

Policy Priorities for Preventing Violence

Susan Lee of the Advancement Project spoke in Los Angeles in October 2010 as part of the panel discussion “Exploring State and Federal Policies That Would Support Violence Prevention Work on the Local Level.” The panel was part of The California Wellness Foundation’s annual Conference on Violence Prevention. The following narrative is excerpted from her remarks.

The Advancement Project works to remove and reduce large-system barriers to equal opportunity. The work that I do pushes a comprehensive solution to gang violence, and gets smart government to respond effectively, in partnership with community, to issues of safety and violence that are barriers to opportunity.

We’ve been doing work on two major fronts. One is around the issue of unlikely alliances—how do we build it and can you sustain it? And two, how to make ground-level data relevant for strategy and implementation of projects, and what can we learn from gathering that ground-level data?

Forging New Alliances

We [use] a public health ecological model, and we always talk about all sectors having to get in the same boat and row in the same direction. We need the schools, we need the families, we need the service providers, we need faith-based community, we need the police, we need probation—we need everyone. There are a lot of folks missing from the table. What does it take for us to build an alliance that is truly comprehensive? What [should] a true comprehensive violence reduction community revitalization strategy look like?

This is a really big question for all of us, particularly around a strengthening of the prevention framework. Folks talk about having a prevention/intervention/re-entry/suppression strategy, and that is really the model by which we’re going to sustain this effort. Everyone claims that they’re doing it, but it isn’t being done. The area that is missing most is primary prevention. We are invest-



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ing two-thirds of our public resources into suppression. You look at the auditor-controller report out of [Los Angeles] County and also our report on the city's expenditures,* and of all of the expenditures around gang prevention, intervention and suppression, 70 percent of those dollars go toward suppression. In many efforts that are called comprehensive, [the strategy] is not comprehensive.

What's it going to take really for us to get to a truly comprehensive, truly balanced, truly prevention-focused approach toward violence reduction, and how do we sustain that in a time of fiscal crisis? That is a challenge for all of us as we move forward.

Gathering Local Data

[Advancement Project has been] gathering primary data in L.A.'s hottest neighborhoods, as well as in many of the city's [Gang Reduction and Youth Development] zones and the county's violence reduction sites. We are establishing an information system under the Sheriff's Department to create a multi-jurisdictional alliance between law enforcement agencies to access community-based data. [This is] so when law enforcement is deploying their resources, they are not deploying in absentia of what the community looks like and what the community dynamic is, but are in fact working in tandem with those community dynamics. We've talked to hundreds, probably thousands, of youth and parents, police officers, school leaders, health officials, and government workers in many of these communities. The richness of that data informs the policy work we do and brings to life some of the lessons we have learned over the last three years.

The thing that demoralizes a community more than anything is when we go in to say, "We really want to hear from you. We really want to know what's going on here. And we really want to know what the solutions might be that you have thoughts on," and then we turn around and do something else. The data is supposed to drive policy making, but too often politics derail it. How do you overcome that challenge to truly partner with community and to value and respond to what the community is saying in the most authentic way that you can? That is a challenge for policymakers at all levels.

No More "Evaluation Politics"

We talk a lot about evaluation, data-driven policies and evidence-based practices. We cannot invest in every strategy; it's got to be a strategy that works. But it's got to be a strategy that allows for accountability and [also] allows for innovation at the local level to drive the process of finding what works. That's where advocates really need to work with policymakers.

* Golden, M., Siegel, J., & Forsythe, D. (n.d.) Vera Institute of Justice Cost-Benefit Analysis. Retrieved from http://www.advancementprojectca.org/doc/p3_cost.pdf.

URBAN PEACE ACADEMY

Advancement Project's Urban Peace Academy contains the seeds of one such unlikely alliance. Urban Peace Academy trains frontline gang intervention workers and law enforcement officers how to work with each other to prevent gang-related violence in L.A.'s hot zones.

Gang intervention workers broker ceasefires between rival gangs, defuse tensions before violence escalates, and respond to gang-related homicides to prevent retaliation. Graduates of Urban Peace Academy complete courses in topics such as building understanding and maintaining ceasefires, school- and hospital-based intervention, and law enforcement dynamics over the 14 weeks of the program.

Urban Peace Academy and its professional intervention workers are a key component of the Los Angeles Mayor's comprehensive strategy to reduce gang violence. Urban Peace Academy has played an important role in defining the separate but parallel functions of gang intervention workers and law enforcement, ensuring that the response to gang violence is swift, coordinated and effective.

We need outcomes, but we've gotten into this politics of evaluation where we say, "Well, if you haven't produced results in two months, that must not be working." It's "gotcha!" politics that's going to derail a long-term strategy that is in fact sustainable, that is in fact about true data gathering and true impact, rather than trying to get folks to play the game of short-term, short-sighted "gotcha!" politics about what works and what doesn't work.

"It can sometimes be difficult to find support for violence prevention when such efforts are generally focused on long-term results. The research shows that such initiatives can be successful, but it's not the immediate response to the tragedy of a child killed by random gunfire. It's the long-term vision that stops the shot from being fired in the first place."

— THOMAS P. ABT, CHIEF OF STAFF,
OFFICE OF JUSTICE PROGRAMS,
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE,
RESPONDING TO SUSAN LEE'S REMARKS

Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth (UNITY) builds support for effective, sustainable efforts to prevent violence before it occurs so that urban youth can thrive in safe environments with supportive relationships and opportunities for success. A Prevention Institute initiative, UNITY is funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as part of the CDC's national youth violence prevention initiative, Striving to Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere (STRYVE), and in part by The California Wellness Foundation (TCWF). Created in 1992 as an independent, private foundation, TCWF's mission is to improve the health of the people of California by making grants for health promotion, wellness, education, and disease prevention programs.

For more information on UNITY: www.preventioninstitute.org/unity