

## CITY VOICES AND PERSPECTIVES

**Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth (UNITY)** is a national initiative for preventing violence that brings together representatives from cities around the country to share best-practices and discuss challenges and strategies for preventing violence in their communities. As part of its quarterly National Consortium convenings, UNITY highlights work in cities around the country.

At its July 10, 2007 convening, UNITY featured Connie Rice, a civil rights attorney and director of the Advancement Project LA (AP). In her presentation, Connie Rice describes the report, *A Call to Action: A Case for a Comprehensive Solution to LA's Gang Violence Epidemic*. The report was the final product of a multidisciplinary team established by AP in response to a request for participation made by the Los Angeles City Council's Ad Hoc Committee on Gang Reduction and Youth Development.

These excerpts from Connie Rice's presentation provide a persuasive case for incorporating a public health approach into violence prevention efforts.<sup>1</sup> They also illustrate many ways that city and county government can provide structural and systematic support for a public health approach to violence prevention and specifically gang reduction.

### CONNIE RICE'S PRESENTATION TO THE UNITY NATIONAL CONSORTIUM ON JULY 10, 2007

## "A CALL TO ACTION"

### LOS ANGELES IS ENMESHED IN AN ENTRENCHED CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

We've had a particularly entrenched and unique culture of youth violence in this county. Gang violence is just one part of it. We're out here in the Wild West, and we're very clear there's a youth gang homicide epidemic. We've had it for 20 years. It does not follow the normal dips and valleys of crime trends. We have an epidemic that is in a dire stage, and it requires a massive response.

Billie,<sup>2</sup> Mildred,<sup>3</sup> and I had been working with the gang intervention folks in LA for a long time when the city's request to do a study was announced. A couple of the guys who used to be gang members called me and said, "Lady, you know that contract's come up." They were watching the issuance of this request on the Web. I called Billie and said, "I think we have to do this."

We put together a team of educators, child development specialists, law enforcement folks, pediatricians and epidemiologists specializing in violence

<sup>1</sup> This brief represents excerpts from the presentation made by Connie Rice, in her own words, organized and edited for clarity.

<sup>2</sup> Billie Weiss, Associate Director for Outreach and Communications at the UCLA School of Public Health, Southern California Injury Prevention Resource Center, and UNITY co-chair.

<sup>3</sup> Mildred Martinez, LA City Mayor's Office of Homeland Security and Public Safety.



Connie Rice, Co-Director  
Advancement Project Los Angeles

### THE LA ADVANCEMENT PROJECT

The LA Advancement Project is a non-profit that advocates for equity with a strong civil rights bent. The organization, with offices in Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles, was founded in 1998 to explore revitalized approaches to problems of inclusion and equity. The Los Angeles office focuses on making big public systems—mostly in Los Angeles County but statewide as needed—do a better job for low-income residents, especially low-income children and youth. Over the past decade, AP's principals have been active in the reform of LA's public transit, public schools, and police. For more information about the LA Advancement Project, go to: [www.advanceproj.org/002.html](http://www.advanceproj.org/002.html). For more information about their report to the Ad Hoc Committee on Gang Activity and Youth Development, go to: [www.advanceproj.org/index.html](http://www.advanceproj.org/index.html).

intervention and health matters. We got demographers. We had an impressive team that went way beyond the usual suspects.

We tried to help answer the city's questions, which were as follows:

- Why are the City and County of Los Angeles unable to get a grip on solving this problem?
- Is there a model that could begin to reverse our increasing trends of youth gang violence and, generally, youth violence?

That, basically, brought on three phases of work. The result is not a statistical analysis. It is a political diagnosis of why the city is unable to come to grips with what is, I think, for a developed country, probably the worst gang problem in the world.

The report tries to change the following four paradigms: first, to move from a paradigm of transactional violence, very small in outreach, to a transformational model; second to move from the crime suppression model to the public health model building healthy communities, healthy families, healthy cities; third to go after the Petri dish of root cause conditions spawning violence; and fourth, to figure out how to change the public will, the political will.

