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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

COMMONWEALTH *of* PENNSYLVANIA

***House Democratic Policy Committee Hearing***

Youth Violence Intervention and Prevention  
Tuesday, August 23, 2022 | 10:00a.m. – 12:00p.m.  
Pennsylvania Legislative Black Caucus

- |            |  |
|------------|--|
| 10:00 a.m. | Opening Remarks Rep. Donna Bullock, Chair<br><i>PA Legislative Black Caucus</i>  |
| 10:10 a.m. | Bishop Dwayne Brock, CEO<br><i>Eagles Nest Leadership Development Corporation</i><br><i>Q &amp; A with Legislators</i> |
| 10:35 a.m. | Josh Fleitman, Western PA Manager<br><i>CeaseFire PA</i><br><i>Q &amp; A with Legislators</i>                          |
| 11:00 a.m. | Michael Outlaw, Community Liaison<br><i>City of Erie</i><br><i>Q &amp; A with Legislators</i>                          |
| 11:35 a.m. | Pastor Darrell K. Cook<br><i>Christ Community Church, Erie</i><br><i>Q &amp; A with Legislators</i>                    |
| 11:50 a.m. | Closing remarks Rep. Donna Bullock, Chair  |



# CEASEFIREPA

## EDUCATION FUND

### TESTIMONY FOR YOUTH VIOLENCE INTERVENTION & PREVENTION POLICY HEARING – ERIE, PA

August 23, 2022  
Josh Fleitman  
CeaseFirePA

Good morning members of the PA Black Legislative Caucus, the PA House Democratic Policy Committee, and the Erie County Black Democratic Caucus. My name is Josh Fleitman. I'm the Western Pennsylvania Manager for CeaseFirePA Education Fund, the Commonwealth's leading gun violence prevention advocacy organization. It is an honor and privilege to be here with you today to share some of my suggestions on how you as policymakers can help to prevent youth violence, which we know has sharply risen across Pennsylvania with devastating consequences.

From young people getting caught in the crossfire, such as the recent tragic killings of *seven-year-old* Antonio Yarger, Jr here in Erie and *18-month-old* De'Avry Thomas in Pittsburgh, where I live, to young people themselves picking up guns and using them against other youth as a way to solve problems – we are experiencing a crisis of youth violence that is traumatizing and draining the lifeblood from an entire generation and tearing at the fabric of communities across our Commonwealth. We recently polled 400 at-risk youth in Allegheny County, and the results provide hard data to confirm this. Among the survey's most concerning findings ([detailed fully here](#)):

- **57% have lost a family member to gun violence.**
- **Almost half – 46% – have personally witnessed gun violence** at least once. Of that group, 22% have witnessed gun violence *4 or more times*.
- **86% are concerned that gun violence will impact them and their family's health and safety.**
- **84% feel that *nothing at all* or *only a little* is being done to address the violence** in their neighborhood, school, or classroom.

Something has to be done. Fortunately, we know that specific policies and investments can be effective at reducing youth violence.

My policy recommendations fit broadly into two categories:

1. First, policies to make it harder for guns to get into the hands of people who intend to cause harm, including youth, most notably by addressing the sources of illegal firearms in our communities;
2. And second, investments to address the root causes of gun violence.

On the first topic of illegal firearms:

It is important to understand that yes, firearms that are already illegally possessed under state law are fueling much of the youth violence in Pennsylvania. But these illegal guns simply do not sprout out of the ground. Most guns in circulation were purchased legally, then through a particular process, became possessed illegally.

Legislation and law enforcement should focus on interrupting those processes by which *legal* firearms fall into the hands of people who want to hurt others, including youth in our community.

One major mechanism here is weapons that are lost or stolen by irresponsible gun owners, or weapons that are claimed to be lost or stolen by gun traffickers. This includes straw purchasers – people who can legally purchase firearms but do so for people who are legally *prohibited* from purchasing firearms – which is a crime.

Currently in Pennsylvania, there is no requirement for firearm owners to report to law enforcement when their weapon is lost or stolen. This happens more than one may think – on average, 21 guns go missing *every single day* in *Pennsylvania alone*.

