Blueprint for Action— Preventing Violence in Minneapolis

Representatives from five UNITY cities participated in the panel discussion "Prevention Works: UNITY City Network members from around the country share their successful local efforts," moderated by Neil Rainford of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The panel was part of The California Wellness Foundation's Conference on Violence Prevention, held in October 2010, in Los Angeles. The following narrative is excerpted from Bass Zanjani's presentation on preventing violence in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and is supplemented by his remarks at the 6th Annual Youth Violence Prevention Conference in Charlotte, North Carolina, in March 2011.

The number of youth suspects in violent crime in Minneapolis has decreased by 62 percent since 2006, the peak of a substantial increase in violent crime and homicides. If you're wondering, "What are you doing? Are you locking everybody up?" the answer is no, we are not arresting our way out of the problem. Changing behavior and social norms around violence, and taking a very pro-active youth development and public health approach is working well.

Adopting a Public Health Approach

Eleven-year-old Tyesha Edwards was sitting at her kitchen table with her mom. She was trying to get her homework done so she could go to the mall, and there was some gang activity outside her house. Shots broke out, and Tyesha was struck in the throat by a bullet.

After Tyesha Edwards's unfortunate homicide, Minneapolis saw a tragic increase in the number of homicides from 2003 to 2006, including 80 youth and young adults between the ages of 15 and 24. Homicide was not only the leading cause of death in this age group, but also accounted for almost half of all homicides in Minneapolis; homicides of juveniles and young adults was a major driving force of violent crime in the city.

Bass Zanjani is deputy district director of the Office of Congressman Keith Ellison. At the time of his remarks, Zanjani was the youth violence prevention coordinator at the Department of Health & Family Support in the City of Minneapolis. As manager of the mayor's Blueprint for Action initiative, Zanjani's chief responsibility was to implement the city's strategy and to staff the Blueprint for Action Executive Committee, which is comprised of a cross-section of stakeholders and partners. Earlier in his career, Zanjani served as chief of staff at NorthPoint Health & Wellness Center, a federally-qualified health center that provides quality care to underserved populations. He also served as staff to United States Senators Paul Wellstone and Dianne Feinstein. He has also worked as a policy advisor for the Baha'i International Community at the Baha'i World Centre, an international non-governmental organization focused on human rights issues in Haifa, Israel. Zanjani has a degree in international relations from the University of Minnesota where he is a Humphrey Policy Fellow.

During that same period we saw an increase in firearm-related injuries for youth aged 18 to 24, up to 159 per year, and incidents of violent crime increased to 766 in 2006.

In response to this increase in violent crime, the community called for policy change and for government to take action. There was a growing list of stakeholders who kept meeting with policymakers and demanding, "How are things changing? What are you doing to address violence?" Community members came to government to voice their concern, and government responded to their outcry.

The City Council had instituted a number of law enforcement strategies to address violence—more police officers, more cameras on streets and shot spotters. From a law enforcement perspective, they had really maximized their efforts, but they weren't still seeing results. It costs taxpayers $21,800 for every shooting that takes place in Minneapolis where the victim that is sent to the hospital. For every juvenile incarcerated for one year, it costs taxpayers $44,000. So we started looking at the public health model and asking, "What are we doing to get in front of the issue, not just responding afterwards? What are we doing as a city to try to prevent homicides from taking place?"

The Minneapolis City Council began to look at youth violence beyond the traditional criminal justice approach. Among the models the council examined was one that treated youth violence as a public health issue and worked more upstream. The Minneapolis City Council adopted this approach, unanimously passed a resolution that declared youth violence a public health issue, and mandated a multi-faceted long-term solution to address youth violence.

Blueprint for Action
The Blueprint consists of four objectives:
- Connect youth to trusted adults.
- Intervene at the first sign of risk.
- Restore youth who have been in the juvenile justice system— how do we reintegrate them back into the community?
- Unlearn the culture of violence.

We developed various strategies from mentoring to employment to accomplish these goals. We incorporated many effective existing and ongoing violence prevention strategies into the Blueprint. We mapped all the different resources in Minneapolis and put them into a more structured coordinated framework. They used to be scattered, like the

LEVERAGING PARTNERSHIPS FOR MORE FUNDING

The work in Minneapolis was made possible by the City Council, which designated funding for a youth violence prevention coordinator, and because the city encouraged partnerships among various stakeholders to accomplish each of the Blueprint's goals.