## **“HOT SPOTS”: COMPLEX PROBLEMS REQUIRE SOPHISTICATED STRATEGIES**

Because LA is 700 square miles, you can miss the following facts: there are 80,000 gang members county-wide. There are 40,000 in the city. We have a youth gang homicide rate that is astonishingly high. The thing about LA is, when you get here, you don't see it. You see the palm trees. It's a fairly safe city, in general. In my neighborhood, you can walk the dog at ten o'clock at night. But ten miles south of me children can't sit in their front yard because of almost weekly drive-by's. These “hot spots” experience war zone levels of violence.

The demographers wanted to know how many children, most of whom are not in gangs, face actual gang members walking to school. There are about 300,000 children who live in high-gang/high-violence areas. About 120,000 of them live in what I call hot spots, where it's actually dangerous to walk to school. RAND,<sup>4</sup> along with LA Unified School District, did a study of 4,000 kids in the school district who live in these hot spots, and 90% of them had been exposed to chronic violence, either as a witness or a victim. These are the areas where, for weeks at a time in LA, a postal worker can't deliver mail or a water-meter reader can't read meters because there's a gang war. In fact, it's actually too dangerous for paramedics to go in without a double escort from the LAPD. Violence invades every aspect of community life and the children in these areas suffer increased PTSD<sup>5</sup> levels.

<sup>4</sup> The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research institution based in Southern California that develops policy analysis across a wide range of areas and expertise. For more information, go to [www.rand.org/](http://www.rand.org/).

<sup>5</sup> PTSD is post traumatic stress disorder.

## **PROJECT OVERVIEW**

### **Phase I:**

Review current gang reduction programs in LA.

### **Phase II:**

Identify and determine the ideal programs and best practices locally and nationally.

### **Phase III:**

Propose options for implementing an ideal approach for LA to ensure the safety and vitality of all children.

*It's a fairly safe city, in general...[but] these “hot spots” experience war zone levels of violence.*

We also had a silo-ed, isolated, not-to-scale, and inadequately funded system. The city and county were operating under a Darwin-like funding scheme that actually decreases the number of providers of gang intervention and gang prevention services. We had to make the city understand, (1) that it's a serious problem. In fact, it wasn't just a problem, it was an epidemic. (2) There was a solution to the problem. (3) The real problem here is a political one. All those third rails that politicians are afraid to touch are required to be touched in order to solve this problem. In a city that had 40,000 gang members and is currently spending \$4 million a year on projects for gang intervention, we calculated that current spending is as little as 27 cents a day per gang member.

## **STRATEGIC, COMPREHENSIVE AND NEIGHBORHOOD-SPECIFIC SOLUTIONS REDUCE VIOLENCE**

What we have been trying to do out here is to figure out how to change that political calculation. The city needs to change organizationally and structurally, along with the county, the LA Unified School District, and law enforcement agencies. They need to link up in expert teams. The idea is to go to each individual neighborhood and sit down with the leaders of those neighborhoods and implement the comprehensive, wrap-around, saturation strategy that we developed in our report.

Our theory is that in the areas where violence is cultivated both in the home, on the streets and in the schools, where children are kept in a civil war level of PTSD, you have to have a super-saturation, 24-hour-a-day model. It can't be a program that ends at 8 o'clock at night. You basically have to organize that neighborhood with all the public resources, as well as private sector, civic sector, and faith-based sector resources to do a wrap-around strategy where every kid in that neighborhood is programmed 24 hours a day. The theory is that they don't get our kids; the gangs do not get a single other one of our kids. We get them.

What we've built the model on was a snapshot of what a city councilman named Martin Ludlow did. Before Martin took the oath of office he basically went in his area, an area called "the jungle," which is one of the city's hot spots, and he organized a 12-week program. He took \$300,000 of his campaign money and instead of keeping the money for himself he matched it with foundation grants. He said, "I'm going to take the 17 shootings and 3 fatalities that I had last summer and I want to reduce it to zero." He's an extraordinary politician; no other politician I know would do this.

