

# Paul D. López

## Denver City Councilman

*Paul D. López served as a panelist for the congressional briefing “Addressing the Intersection: Preventing Violence and Promoting Healthy Eating and Active Living,” in Washington, D.C., in February 2011. The briefing was sponsored by Prevention Institute, in partnership with Senator Tom Harkin and Representative Barbara Lee.\* Councilman López described Denver’s efforts to simultaneously prevent violence and increase access to healthy food. The following narrative is excerpted from his remarks.*



Photo courtesy of the Gang Rescue and Support Project

Violence is much more than just numbers and statistics; these are people’s lives. These are our children, and 10 or 20 years from now [our society as a whole will reflect] how our children are doing today in elementary school. We can’t arrest our way out of this, and the work that’s happening on the ground is incredible. I’m here to tell you that this is working, but we need the political will to make it happen. It’s not a matter of what you believe the role of government is. It’s about what you believe the role of safety is in your community and how that’s important to your constituency. If you put safety in there and ask a community anywhere in the country what’s important to them, out of all the issues, I guarantee safety is the number one or two issue.

\*The congressional briefing was co-sponsored by American Public Health Association (APHA), APHA Injury Control and Emergency Services Section, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies, Institute for Alternative Futures, Safe States Alliance, and Society for Advancement of Violence and Injury Research.



**Paul D. López** represents District 3 on the Denver City Council and is a homegrown champion for working families. While earning a degree at the University of Colorado, he fought to improve recruitment, retention and graduation of low-income students. As a community organizer, he went to work in Denver’s poorest neighborhoods to protect affordable housing and quality public health care. As a union organizer, López took on employers who violated workers’ rights and he brought thousands of Denver-area janitors and their families to the bargaining table. López convened human rights leaders in May 2006 for the largest political march in Colorado history, bringing more than 100,000 marchers to the steps of the Colorado State Capitol in support of humane comprehensive immigration reform. Elected in 2007 to west Denver’s District 3, the 28-year-old López became the youngest member of the Denver City Council to ever take the oath of office.

## Double Jeopardy: Violence and Food Deserts

In Denver, we have the issue of violence in these food deserts, [areas where it's hard to find healthy, affordable food]. The neighborhood that I represent—the neighborhood that I was born and raised in and that I love dearly—is suffering at the hands of this. We have more liquor stores than grocery stores. In some of these neighborhoods, the only access you have is to a convenience store, so when you have access to “corn,” it's not corn; it's Cheetos. It's not juice; it's soda. There's something wrong about that. We don't have a coffee shop in the whole district of about 60,000 people. It's also an area where you have a lot of diabetes, heart disease and cancer, and where you can't find a grocery store. The district I represent has the least amount of park acreage per thousand people in the whole city.

I had a young person come from Louisiana, from New Orleans. Hurricane Katrina basically gave his parents the excuse to abandon him, and next of kin was in Denver, a grandmother who was not able to take care of him, to stay behind him. He comes into my office with a bunch of other kids after getting in trouble for graffiti. I ask, “Why is it that in this neighborhood I see graffiti all over the place, but in Cherry Creek, the wealthier area, I don't see one lick of graffiti. Who can tell me why? Someone explain to me why it's this district and not the one across the highway.” This kid from New Orleans was the only one that spoke up. He says, “It's because this is the ghetto, this is the hood.” And I said, “Are you kidding me? I've been to the hood, and it's nothing like this. What makes you think this is the hood?” He starts talking about the infrastructure: “The streets look horrible. If I paint over here, nobody cares. The parks are not kept up. The playground burned down and nobody cares about it, so you can tag on it. There's bottles all over the street and no one picks it up.” It was a critique of us as a city and as a society. We are creating this situation and the environment for young people to act this way. By letting this happen and not doing anything, we shape the identity of this neighborhood.

So it's no surprise that we deal with gang violence, that a lot of our young people are caught in the juvenile justice system. But we cannot arrest our way out of this because all we would be doing is sending young people to jail where they come out worse. They come out with a felony or a misdemeanor, and then they aren't hireable [and can't make a living wage for themselves]. We don't have the resources to arrest our way out of this. So let's think about a new way to approach this. We are not going to build one single jail bed when we are closing down schools and when there's suffering in these neighborhoods. Show me the preventive side of this [because] we want to make sure that we create long-lasting change.

## CREATING A SAFE, HEALTHY NEIGHBORHOOD

Denver is one of six community pilot sites funded by the Convergence Partnership to implement policy and environmental changes that create safe and healthy neighborhoods. These pilot sites all address the intersection between preventing violence, and promoting healthy eating and active living.