For example, all the Minneapolis organizations with mentoring programs meet on a regular basis to identify the greatest needs in the community and to decide how to collectively address them. These groups provide services as part of a coordinated plan, and local foundations have expressed interest in collaborative efforts.

Partnerships require increased communication, which reduces redundancy of programs across agencies. Coalitions working together can have a greater impact than if those same resources were allocated to individual organizations. The mentoring organizations in Minneapolis presented a united front to funders and were able to demonstrate success using quantifiable outcomes. These groups received grants to work with ex-offenders and young people whose parents are incarcerated, which supplemented resources from the city.

URBAN NETWORKS TO INCREASE THRIVING YOUTH
UNITY
through Violence Prevention

Youth Are Here buses, a transportation service where youth are able to avoid gang territory and travel safely from community-based organizations to parks and libraries, or the Juvenile Supervision Center, a facility for at-risk youth who have been picked up by law enforcement for low-level offenses such as curfew violations and truancy.

In the past, youth sit there in detention, parents are called in and they get to go home. We said, "While the youth are sitting there, why aren't we learning more about what's making them ditch school? Why aren't we using that as a moment to build a relationship with the youth and family, and work with the schools?" So we created a Juvenile Supervision Center where a community-based organization conducts an assessment, has a conference with parents when they pick up their child, and then follows up 30, 60, 90 days, and six months later.

To connect youth to trusted adults, we placed Minneapolis police officers in all the high schools, working as school resource officers and mentors. In the summer, these officers are in parks, out in the community, on bikes, all to be a visible, positive presence in the life of youth.

Another example is Step Up, an employment program for youth ages 14 to 18. The city made a decision to provide structured environments where youth can learn and feel they have a career ahead of them. For youth ages 14 and 15, the city provides them with non-profit jobs and pays their wages. We place the older youth in corporations where the employer pays most of their salary.

We created an anonymous tip line for youth to call or text that there was going to be a fight or other threat. We read a report that said in school shootings, 82 percent of youth knew that someone had a gun at school but they weren't comfortable telling anyone. Snitching is a big thing, and this way they're not disclosing their identity. Community organizations are now using this technology too, when they know of something happening in parks or other areas of the neighborhood.
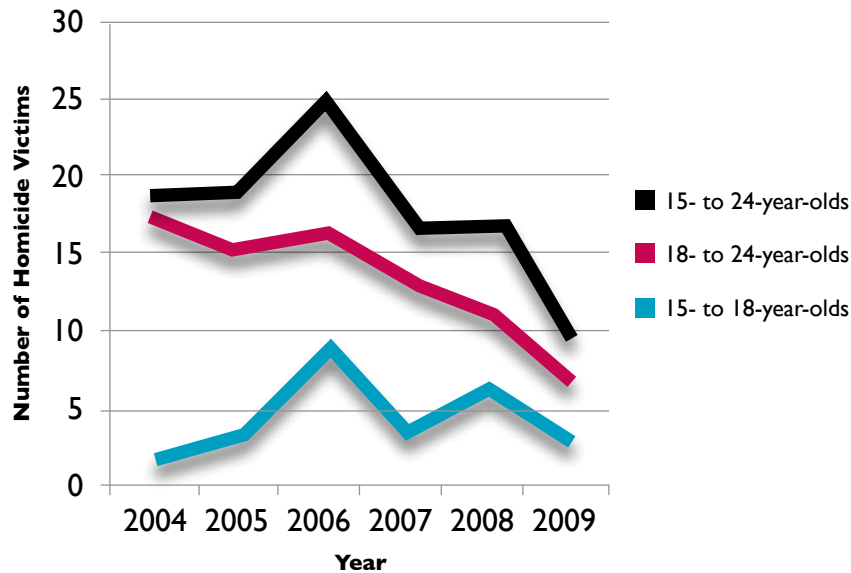
We've also expanded the capacity for groups in Minneapolis to develop rites-of-passage programs. One group that works with Native American boys draws on restorative justice principles and uses drum circles so the program's in line with their traditions and culture. We're also developing a culturally-specific program for Somali youth to bring healing to the youth and peace to the communities.

