

8 February 2021

Dear Mayor Bowser,

As you develop your 2022 fiscal year budget, the undersigned stakeholders urge you to launch a bold restructuring and expansion of DC's efforts to eliminate gun violence. Without systematic changes, Washington, DC will remain among the most deadly cities in the country.¹ It does not have to be this way. We have the solutions that can solve this public health crisis.² The District has the potential to truly be a world-class city. To get there, we must adopt a thorough, focused plan to put an end of gun violence in our great city.

The District must fully commit to a comprehensive, fully scaled, multidisciplinary approach to reducing gun violence. We have the data driven, proven strategies that have worked in many other cities, but no effort will be successful unless we tackle gun violence head on in a fair and balanced manner, with sufficient, sustained funding, and exacting focus.³ We can point to strategies implemented successfully in other cities such as Oakland, CA and Eugene, OR⁴⁵ but we also need to recognize that DC successfully worked in a multi-faceted, collaborative manner to bring the homicide rate down from a high of 489 high to a low of 88 (1989-2012).⁶

Research strongly shows that a small number of people are driving the majority of gun violence and that it often tracks social networks.⁷ This is in part because gun homicides, nonfatal shootings, and exposure to gun violence reflect and intensify our country's long-standing racial inequities. Deliberate policy decisions, particularly a history of housing discrimination, have resulted in segregated neighborhoods and under-investments in Black communities, including schools, businesses, and employment opportunities.

The opportunity to live in a community free from gun violence is a basic human right. Community violence is also a core obstacle to equity and racial justice, as it disproportionately impacts Black and brown Washingtonians. We know what works, and it is incumbent upon us to implement all the proven strategies and work together to save lives.

¹ What's the Homicide Capital of America? Murder Rates in U.S. Cities, Ranked
<https://www.thetrace.org/2018/04/highest-murder-rates-us-cities-list/>

² *Everytown* - City Gun Violence Reduction Insight Portal: <https://citygrip.org/>

³ *Everytown Fact Sheet - Community-led Public Safety Strategies*: <https://everytownresearch.org/report/community-led-public-safety-strategies/>; *Everytown Fact Sheet - A Deadly Year in Cities — And How Policymakers Can Respond*: <https://everytownresearch.org/report/a-deadly-year-in-cities-and-how-policymakers-can-respond/>

⁴ *Everytown Fact Sheet - Community-led Public Safety Strategies*:
<https://everytownresearch.org/report/community-led-public-safety-strategies/>

⁵ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/12/cahoots-program-may-reduce-likelihood-of-police-violence/617477/>

⁶ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2000/01/02/dc-homicides-lowest-since-1987/8005efb9-75dc-438c-86cb-b61bc90425f4/>; <https://mpdc.dc.gov/node/197622>

⁷ <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/abs/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301441>

Gun violence is contagious and spreads like a disease, like a pandemic. There are not “bad” people but learned behaviors. Behaviors and norms can be unlearned by reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors. We can cut off transmission of this disease through prevention. This philosophy embodies the public health approach to gun violence prevention, which is widely accepted and respected.⁸ We must also recognize that gun violence is not an individual problem, but a societal one, and we must all be willing to denormalize gun violence and break this cycle. Homicides increased in DC in 2020 for the third year in a row.⁹

These deaths included 30 children and teens:¹⁰

*[Makenzie Anderson (11 mo), Carmelo Duncan (1), Gabriel Eason (2), Davon McNeal (11), Malachi Lukes (13), Kareem Palmer (16), Jaime Zelaya (16), Christopher Brown (17), Dawaun Simmons (17), Wilfredo Torres (17), Taijehon Wyatt Jr. (17), Saige Ballard (18), Richard Bangura (18), Malick Cisse (18), Kelvin Goggins (18), Marquis Harrod (18), Navaras Johnson (18), Deon Kay (18), Montrell Lucas (18), Antwuan Roach (18), Naseem Simpson (18), Franklin Hernandez Arevalo (19), Andy Bonilla (19), Willie Leon Brown, Jr. (19), Antonio Burnett, Jr. (19), Everett Harris (19), Zymia Joyner (19), Taejuan King (19), Tyrell Smith (19), Rashard Waldo (19)]*¹¹

