

April 28, 2020

Health, Education, Neighborhoods, Parks, Arts, and River Committee
Los Angeles City Council
200 North Spring Street, Room 1060
Los Angeles, California 90012

**RE: CF # 20-0190 – Armed While On Duty / Park Rangers / Los Angeles Municipal Code (LAMC) /
Section 63.41 / Amendment**

Honorable Councilmembers,

The difficult realities of physical distancing that Angelenos are facing has only magnified the preciousness of our open space and public space assets. This is evermore true in the city's African-American and Latinx neighborhoods, where access to parks and private recreational facilities is lower. We are all looking forward to fully utilizing these essential spaces once again – not merely for our joy and wellbeing, but also for the vitality and resilience associated with our physical and mental health.

Prevention Institute writes to voice our opposition to the proposal to arm Park Rangers, which represents a sudden, dangerous pivot back towards weaponization, criminalization and the hardening of public space. For more than 15 years, we have worked nationally and locally to build a public health approach to violence prevention, often through innovative collaborative efforts with cities, local health agencies and community-based organizations. We have also worked at the forefront of the park equity and reinvestment effort coming to fruition in Los Angeles, and our collaborative HEALU Network of diverse partner organizations has worked to enhance understanding about the interconnectedness of the built environment and community violence. Out of this depth of experience, we have briefly summarized some overarching suggestions for addressing the safety challenges facing park staff and patrons.

In communities of color that are striving to contend with a tragic history of gun-related trauma, **arming Park Rangers is not the way to promote a sense of safety amongst community members or the fuller utilization of parks** for their human health benefits. Considering public safety and the use of force in this context raises additional layers of complexity and truths that cannot and must not be overlooked. While park reinvestment and pedestrianization efforts are helping to improve the quality and availability of public space in Los Angeles' communities of color, design charettes related to these efforts have routinely underscored the challenge that improved facilities and beautification alone will not resolve the barriers to park usage. Community members must perceive that they are safer before they utilize parks more regularly. Importantly, participant input also routinely clarifies that safety perceptions in communities of color are substantially derived from biased policing and traumatic interactions with law enforcement personnel, alongside other forms of potential violence. Recent analysis confirms that African-Americans are four times and Latinx are three times more likely to be searched compared to

White drivers, though less likely to be found with contraband. In major California cities, African-Americans have police force used against them at starkly disproportional rates to the White population.

The arming of Park Rangers runs counter to ongoing collaborative efforts to prevent violence (in its various forms) confronting men and boys of color, by further saturating our communities and public spaces with firearms. Decades of research has continually demonstrated that **more firearms in a community merely increases the likelihood of shootings, putting Park Rangers and patrons at greater risk of harm**. We need fewer guns in our parks, not more.

Militarizing park personnel is also a disconcerting, excessively costly method for addressing the public safety impacts of decades of chronically deprioritized, underfunded and understaffed parks in Los Angeles that we have witnessed. Nor does it compliment or leverage collaborative City-funded initiatives (e.g. Summer Night Lights) to reclaim parks as refuges for social cohesion and wellbeing in communities of color – instead it undermines them by potentially diverting ever-vulnerable Recreation & Parks funding. As City Hall faces its biggest fiscal crisis in our lifetime, **the never-ending battle to protect our parks funding won't be helped by this untimely complication**. The most effective way to make our parks safer is to enable their full utilization by the community, which can only happen through a sustained commitment to staffing, programming, maintenance and partnership.

Of gravest concern, **this proposal puts unhoused persons at greater risk for violence** at a moment when they are utilizing recreation spaces (compliant with City directives) to maintain healthful physical distancing. Our civic failure to address the homelessness crises has brought us to the point where this is now an acceptable solution. The unhoused of Los Angeles were already struggling for survival against grinding conditions in the housing market, and are continually challenged by a civic undercurrent that is stigmatizing and exclusionary. We urge that you not nudge our most vulnerable community members further into the pathway of harm, or add to stereotyped narratives that further marginalize them.

It is notable that large cities like New York and San Jose have chosen against arming Park Rangers in recent years. Should this committee proceed to consider the motion, a publicly disclosed **analysis of Park Ranger incident responses** and a **review of alternative park safety and violence prevention models** from other jurisdictions should be a prominent part of those discussions. These will greatly help decision-makers and advocates identify more specific patterns, underlying causes and preventative “upstream” solutions.

A trove of innovative work in cities throughout the world has demonstrated that in most cases, community members can effectively assert claims on public space and against antisocial or predatory behavior, without the use of violent force or the authority of law enforcement. Public sector acknowledgement and reinforcement of this grassroots potential has already been demonstrated as an important violence reduction and cost-saving strategy in Los Angeles, and is ready to be scaled further. Indeed, if our parks belong to us, then community members must play an upfront role in maintaining their safety.

Principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) also point to myriad solutions that, with modest investments, can greatly enhance defensible space and reduce the necessity for

security operations. These range from modifications to landscaping and structural boundaries, to more effective lighting infrastructure, attention to viewsheds and accessways, intentional programming and grassroots partnerships. Community driven analytical methods like *safety audits* and *hot spot mapping* – developed to improve women’s safety in cities – can be readily deployed in parks to help steer design and programming interventions related to CPTED. We encourage these strategies as alternatives to weaponized approaches to enforcement.

Prevention Institute, along with other allies in the park equity and violence prevention sectors, stand ready to help further articulate and craft park safety solutions that work for both staff and patrons.

Sincerely,



Manal J. Aboelata
Deputy Executive Director



Elva Yañez
Director of Health Equity



Rob Baird
Program Manager

Cc: Councilmember David E. Ryu, Chairperson
Councilmember Mitch O’Farrell
Councilmember Curren D. Price, Jr.
Councilmember Nury Martinez, President
Councilmember Joe Buscaino, President Pro Tempore
Councilmember Gilbert A. Cedillo
Barbara Romero, Deputy Mayor of City Services
Michael A. Shull, General Manager, Department of Recreation and Parks