Denver's Urban Farm Training Program expands employment opportunities for at-risk youth in west Denver, and promotes local gardening and large-scale urban agriculture. Poverty, illiteracy and school failure are factors that make violence more likely to occur, and the Urban Farm Training Program equips young people with skills training, job placement and a team problem-solving curriculum that helps prevent violence. Fruits and vegetables harvested from the urban farm increase neighborhood access to healthy food.

This Convergence Partnership effort, facilitated by Prevention Institute, builds on recommendations put forth in Prevention Institute's “Addressing the Intersection: Preventing Violence and Promoting Healthy Eating and Active Living,” available at [www.preventioninstitute.org](http://www.preventioninstitute.org).

## Progress in West Denver

We basically came in and organized the whole neighborhood—all the community-based organizations, the Denver Public Health Department, the Gang Rescue and Support Project, and Re:farm Denver. We have all these different partners working together who did not work together five years ago, like a well-oiled machine. We have been able to do a lot with these partnerships. For example:

- Re:farm Denver encourages people to plant gardens in their backyards, front yards, in the neighborhood. You can roll around west Denver now and see corn stalks everywhere, even though you are in an urban area. We were able to work with Denver Public Schools in an area with a field the school wasn't using. We had young people plant a garden in this field for fruit trees to grow. (See sidebar on page 2 for more information.)
- Gang Rescue and Support Project (GRASP) worked on a great community garden. [When young people were picked up for graffiti], I said, "Don't send them to the sheriff; we'll put them to work. We'll buy a bunch of shovels, a bunch of paint, put these kids to work on the garden, and they'll do all kinds of stuff." One GRASP program is the Barrio Unity Mural Project where we take over walls that have a lot of graffiti, a lot of tagging. We pay the young people who have the talent and say, "Look, we will pay you to do this, as long as the message is community-oriented and it supports unity." Sure enough, we see these murals popping up all over the community saying "Unity in Our Community," "Stop the Violence for the Sake of Our Children," all kinds of great stuff like "Remember Si Se Puede" with a big old bust of César Chavez on the side of a building that used to be tagged. It hasn't been touched. You no longer see graffiti. This is part of the preventive approach we're using.

Community Development Block Grants [from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development] have also helped. We know we are not going to get more money to do more projects, so it's what we do with current funding and resources [that matters]. Those are the monies that helped create the first park in west Denver in three decades. The streets were paved for the first time in 25 years with these kinds of funds. We drove the mayor around the neighborhood and told him that these streets hadn't been paved in 25 years. He said, "You gotta be kidding me. You're exaggerating." I said, "No, those are my initials [in the cement], and I'm telling you, it hasn't been done in 25 years." Now when graffiti hasn't been taken down in a week, we call it in [and it's addressed].



*"Public safety is a public health issue. We can't arrest our way out of this, and the work that's happening on the ground is incredible. I'm here to tell you that this is working, but we need the political will to make it happen."*

— PAUL D. LÓPEZ  
DENVER CITY COUNCILMAN,  
SPEAKING AT THE UNITED STATES CAPITOL  
IN FEBRUARY 2011

Public safety is a public health issue. If we want public safety, we need the political will to get in there with a multi-faceted approach. It's the guts to say, "We are not going to arrest our way out of this situation"—to say it and do it. It's putting ordinances in place that create buffer zones between liquor stores, to keep these shops away from schools. It's looking at zoning on a municipal and state level, on the county level. It's making sure that the flea markets, swap meets and local stores are not selling to minors those coats and jackets that say, "I'm a gangster, and this is what gang I belong to." It's about policymakers being proactive about having enough park space, having enough recreation centers for young people and that they're kept open. We need the political will to do all this because if not, then 20 years from now, what will our community look like? We're not going to be happy.

**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 ample opportunities and supportive relationships. A Prevention Institute initiative, UNITY is funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as part of the CDC's national youth violence prevention initiative, Striving to Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere (STRYVE), and in part by The Kresge Foundation and 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, visit [www.preventioninstitute.org/unity](http://www.preventioninstitute.org/unity).

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information on multi-sector partnerships and on the links between preventing violence and other community concerns, search for the following titles at Prevention Institute's online library, [www.preventioninstitute.org/publications](http://www.preventioninstitute.org/publications).

### On Linkages:

▶ Addressing the Intersection: Preventing Violence and Promoting Healthy Eating and Active Living

### ▶ UNITY Fact Sheets:

- Links Between Violence and Chronic Illness
- Links Between Violence and Mental Health
- Links Between Violence and Learning

▶ All Communities Deserve Safe Places to Play

### On Multi-Sector Partnerships:

▶ Collaboration Multiplier

▶ Developing Effective Coalitions: An Eight-Step Guide

▶ The Tension of Turf: Making It Work for the Coalition