He organized 24-hour-a-day activities. The activities didn't end until four in the morning: there was midnight soccer, midnight basketball. He had to go to the Department of Recreation and Parks and say, "Your park needs to stay open until 2 a.m." He had to go to the Department of Water and Power and say, "I need you to keep the lights on until two." He went to the churches and said, "I need you to cook food for the kids 24/7." He had to negotiate with the

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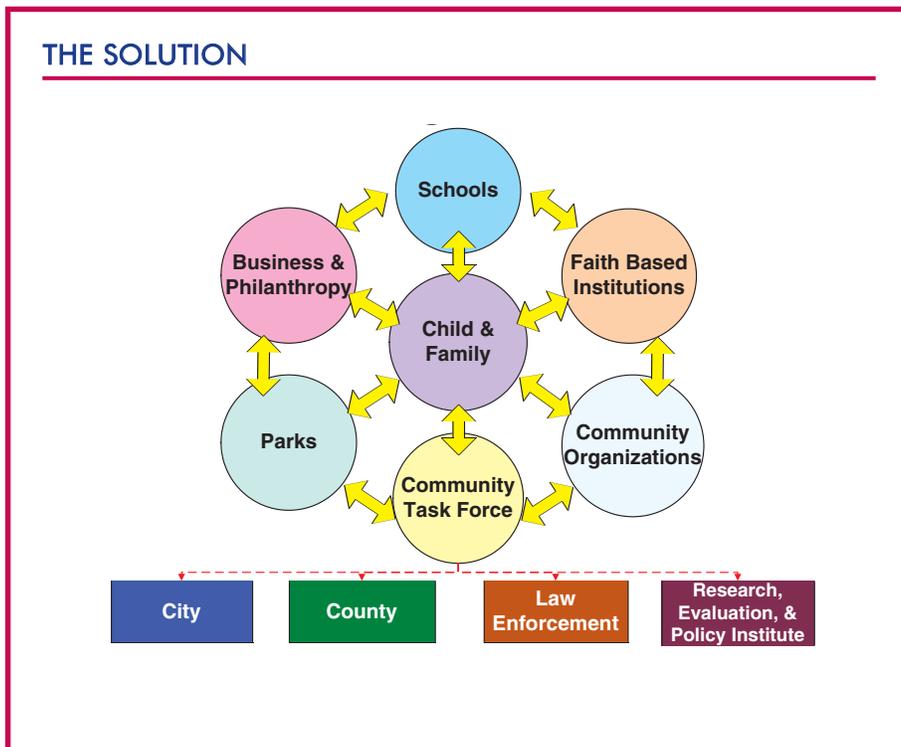
*We get them.*

gangs. He had to get the gang intervention teams in the area to give gang members walk-around jobs providing security rather than mayhem. He had to get LAPD to agree to stand down. And he had to negotiate the safety teams. We had to actually buy some of the gang members off with jobs, the one thing that has been shown in epidemiological studies to reduce LA violence.

This model is kind of like what Boston did with its wrap-around model, only in a much more violent area. There were radio stations doing contests with hip-hop songs that advocated non-violence; computer labs, and recreation and reading programs were put together as well. They even had me out there at midnight, refereeing basketball games. I hadn't played basketball since college. We really did keep these kids busy.

The bottom line was that after that 12 weeks we documented that youth violence, not the overall crime, but the youth crime, plummeted to zero—zero shootings, zero batteries, zero initiation rite gang rapes. We actually saw the model in operation and crime data documented the results. Of course, once the funding stopped and all the programs went away, the violence went right back up.

*What our model calls for is almost seamless coordination, planning, and strategic execution among the county providers—not just with healthcare but also in childcare, probation, parole, law enforcement, as well as medical, mental health, and child development specialists—all coming together as strategic teams to meet with the experts in the neighborhoods.*



## A CALL FOR CITY TRANSFORMATION

The model requires coordination LA did not have. What our model calls for is almost seamless coordination, planning, and strategic execution among the county providers—not just in healthcare but also in childcare, probation, parole, law enforcement, as well as medical, mental health, and child development specialists—all coming together as strategic teams to meet with the experts in the neighborhoods. You need to organize a violence reduction plan for a particular neighborhood, taking into consideration the people who are there, the gangs that are operating there, the level of domestic violence, and all of the factors that are further documented in our report. You deploy the community and you bring the resources, the public resources.

