

Congreso de Latinos Unidos
TESTIMONY TO THE HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
April 13, 2007

Good morning. My name is Zeelyna Wise, and I am here this morning representing Congreso de Latinos Unidos and the work we do in North Philadelphia to eradicate violence in our neighborhoods. I was chosen to speak because I am the AVRIP staff supervisor who works with the youth workers who mentor the young people that are at-risk in our area. I work with young people who face various challenges in their daily lives. I have been able to see first hand some of issues that our young people face and some of the issues that families are dealing with in our ever-changing times.

Congreso is a community-based nonprofit organization based in Eastern North Philadelphia, we work to strengthen Latino communities through social, economic, education, and health services; leadership development; and advocacy. We serve over 10,000 youth per year through over 60 programs. We thank the House Judiciary Committee for coming to North Philadelphia and for prioritizing the needs of the Latino population in our great state, especially knowing that Latino communities have unique challenges *and* are a growing population in the Commonwealth. In Philadelphia alone, since 1990, the Latino population has increased by over 65%, and more than half of the Latino population is younger than 25 years of age.

I am here today to talk to you about the violence we witness daily basis in this area and how we intend to eradicate this violence, and the need for your assistance in this matter. And let us be clear that violence, including the outburst of gun violence, is not unique to Philadelphia. I imagine that much of what I share is similar to the scenarios you will hear in the rest of our urban centers throughout Pennsylvania.

First, let us address the issue of gun violence. As a way of sharing some background with you, the majority of Congreso's clients reside in an area well known for disproportionately high rates of violent crime, domestic violence, and drug related crime. For example, in 2002, the rate of

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violent crime per 10,000 people was 1.6 times higher in our police districts.¹ Moreover, in 2003, the Philadelphia Police Department responded to 115,745 domestic-related calls citywide, and nearly 20% of those calls (20,577) were to the Philadelphia Police Department's East Division which encompasses Eastern North Philadelphia. This year alone the rate of homicides in Philadelphia is over 85% of which are perpetrated by guns, this has exceeded the incredible number of homicides last year. Violence is very real, and our youth experience it everyday. As such, we implore the State Legislature to consider the package of 13 bills that were presented to you at the beginning of the year. **Of particular importance to us is restricting the number of handgun purchases to one per month, or at the very least giving Philadelphia the authority to make this and other gun legislation decisions for its residents.** To date, there has not been a valid argument against passing this legislation in today's context. Unless you live a life in violence everyday, you cannot truly understand why these bills are so imperative. Through my work I live in this world of violence, so I plead with you to prioritize Governor Rendell's wish and Representative Evans' wish to limit handgun purchases. Congreso sent 30 people to Harrisburg last September to implore over 25 legislators to do the same.

Right now, Washington, DC is fighting to retain its ban on handguns. Whether the ban has solely diminished gun violence in that city is highly contentious and improbable. Congreso agrees that gun legislation is only an initial or at least partial step to eradicate the violence that our youth live in throughout the state. For this reason, Congreso also advocates for a holistic, streamlined, coordinated and effective approach to fight this epidemic. By looking at gun legislation and increasing the number of officers in high risk communities where there is not police and community engagement we run the risk of creating a police state. But if real change is to be successful, we have to fund effective violence prevention and intervention programs. The compilation and coordination

¹ McClanahan, W. 2004. Alive at 35: Reducing youth violence through monitoring and support. Field Report Series. Public/Private Ventures.

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of all of these tactics is much more efficient and effective in addressing the public health problem that is youth violence.

Latino youth have not fared well against this backdrop of violence. Steadily increasing numbers of Latino youth are exposed to violent situations through family, peers, and community members and too frequently they either become victims or sometimes even perpetrators. As such, they enter the juvenile justice system at a disproportionate rate. This demonstrates a clear need for an increase in culturally and linguistically appropriate violence-prevention services for Latino youth².

After 30 years of service, Congreso prioritizes working with our neighborhood youth and their families to stem the tide of our youth becoming involved in violent situations, crime and drugs. Congreso is a partner in the Blueprint for a Safer Philadelphia, and we are delighted that this Blueprint effort is focused on a myriad of strategies. As an agency, our contribution to this effort will result in the development of a youth leadership council. The council will support workshops and other prevention and intervention strategies with at-risk youth, support the work of the Latino Juvenile Justice Network (which supports community-based alternatives to incarceration and educates entities on disproportionate minority contact), and engage the community through civic participation.

We are also providers in the City's Adolescent Violence Reduction Project (AVRP). AVRP works in conjunction with community-based alternative programs to provide intervention to youth, aged 10-15, who are at high risk of perpetrating or committing violence. I mentor and supervise the 12 AVRP youth workers that Congreso employs, who in turn intensively serve over 100 youth. This program and others at Congreso are geared toward mentorship. Mentorship of young people is one of the most positive and powerful means of bringing about social change. Research even shows that a relationship with a caring adult is one of the most influential components that lead youth toward

² Jones and Harris 2003.

