to establish opportunities for cities to learn from each other about what works and not have to reinvent the wheel. With their input, we will facilitate topical interactive sessions, establish listservs, and disseminate information to support a national peer network.
- *Conduct training and technical assistance:* We will provide training and technical assistance via internet, phone and in person to support local efforts.
- *Develop a national strategy:* With the help of City representatives, we are incorporating the prioritized strategies and the *UNITY RoadMap* into a national strategy to prevent violence before it occurs and improve outcomes for young people.

#### UNITY Steering Committee

##### **Alan Baker**

Chief of Staff, American Public Health Association

##### **Don Blevins**

Chief Probation Officer, Alameda County

##### **Father Gregory Boyle**

Executive Director, Homeboy Industries

##### **Linda Bowen**

Executive Director, Community Institute for Peace

##### **Jack Calhoun**

Executive Director, Hope Matters, representing National League of Cities

##### **Joseph Carter**

National Police Chief's Association

**Larry Cohen**  
Executive Director, Prevention Institute

**Lori Dorfman**  
Director, Berkeley Media Studies Group

**Hon. Dwight Evans**  
State Representative, Pennsylvania

**Tony Gomez**  
Manager, Seattle Public Health, Injury and Violence Prevention Division

**Fred Griego**  
Senior Community Fellow, Office for Community Learning and Public Services

**Robert Hargesheimer**  
Commander, Chicago Police Department

**Paul Juarez**  
Professor and Vice Chair, Meharry Medical College

**Ivan Juzang**  
Executive Director, MEE Productions

**Patrick Libbey**  
Executive Director, National Association of County and City Health Officials

**Reverend Romie Lilly**  
Director of Faith-based Ministries, Central Baptist, Los Angeles

**Gregory Y. Mark**  
Director, National ACE Coordinating Center

**Cheryl Maxson**  
Associate Professor, UC Irvine, Department of Criminology, Law & Society

**Allen Nance**  
Former Acting Director, San Francisco Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice

**Howard Pinderhughes**  
Associate Professor and Vice Chair  
University of California, San Francisco

**Karen Pittman**  
Executive Director, Forum for Youth Investment

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**Deborah Prothrow-Stith**

Associate Dean, Harvard University School of Public Health

**Pamela Riley**

Executive Director, National Organization, Students Against Violence Everywhere

**Barri Rosenbluth**

Director of School-Based Services, Safe Place

**Barbara Shaw**

Director, Illinois Violence Prevention Authority

**Peter Simon MD, MPH**

Rhode Island Department of Health, Representing the American Academy of Pediatrics

**Gary Slutkin**

Director and Research Professor, CeaseFire Chicago

**Susan Sorenson**

Professor, University of Pennsylvania, School of Social Policy and Practice

**Howard Spivak**

Chief of the Division of General Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine  
Tufts University

**Paul Vandeventer**

President, Community Partners

**Natoya Walker**

Special Assistant to the Mayor, Public Affairs  
Mayoral Cabinet of Cleveland

**Billie Weiss**

Associate Director for Outreach and Communications  
Southern California Injury Prevention Research Center  
UCLA School of Public Health

**Elisa Wong**

Community Health Specialist, Kaiser Permanente Community Benefit,  
Program Office

**Andrea Youngdahl**

Director, Department of Human Services, Oakland, CA

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Prevention Institute  
Harvard School of Public Health

Southern California Injury  
Prevention Research Center,  
UCLA School of Public Health

221 Oak Street ■ Oakland, CA 94607 ■ 510.444.7738 ■ fax 510.663.1280 ■ [www.preventioninstitute.org](http://www.preventioninstitute.org)

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**Renee Wilson-Simmons**

Senior Associate, Adolescent Health and Development  
Anne E. Casey Foundation

<sup>1</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance, United States, 2003. MMWR 2004:53 (No. SS-2). Available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/yrbs/index.htm>

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