and 25 women:¹²

*[Jeanette Walls (47), Lorraine Marie Thomas (25), Noelle Wilson (31), Donika Hawkins (24), Latasha Estep (40), Courtney Jones (54), Olga Ooro (34), Tia Cokley (40), Hazel Evans (67), Tamika Jones (45), Shanika Williams (28), Jordyn Simmons (20), Claudette Williams (56), Larkia Izlar (23), Saige Ballard (18), Zymia Joyner (19), Kamonie Edwards (21), Shana Donahue (26), Sheila Lucas (71), Resha Blount (25), Brea Moon (21), Shantal Hill (28), Lagioria Brinkley (36), Kriston Robinson (28), Tia Carey (21)]*¹³

These are people who are intensely missed by their loved ones. The parents of one-year-old Carmelo Duncan will never get to see their child grow up, and his 8-year old brother will never fully erase the image and extreme trauma of seeing his baby brother shot and killed.¹⁴

Seventeen-year old Christopher Brown, a beloved father, son, brother to four younger brothers, a big brother and friend to so many youth in his community, who loved music and basketball, will be forever missed in his community and family.¹⁵ His mother, Ms. Artecka Brown, says that “his smile alone could brighten up a room”. He had charisma and goals and was so excited about being a new father. Carmelo and Christopher and all of the other victims of gun violence should be here today.

We urge you to make a full commitment to preventing gun violence and partnering with the community to help change the behaviors that drive violence.

⁸ <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/publichealthissue/publichealthapproach.html>

⁹ <https://mpdc.dc.gov/page/district-crime-data-glance>

¹⁰ <https://saythisname.wordpress.com/archival-list/names-archive-2020/>

¹¹ <https://saythisname.wordpress.com/archival-list/names-archive-2020/>

¹² https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/local/homicides/?itid=lk_interstitial_manual_13

¹³ <https://saythisname.wordpress.com/archival-list/names-archive-2020/>

¹⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/carmelo-duncan-fatal-shooting-dc/2020/12/03/fa0486de-3560-11eb-a997-1f4c53d2a747_story.html

¹⁵ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/08/10/washington-dc-shooting-17-year-old-dead-20-injured-party/3333222001/>

The following steps are critical to success:

1. Ensure full implementation and funding of the entire NEAR Act, including sustained funding for “Neighborhood Safety and Engagement Fund” (Section 103), establishing and funding the “Office of Violence Prevention and Health Equity” (Section 104), establishing the Community Crime Prevention Team Program to “reduce crime and increase access to social services by enhancing the coordination between law enforcement and health and human services agencies” (Section 105), and fully implementing additional Police Department redesign/improvements (Sections 207, 208, 211).¹⁶ Establish public-private partnerships and promote investment in the “Neighborhood Safety and Engagement Fund” that was called for in the NEAR Act. Expand the existing NEAR Act programs such as the Office of Neighborhood Safety & Engagement, the Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Program, and the diversion-focused Community Response Team at the Department of Behavioral Health.
2. Provide secure, long-term funding for agency and community-based violence intervention work. These violence prevention and interruption efforts should be core city services, and the funding should be sustainable and certain. Invest in established gun violence prevention programs in the District specifically the Office of Neighborhood Safety & Engagement, the Office of the Attorney General’s Cure the Street program, the Hospital-Based Violence Intervention Program, the Community Response Team at the Department of Behavioral Health, Credible Messengers at the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services, Roving Leaders at the Department of Parks and Recreation, the community-based trauma support services funded by the Office of Victim Services & Justice Grants, and the DC Safe Passage program.