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success. Congreso mentors out-of-school youth through our E3 center, pregnant teens through our health and workforce development programs, youth who are drug and alcohol users through our Aftercare program, truant youth through the Parent Truancy Officer program, and in-school youth through our after-school programming.

Mentors give support in the areas where youth need the most encouragement: school, home, peer pressure, and outside stimuli such as drugs. Mentors are able to develop skills that some of our youth have not yet explored in themselves. Skills that are developed by our mentors include problem solving, anger management, healthy ways of expressing of emotions. Interpersonal skills between parents and school authorities are enforced and improved. Attendance and the rates of truancy have been improved by having a strong support for our youth, changing non-compliant behavior into compliance.

We need these types of programs, programs that are culturally diverse in meeting the needs of our community. And we need for “you” to support the programs that have been proven to work effectively. Programs which allow enough time spent with an individual to truly transform their lives. After all, the alternatives are typically harmful and even more costly. On average, approximately \$3,000 is dedicated to each youth slot in our E3 center each year, while upwards of \$40,000 is spent on youth placed in residential treatment.

In order to bring the point home, how quality prevention and intervention programs are worth your investment, let me read to you the purpose statement written for one of our after-school programs and a letter written by the same youth. This sums up how most kids feel about having a program that helps them feel safe and cared for : “At Congreso, we work very hard to provide a safe, secure, and loving environment for our youth. Our building is not a school, although to some it is a place for learning. To others it is home. We see the light in our youth; helping the children of today become the leaders of tomorrow.”

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And here is the letter written by that same youth.

“Eight long months have passed since I started the AVR program, and if you look at me you might think nothing has changed. The truth is, almost everything about me is different, from the way I feel about myself on the inside to what I show and what I feel on the outside. It took a lot for me to get where I am right now, and if it were not for the Congreso staff I never would have made it. When I first started at Congreso I did not have plans on coming back a second day. Something about the place brought me back; I liked being there. The positive energy kept me coming back. The best part was that I had an activity leader like Ms Z...As of Feb 5, 2007 I am official Fairhill Community student. Now I can work on the second step, getting me to stay in school. I know I’ve made a lot of progress in the past eight months but I still need work. Without program I don’t know where I would be right now. They helped me make a big change in my life. I still need Congreso services to better my future.”

According to the IQ testing this youth is smarter than 91% of the population. She was placed in a disciplinary school after one incident, and she slowly stop attending because she was placed in a classroom with other students who couldn’t read at a 9th or 10th grade level. She eventually stopped attending school giving the reason that “it was not in a place of learning”. This is a youth who has been touched consistently by gun violence and the like in her neighborhood.

Congreso is an organization that prides itself on strong community support and service. I have been told by our youth “they want help inside their homes”. They want their families back. They want the schools to care about their achievements not failures. They desire programs that develop and encourage growth and promote real skills that they can use toward future goals.

We have developed a Parent and Family Support Group with a holistic approach to services. We have developed a “Freedom to Change” curriculum that was developed by the parents for parents, based on listening to their needs and factoring in their cultural considerations. We don’t have families that have problems; we have families with “possibilities”. Everyone has the ability to change, and they should be supported and encouraged to move forward. The focus of the program is to address family dynamics and structure; teach the developmental stages of children; exercise positive discipline; parent & child self-esteem building; teach active communication and the art of listening; manage anger & guilt; cope with stressful situations; and find new pathways for conflict

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resolution. Parents learn practical tools to raise their children by enhancing parent/children relationships and family life, to provide skills to raise a thinking child, to prevent and intervene in the children's self destructive behaviors, and to encourage the integration of child and family quality of time.

By practicing the art of listening we may be able to detour future breakdowns within our families. Families need to feel supported not condemned by the same system that is working to assist them. By empowering families we create a ripple effect that will positively impact the overall family and community systems. This is the ripple effect and this is how it looks;

1. Schools will receive more parental support, because families will be receiving support and mentorship.
2. Reduction of truancy, parents will hold youth accountable for attending school, because parents will be better educated about the school system
3. Reduction of crime there will be more after-school programs, keeping our youths of the street and hanging out, keep them from being prime candidates for drugs and many forms of crime.

Through the coordinated efforts of the Parent Truancy Officers, parents working as peers can effectively be the liaison between parents, schools and youth thus assisting in the education of our families being empowered and having access to information that could better assist them in helping their youth.

So, yes, please advocate with us for gun legislation that protects residents throughout the Commonwealth, or at least give Philadelphia's citizens the right to determine the safety of their own children. We understand that the need for guns in an urban environment is quite different than those in other areas. Together we seek your collaboration for supporting community-based, family

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youth programs. Only through these partnerships and multiple efforts will we witness the eradication of violence in our neighborhoods.

“It is the right of every child to have a safe place to hang out to learn and grow.”

Thank you for your time, and our doors are always open for you to visit Congreso to see how we are an effective partner in this process.