Our report requires a revolutionary transformation in how the government operates. It requires a level of funding that government mainly has right now, but is wasting. We calculated that between the county, the city, the LA Unified, and a number of other jurisdictions that have a lot of state, local, and county money, there's over a billion dollars that are frittered away in little silo programs. There are 20 to 100 to 500 kids served at a time with absolutely no strategic implementation or execution to actually do anything about reducing violence or getting a baseline for public safety through the public health model.<sup>6</sup>

Absolutely no one in the county, LA Unified, city offices, City Attorney, or law enforcement had ultimate responsibility for the problem. You could not find anyone in charge of any of those programs to whom you could go and ask a simple question: “How many kids did we get out of a gang?”, “How many initiation shootings did we avert?”, “How many retaliation shootings did we avert?”, or “How many kids did we get out of a gang, into a job, back into school?” No one in the entire county of Los Angeles had that as their responsibility, and no one wanted it.

So the Mayor has stepped up in appointing one person who does have that job title. The media calls the new position a “gang czar.” I call it a “prevention coordinator.” The Mayor called the position the “director.” But the problem is that that's still a transactional level analysis. Yes, we do need Jeff Carr,<sup>7</sup> we need Mildred,<sup>8</sup> but they can't rule a county this big without a fundamental change in how government operates, and that is the real challenge here.

*We're doing triage without transforming or getting the community on a path out of poverty. And the nexus between those conditions and violence is something that we're just starting to understand.*

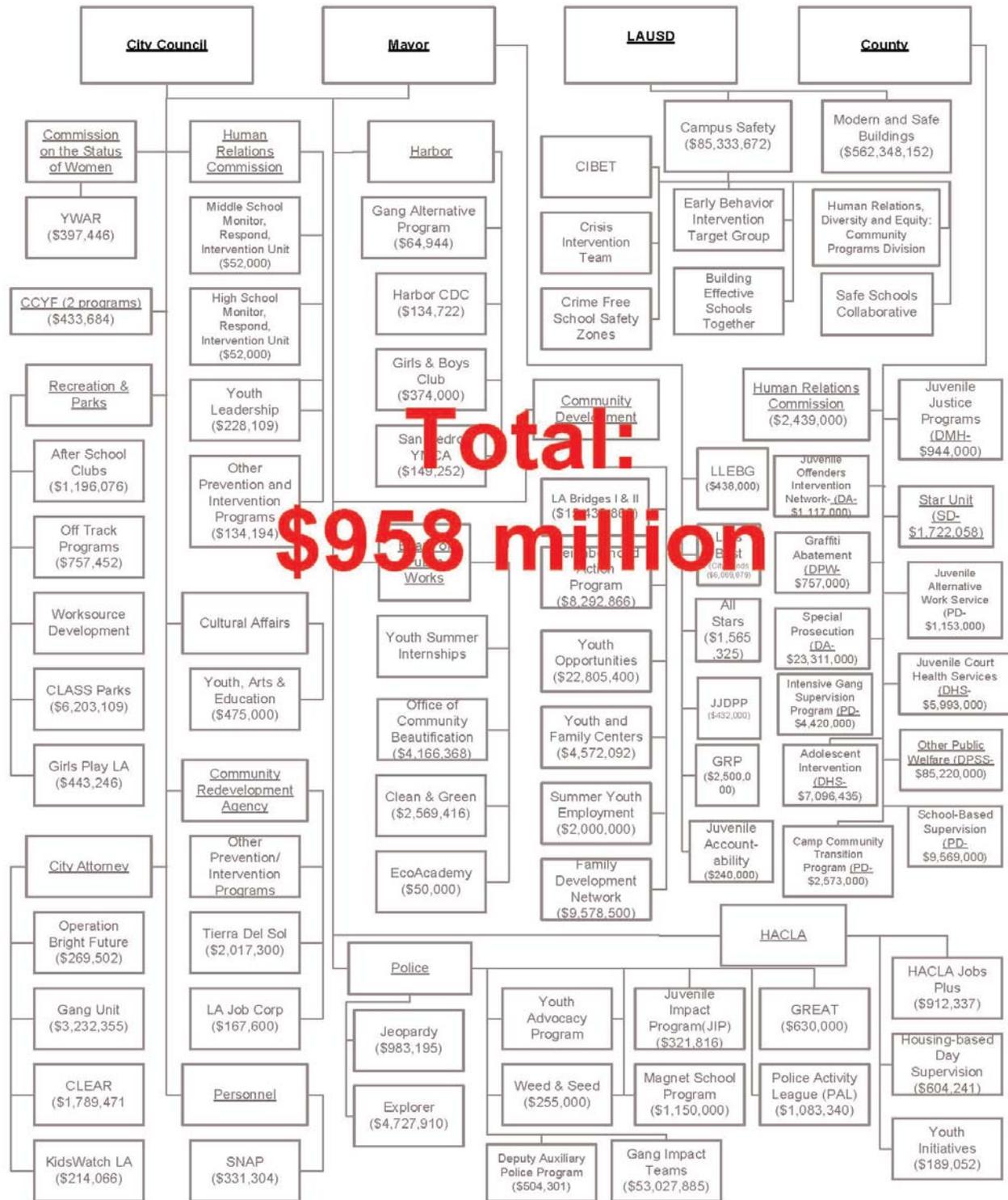
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<sup>6</sup> The public health approach to violence prevention is based on a four-step process, including: (1) Definition of the problem, (2) Identification of protective and risk factors, (3) Development and evaluation of pilot programs, and (4) Implementation of the programs at scale.