In these and other ways, we are trying to think outside the box and create opportunities where the community provides more services for youth in a non-traditional way.

URBAN NETWORKS TO INCREASE THRIVING YOUTH

UNITY through Violence Prevention

Homicides of Youth and Young Adults in Minneapolis (2004-2009)

Homicides of Youth and Young Adults in Minneapolis (2004-2009). After a rash of youth and young adult homicides, the City of Minneapolis implemented the Blueprint for Action in 2007. Within two years, Minneapolis saw a 64 percent decrease in homicides of young people aged 15 to 24 years. The number of youth suspects has dropped by 60 percent from 2006 to 2010, and the number of youth arrested for violent crime is down 31 percent compared to four years ago.

Community Partnerships

Perhaps the greatest single critical factor underlying the success of the Blueprint has been the support and partnerships from community stakeholders. We've been able to form some innovative partnerships at multiple levels that have helped us implement a lot of the strategies in the Blueprint. We wouldn't be nearly as effective without partnerships. Some strategies include mentoring for at-risk youth and gang-affiliated youth in parks. We also have a protocol at two of the Trauma One-level hospitals where youth who are admitted as a result of a violent incident are given a psycho-social assessment, and then referred out to the community for follow-up.

The community is really the driver of this and recognizes the value of this initiative. It was the community that brought this issue to the mayor and got the mayor involved and the city council behind it. We held a series of community forums and discussions because we wanted to make sure that the ideas matched the community's needs. We brought different stakeholders—traditional and non-traditional allies—to look at whether

MEASURING PROGRESS

There is a strong and growing evidence base that violence is preventable. Early results from the Blueprint for Action in Minneapolis indicate it is possible to reduce the likelihood of violence.

Minneapolis tracked a number of indicators to gauge success of the Blueprint for Action. These included homicide victims (ages 15 to 24); arrests for aggravated assault (ages 0 to 24); arrests for simple assault (ages 0 to 24); curfew/truancy pick-ups; arrests for weapons possession; teenage pregnancy rates (ages 15 to 17); and high school graduation rates.

Violent crime in the four neighborhoods prioritized by the Blueprint fell by 43 percent in the first two years of the initiative. As a result of this remarkable early success, the Blueprint for Action expanded its programs from the four initial neighborhoods to 22 neighborhoods in 2009. Rather than look solely at areas with the most youth homicides, the city considered criteria such as poverty, number of youth residents and existing neighborhood assets to assess community risk.

Intervention, suppression and enforcement are necessary but cannot sufficiently reduce violence on their own. Cities need a balanced approach that includes prevention. Focusing on decreasing risk factors and promoting resilience among youth most likely to behave violently is an investment that is paying off in Minneapolis.

URBAN NETWORKS TO INCREASE THRIVING YOUTH

UNITY
through Violence Prevention

the plan makes sense, and we had several advisory committees give us feedback. We wanted parents, we wanted schools, we wanted everybody to be invested in this process and to make sure that this direction made sense for the community.

We wanted to be effective in developing a coalition, [so] we developed an oversight structure with an executive steering committee from a strong cross-section of folks in the community and city leadership, ranging from public schools to the County to foundations to local businesses to the University of Minnesota, and a substantial number of community organizations and youth. We have a community advisory group make up of individuals from the neighborhoods that we meet with on a bi-monthly basis, so there's ongoing dialogue and a consistent feedback loop.

The Minneapolis Blueprint for Action is an embodiment of a value change from within the community. Some of the strategies we have are evidence-based practices, but some of the strategies are not. They are the strategies that the community said, "We think this is a good idea and we want you guys to try it, and let's see how it works." And so we're trying both. At the heart of what we're doing, we're always mindful that we must be responsive to the needs of the community.

"Perhaps the greatest single critical factor underlying the success of the Blueprint has been the support and partnerships from community stakeholders. The community is really the driver of this, [and] we wouldn't be nearly as effective without partnerships. At the heart of what we're doing, we're always mindful that we must be responsive to the needs of the community."

— BASS ZANJANI
FORMERLY OF THE DEPARTMENT
OF HEALTH & FAMILY SUPPORT,
CITY OF MINNEAPOLIS

URBAN NETWORKS TO INCREASE THRIVING YOUTH
UNITY
through Violence Prevention