The street outreach workers who are building trust and de-escalating conflicts in neighborhoods are committed to changing their communities. For example, Alliance of Concerned Men have successfully negotiated truces in two target areas recently, which is nothing short of miraculous.¹⁷ These dedicated peacemakers deserve not only adequate pay but mental health services, other job benefits and respect. The work that they do is not easy¹⁸ and can sometimes be deadly:

- Crystal McNeal lost her 11-year-old son, Davon, on the 4th of July at a family-focused event that she organized as part of her job as a violence interrupter.¹⁹

¹⁶ <https://code.dccouncil.us/dc/council/laws/21-125.html>

¹⁷ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/with-a-truce-brokered-over-zoom-one-dc-neighborhood-goes-nearly-100-days-without-a-shooting/2020/08/21/69f010a8-e183-11ea-b69b-64f7b0477ed4_story.html; https://allianceofconcernedmen.org/?page_id=266

¹⁸ Everytown Fact Sheet - How COVID-19 Has Increased the Need for Street Outreach Work: <https://everytownresearch.org/report/how-covid-19-has-increased-the-need-for-street-outreach-work/>

¹⁹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/davon-mcneal-shot/2020/07/05/16390c1a-bec6-11ea-b178-bb7b05b94af1_story.html

- Twenty-one-year-old Lorraine Marie Thomas (known as Chyna) had ambitions of becoming a violence interrupter, and had successfully brokered a truce in her neighborhood, but she was shot and killed in October.²⁰
 - Clarence Venable was training to be a violence interrupter in 2019 when he was shot and killed, leaving behind his children, family and friends.²¹
3. Expand efforts to provide Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to treat those most directly impacted by gun violence—either as perpetrators or victims. Exposure to gun violence is very widespread in many DC neighborhoods, and the majority of people exposed do not have access to therapy or counselling. This includes most especially children, for whom frequent exposure to gun violence has been shown to have effects on development and skills.²² In addition to focusing prevention and intervention efforts on the small number of individuals most likely to be involved in violence, to stop the cycle of trauma and pain, we must also treat those who live with daily gun violence in their communities by investing in the organizations based in the community, like the TraRon Center that provides a safe space for children to work with counselors and art therapists.²³ Another example is Momma’s Safe Haven, which provides healing circles and retreats for grieving mothers and youth empowerment events.²⁴ A third example is the TRIGGER Project that works with teens to help them understand their emotions, understand what triggers people to become violent, and works to boost the protective factors that help prevent violence.²⁵
 4. Develop a training academy to invest in professional development of individuals to serve as violence interrupters, outreach workers, credible messengers, roving leaders, and trauma-informed mental health professionals. Unify, expand, and professionalize street outreach and violence intervention programs under common goals and training. Enhance the ability for community organizations to receive funding, while providing unified training, data, and supervision. Expand the financial capacity of community-based violence prevention organizations. A great model for this is Oakland Ceasefire, a program that “seeks to combine the best of community energies, social services, and strategic law enforcement to reduce gun violence associated with gangs/groups far more effectively than these entities operating alone”.²⁶ Instrumental to the success of this

²⁰ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/public-safety/young-woman-killed-in-the-dc-neighborhood-where-she-helped-to-prevent-gun-violence/2020/10/31/b6884eb0-1baf-11eb-aeec-b93bcc29a01b_story.html

²¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/dc-politics/he-was-training-as-a-violence-interrupter-and-then-he-was-fatally-shot/2019/11/23/84ac40f4-0e18-11ea-bd9d-c628fd48b3a0_story.html

²² Everytown Fact Sheet - The Impact of Gun Violence on Children and Teens
<https://everytownresearch.org/report/the-impact-of-gun-violence-on-children-and-teens/>

²³ <https://traroncenter.org/>; https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/dc-children-gun-violence/2020/12/28/bab1afb2-3ba4-11eb-bc68-96af0daae728_story.html

²⁴ mommassafehaven.org/momma-s-safe-haven-healing-center

²⁵ <https://thetriggerproject.org/>

²⁶ <https://www.oaklandca.gov/topics/oaklands-ceasefire-strategy>

program is the fact that it is community-led and it has dedicated funding. Oakland Ceasefire puts the power in the community while maintaining standards and proficiency.