<sup>7</sup> Jeff Carr, LA City Mayor's Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development Director, City of Los Angeles.

<sup>8</sup> Mildred Martinez, LA City Mayor's Office of Homeland Security and Public Safety.

**DIAGRAM OF LA CITY AND COUNTY PROGRAMS:  
A System Representing Inadequate Coordination and Ineffective Use of funding**



Note: County budget figures represent net County cost

## CONNECTIONS TO LONG-TERM STABILITY

If you stabilize the hotspots, if you do the wrap-around strategy, and if you sustain it for five years, we think you could pull the plug on the gang problem without even decreasing violence suppression measures such as policing and arrest strategies. Then there's a fourth phase of our report. Once you get rid of the root causes of the neighborhood conditions that spawn the violence, and the family conditions that spawn violence, and you stabilize the neighborhood, then you've got to build for that neighborhood the kind of infrastructure related to wealth creation, educational benefits, and the rest of the infrastructure that makes a healthy community stay healthy. That's the whole fourth phase of our report.

Few politicians want to recognize the conditions that you need for job creation and wealth creation, the conditions that you need to support the institutions that create a healthy village. That's where you have to invest. We're doing triage without transforming or getting the community on a path out of poverty. And the nexus between those conditions and violence is something that we're just starting to understand. Really, we are at the starting gate. It took all of this to force the attention. It shouldn't have taken a report. It shouldn't have taken an ad hoc committee to focus on this, but it did.

## REACTIONS TO THE REPORT

The report was a very hard-hitting analysis that basically said to the city and to the county, "You have failed because you have actually structured yourself to fail. You execute criminal justice policies that not only don't solve the problem, but actually increase the problem and make children more violent. You have taken a crime suppression and mass incarceration strategy that has resulted in over 470,000 youngsters under the age of 18 being arrested with absolutely no remediation whatsoever. And those children have come out of the county and state system more violent and more gang-prone." It was not a welcomed message.

In addition, it told the city and county, "You have to completely reorganize how you do business. You cannot sit in your gilded cubicles and write memos to one another. You actually have to work with each other and with the community, in the community." So our report required a revolutionary transformation in how the government operates.

This is not what the politicians wanted, and they did not want responsibility, actually being held accountable for reductions in violence, reductions in gang recruitment and reductions in shooting. We were proposing a highly accountable, documented level of violence reduction that most of city government and certainly most of county government did not want to hear about. They were afraid they were going to be held responsible for not actually reducing violence, no matter how many meetings they had and how many fliers they handed out.

In the broader sector, the response to this report was overwhelming. My team didn't really have the resources to field all the responses. We had Governor Schwarzenegger and the Speaker of the Assembly trying to do bills based on the report. We had the Sheriff come up with a plan. The Mayor came up with a plan.

I think so far, the report has put prevention squarely into the discussion. People still do not understand what a public health model means. They do not understand the huge cosmic gap between what we do right now and what is needed for this comprehensive wrap-around, neighborhood-based public health strategy to work. We had to wrestle and kick some people to make them go even this far. There would not be a gang prevention czar hired by the Mayor had we not worked this hard.

## NEXT STEPS: MEDIA, EVALUATION AND RESOURCES

This movement is also going to take a public will. We're going to need a million-dollar campaign to break the norm of violence these children absorbed, because as far as they are concerned, *la vida loca*, this crazy life, is the only choice. First of all, we've got to come up with an accessible name for the public health approach to violence prevention.

The other thing is to set up the model so that it can be scientifically measured. The Mayor, for example, has chosen eight sites, but no one has put up a budget for the evaluation. We could take these eight neighborhoods, set it up as a demonstration, and then document the results in a way that can be evaluated, professionally evaluated. That hasn't happened yet. That's what we're in the process of doing. We are really building this airplane as we fly.

When you take a look at what the real costs are to really do it the right way, we're estimating, if you did it 24/7 for a year, it would be about between \$35- and \$40 million. A lot of that money is already being spent through salaries. It's not like you have to raise new money. If you were to take public money and private sector money that is being spent now and dissipated without any impact, and instead if you focus it through this model, the cost is about \$35- to \$40 million for the worst hotspots. It's a lot less than that for the areas where you have gang activity that hasn't reached an epidemic level. This is a political will problem. We think we know what healthy children need.

## ABOUT UNITY

**UNITY (Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth through Violence Prevention)** builds support for effective, sustainable efforts to prevent violence before it occurs so that urban youth can thrive in safe environments with supportive relationships and opportunities for success. Initiated in 2006, UNITY is a five-year cooperative agreement funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and led by Prevention Institute, Harvard School of Public Health, and the Southern California Injury Prevention Research Center, UCLA School of Public Health.

UNITY is supported by the CDC and The California Wellness Foundation (TCWF). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the US Department of Health and Human Services, CDC, or TCWF.

## FROM THE AUDIENCE

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### What advice do you have for other cities who are trying to take this issue on in this comprehensive, multidisciplinary, public health way?

You've got to have sufficiently progressive law enforcement that will permit a non-suppression strategy to be taken.

We could not have done this political campaign for comprehensive violence prevention and reduction without Chief Bratton<sup>9</sup> agreeing that you can't arrest your way out of this. LA has had an applied suppression model for 30 years; they have now climbed onboard the prevention paradigm.

You have to have a couple of leaders who are willing to see this through.

We worked with City Councilman Martin Ludlow, and Tony Cardenas at the City Council level, and the Mayor, because you've got to have someone who is capable of executive action to push through a mandate, a political mandate, that your city is no longer going to tolerate this level of violence.

You have to get the politicians to understand the model and what it's going to take.

There's a lot of political capital at stake. You've got to have a couple of politicians who are willing to tell the unions and all the city workers: "You have to change how you work and you also have to work together." That's the hardest part of this. Then you've got to get the money, the funding, whether it's existing funds or new funding.

You've got to have a couple of catalytic independent operators who have enough clout with the media to be able to hold the politicians and law enforcement to account.

There also has to be a developed network of violence prevention and intervention experts. Our gang intervention experts are sufficiently developed out here.