5. Invest in programs that provide youth safe alternatives to violence through expanded after-school activities, youth enrichment programming, paid internships and career opportunities. We need to invest in the youth violence intervention programs that the District has successfully implemented including Credible Messengers at DYRS and Roving Leaders at DPR. We must ensure schools have resources to prioritize positive behavior methods over punitive punishments and out of school time. We need to fund the DC Safe Passage Program so our children are not fearing for their lives on their way to and from school. We need to reduce adverse childhood experiences and increase protective factors.²⁷
6. Ensure that every District agency and department is included in the comprehensive prevention of violence. Every agency and department should be able to answer the question: what metrics does your office utilize and what actions does your office take that help our city-wide effort to reduce gun violence. The GVP Director in the City Administrator's Office should have a key role in coordinating the often-siloed efforts of the various offices and ensuring efforts are coordinated and well communicated both internally, to non-government partners, and to the public at large.
7. Commit to reimagining law enforcement. Commit to investing in the community. We need structural and strategic changes to policing to build and foster trust with communities. There needs to be a more robust system for internal and external accountability, including the Office of Police Complaints, so complaints can be investigated and addressed in an expedient and fair manner. There must be accountability and discipline for officers who use excessive force or exhibit other forms of misconduct. We need to focus on diversion, and radically change the process of the 911 call response system so situations involving mental health, or housing/food/job insecurity are diverted to the appropriate social services agency rather than police. Eugene, Oregon provides a successful example of a community-based crisis co-response program, called Crisis Response Helping Out on Streets (CAHOOTS).²⁸ DC already has one example of this in the diversion-focused Community Response Team at the Department of Behavioral Health, which came out of the NEAR Act.²⁹ DHS/OAG also have a very successful juvenile ACE diversion program.³⁰ Without a high level of trust between police and the most impacted communities, you cannot reduce gun violence. Police should expand procedural justice and community policing strategies, along with a trauma-informed approach to helping individuals. MPD should fully implement NEAR Act recommendations on community crime prevention as well as

²⁷ <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>

²⁸ <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/12/cahoots-program-may-reduce-likelihood-of-police-violence/617477/>

²⁹ <https://dbh.dc.gov/service/community-response-team>

³⁰ <https://dhs.dc.gov/page/alternatives-court-experience-ace-diversion-program>

pairing police with social services, including an expansion of teams which pair mental health and behavioral health clinicians and outreach specialists with MPD. We must ensure that the recruitment, education, training and community engagement efforts of our police department and officers are authentic and continuous and not just slogans or feel-good strategies. These efforts do not indicate an increase in funding for MPD. These efforts should be made by MPD using existing funding. Years of increases in police budgets have not reduced violence or made our neighborhoods safer. We must invest in the community.

8. Establish a specific framework and strong working group for a collaborative, multidisciplinary effort to eliminate gun violence. Efforts should be informed by national experts and utilize the most rigorous, proven strategies currently available. The government must develop partnerships with communities most impacted by gun violence, nonprofits, police, educators, faith and community leaders, parents, public health professionals, other service providers, and local businesses and private grantors/investors. This unified effort must focus squarely on the small number of individuals and locations that contribute to the majority of shootings and homicides in the District. Collaborative efforts are already underway in the community, including Next Level Vision a networking partnership of community leaders started by DeShola Dawkins and Tyrone Parker in the spirit of DeShola's son, Timothy, who was shot and killed in 2013, as well as Peace Walks DC a faith-based alliance that regularly organizes peace walks, peace summits, and is committed to ending gun violence, and others.^{31,32}
9. Implement community-driven focused deterrence/group violence intervention efforts through a partnership between MPD, community leaders and social service providers. Focused deterrence has been proven to be the most effective violence reduction strategy in cities across the United States. Focused deterrence is not strictly enforcement and punishment. Rather, it provides real alternatives to a life of violence to those individuals most at risk. It must be implemented fairly, in full partnership with community organizations, faith leaders, and social service providers who are enabled to provide tangible incentives to individuals to pursue peace rather than violence. When done properly, it is fully transparent and can lead not only to a reduction in shootings, but also a reduction in arrests. Because no one strategy will eliminate gun violence alone, focused deterrence must be used along with the District's already established efforts.

Antonio Gardiner had just left a family cookout on July 4, 2020, when he was shot and killed outside a McDonalds by a 14-year-old child. His mother, Ms. Angela Gardiner grieves the loss of her 36-year-old son every day.³³ Ms. Lakiethia Izlar says that her daughter, 23-year-old

³¹ <https://washingtoncitypaper.com/article/182098/as-homicides-continue-to-rise-in-dc-parents-of-gun-violence-victims-reflect-on-open-wounds/>

³² <http://peacefellowshipchurch.org/dc-peace-walks/>

³³ <https://www.wusa9.com/article/news/crime/two-shootings-southeast-dc-less-than-an-hour/65-dbb53427-3650-4573-8ff7-e72a31b5e007>

Larkia Izlar, “was a big sister to everybody”, and “her smile and laugh was everything”.³⁴ Larkia’s mother and younger 12-year-old sister have been unable to access grief or trauma counselling, a commonly heard refrain among survivors in DC, even though they have been very affected by the loss of Larkia. There are countless stories like these.³⁵ What is more are the numerous people living with injuries due to gun violence.³⁶

By recognizing that what we are currently doing is not working, and immediately adopting a comprehensive, fully scaled, multidisciplinary approach that focuses directly on preventing gun violence, DC can start to decrease the number of shootings and homicides. To be successful, build legitimacy and community trust, this public safety and public health approach must be data-driven, community-supported, fair and focused. All stakeholders, public and private, must have a seat at the table, efforts must be collaborative, restorative, transparent, and measurable, and led by communities most impacted by violence. Funding for these efforts must be commensurate to the monumental and essential task at hand. Relying on experts who have done this before, and in partnership with community voices, we must establish a clear road map and comprehensive plan to tackle this, using every tool in the toolbox. For the District to truly be the world-class city that it has the potential to be, we must fully commit to eliminate gun violence from every neighborhood and community.

cc:

Chairman Phil Mendelson
At-Large Councilmember Anita Bonds
At-Large Councilmember Elissa Silverman
At-Large Councilmember Robert C. White, Jr.
At-Large Councilmember Christina Henderson
Ward 1 Councilmember Brianne K. Nadeau
Ward 2 Councilmember Brooke Pinto
Ward 3 Councilmember Mary M. Cheh
Ward 4 Councilmember Janeese Lewis George
Ward 5 Councilmember Kenyan R. McDuffie
Ward 6 Councilmember Charles Allen
Ward 7 Councilmember Vincent C. Gray
Ward 8 Councilmember Trayon White, Sr.
Deputy Mayor for Public Safety, Chris Geldart
DC Attorney General, Karl Racine
Metropolitan Police Department (MPD), Chief Robert Contee
City Administrator, Kevin Donahue

³⁴ <https://mpdc.dc.gov/publication/homicide-victims-timothy-hinton-and-larkia-izlar>

³⁵ *Everytown Report - A Nation of Survivors*: <https://everytownresearch.org/report/a-nation-of-survivors-the-toll-of-gun-violence-in-america/>

³⁶ *Everytown Report - A More Complete Picture, The Contours of Gun Injury in the United States*: <https://everytownresearch.org/report/nonfatal-in-the-us/>

Director of Gun Violence Prevention, Linda Harllee Harper
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Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS), Clinton Lacey
Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), Delano Hunter
Department of Behavioral Health (DBH), Barbara Bazron
Executive Director, Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC), Mannone Butler
Director of DC Health, LaQuandra Nesbitt

Sincerely,

Organization Signatures:

Adas Israel Congregation
American College of Surgeons, Washington DC Committee on Trauma
Black Mothers 4 Justice, Inc.
Business Card Father Factor Inc
Charnice Milton Community Bookstore
Coalition of Concerned Mothers
Coalition to Stop Gun Violence
DC Area Interfaith Gun Violence Prevention Network
DC Chapter of Moms Demand Action
DC Coalition Against Domestic Violence
DC Education Coalition for Change (DECC)
DC Prep
Episcopal Diocese of Washington
Gun Violence Prevention Team - National UMC
March For Our Lives DC
NEXT LEVEL VISION
Pathways 2 Power
Peace Walks DC
Second Look Project
Serve Your City
St. Mark's Meditation Center
Tale of The Tape Foundation
Talking Drum Incorporated
Temple Sinai (DC) Gun Violence Prevention Group
The TraRon Center
The T.R.I.G.G.E.R. Project
The WIRE
Tin Shop

Ward 8 Woods Conservancy
Woman's National Democratic Club (WNDC)

Individual Signatures:

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Beth Belinky
Roger Bell, Overcoming Scars
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Johnathan Tafoya
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Mary Beth Tinker
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