LA has a highly developed public health set of violence prevention networks that Billie<sup>10</sup> has led, and there are a couple of other complementary networks. They're going to be absolutely crucial, because without that, you just have isolated scattered sites.

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<sup>9</sup> Chief William Bratton, Chief of the Los Angeles Police Department.

<sup>10</sup> Billie Weiss, Associate Director for Outreach and Communications at the UCLA School of Public Health, Southern California Injury Prevention Resource Center, and UNITY co-chair.

## THE UNITY ROADMAP

As a part of its effort to help cities develop prevention strategies unique to their environment, UNITY has developed the *UNITY RoadMap*, a comprehensive framework for preventing violence. The *UNITY RoadMap* responds to the question: How can we get to the point of preventing violence before it occurs? In particular, it answers the questions: “Who?, What? and How?” of preventing violence at the national, local, and community levels.

The *UNITY RoadMap* is intended to help cities assess current levels of violence and prevention strategies in their locality, and to identify and implement core programmatic and infrastructure elements necessary to actually prevent violence before it occurs.

Excerpts of Connie Rice’s guest presentation have been highlighted on the next page as illustrative examples of one city’s voice throughout the various elements of the *UNITY RoadMap*.

## WHO? does it take to prevent violence before it occurs?

### PARTNERSHIPS

**High-Level Leadership:** catalyzes and leads policy change, ensures financial and staffing resources, and engages broader support through eliciting multiple partnerships in public and private sectors.

*“You have to have a couple of leaders who are willing to see this through...you’ve got to have someone who is capable of executive action to push through a mandate, a political mandate, that your city is no longer going to tolerate this level of violence in any community.”*

**Collaboration & Staffing:** An organized group of individuals, organizations, departments or agencies serving as the central coordinating body for preventing violence

*“What our model calls for is almost seamless coordination, planning, and strategic execution among the county providers...all coming together as strategic teams to meet with the experts in the neighborhoods.”*

**Community Engagement:** The meaningful and sustained involvement in every facet of community life of multiple players in the community

*“Go to each individual neighborhood and sit down with the leaders of those neighborhoods.”*

## WHAT? does it take to prevent violence before it occurs?

### PREVENTION

**Programs, Organizational Practices & Policies:** address the complex factors that contribute to violence by decreasing underlying risk factors and increasing resilience factors.

*“You basically have to organize that neighborhood with all the public resources, as well as private sector and civic sector and faith-based sector resources to do a wrap-around strategy where every kid in that neighborhood is programmed 24/7 a day with the theory that they don’t get our kids. The [gangs] do not get a single other one of our kids. We get them.”*

**Communication:** conveys and shapes public understanding and knowledge of preventing violence.

*“It is also going to take a public campaign. We’re going to need a million-dollar campaign to have to break the norm of violence...first, we’ve got to come up with an accessible name for the public health approach to violence.”*

**Training & Capacity Building:** Practitioners, service providers, program and agency directors and elected officials need skills to prevent violence.

*“People do not understand what a public health model means. They do not understand the huge cosmic gap between what we do right now and what’s needed for this comprehensive wrap-around neighborhood-based public health strategy to work.”*

## HOW? can we maximize & sustain efforts to prevent violence before it occurs?

### STRATEGY

**Strategic Plans:** A strategic plan offers a framework of strategies and policies for preventing violence and clarifies what prioritized actions will be taken.

*“You have to completely reorganize how you do business. You cannot sit in your gilded cubicles and write memos to one another. You actually have to work with each other and [with] the community [and work] in the community.’ So our report requires a revolutionary transformation in how the government operates.”*

**Data & Evaluation:** can inform good strategic planning and implementation by identifying existing assets and resources as well as gaps in services and emerging needs.

*“...Document the results in a way that can be evaluated, professionally evaluated...That’s what we’re in the process of doing.”*

**Funding:** Pooled resources that are sustained and directed towards preventing violence

*“If you were to take public money and private sector money that is being spent now and dissipated without any impact, and instead if you focus it through this model, the cost is about \$35-\$40million. This is a political will problem.”*