Lost and stolen guns appeal to those who cannot pass a background check, including youth who by virtue of their age are legally prohibited from purchasing firearms. These guns are also appealing to those who wish to commit violence due to the difficulty that law enforcement has in tracking and tracing them.

A [2016 study](#) found that nearly a third of guns recovered at Pittsburgh crime scenes were said to have been stolen. When law enforcement approaches the individuals to whom these guns are linked, they often claim that the gun was stolen and they never reported it – a convenient and consequence-free excuse under current state law, which gives gun traffickers and straw purchasers a free pass.

**There's a simple solution: legislation requiring the reporting of lost and stolen firearms within 72 hours of noticing it's missing.** This will help staunch the flow of these illegal guns that fuel a significant portion of youth and community-based violence. **House Bill 980 and**

**Senate Bill 217** will encourage responsible gun owning behavior, help hold irresponsible gun owners and straw purchasers accountable, and will provide more data and information to law enforcement, helping them to better identify patterns of gun trafficking and interrupt illegal gun trafficking networks. [One study](#) revealed these laws reduce the movement of illegal guns by 46%.

I urge each of you to co-sponsor this legislation and to put pressure on leadership to allow a vote. We've heard strong support from both sides of the aisle for reducing the flow of illegal guns. This is a place where I believe bipartisan consensus already exists and we can see tangible policy progress that will make Pennsylvanians safer.

**The second major mechanism by which *legal* guns become *illegal* is a relatively small number of rogue gun dealers knowingly flouting the law or recklessly neglecting their due diligence, resulting in their weapons being used in crime and violence.**

A [report recently released by Brady](#), a national gun violence prevention organization, uncovered trends in crime gun trace data. The report used Pennsylvania's Gun Tracing Analytics Platform and the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives' (ATF) listing of Federal Firearm Licensees, or "FFLs" – individuals or entities registered to sell firearms. The full Gun Tracing Analytics database used in this report includes 186,000 gun trace records in Pennsylvania ranging from 1977 to 2020.

The report found a small number of gun stores are responsible for the vast majority of crime guns in Pennsylvania. Something about the way that these dealers operate their business is making them popular among criminals and those who seek to divert deadly weapons underground and into the hands of youth.

Gun dealers failing to complete the necessary paperwork, such as not confirming an ID match or not tracking and reporting the purchase of multiple gun sales simultaneously, has been shown to likely account for these trends.

The ATF is the sole federal agency responsible for inspecting FFLs to ensure compliance with these legal requirements that are designed to address gun trafficking. Reports have consistently documented that the ATF falls short in this inspection regime – in part due to budgetary and staffing shortages, but also because of a lack of prioritization and stability within ATF leadership.

Fortunately, that is changing, with the recent U.S. Senate confirmation of ATF Director Steve Dettelbach. **I encourage you to send correspondence to Director Dettelbach urging him to prioritize inspection of gun dealers in Pennsylvania to ensure compliance with existing laws designed to prevent straw purchasing and illegal sales, and to not hesitate to use ATF's**

**authority to revoke licenses from FFLs who flout the law and contribute to the crime gun problem.**

There are a few other pieces of relevant legislation that I urge each of you to co-sponsor and to put pressure on leadership to allow votes to take place:

The age to legally purchase a handgun in Pennsylvania is rightly 21. But the minimum age to purchase a long-gun is only 18. While handguns are predominantly used in community-level violence involving youth, **there is no reason that we should allow 18, 19, and 20 year-olds to legally purchase weapons of war that are being increasingly used in youth violence**, such as at a mass shooting at an AirBnB party full of teenagers in Pittsburgh this past April. **House Bill 717 and Senate Bill 1307 would raise the age for all gun sales to 21.**

Additionally, **a gap in Pennsylvania's otherwise-strong background check system allows these 18, 19, and 20 year-olds to purchase long-guns from private sellers without having to go through any background check whatsoever.** Purchasing these same weapons from licensed dealers *does* require a background check. **House Bill 235 and Senate Bill 88 would close this gap.**

Another way that youth can access the firearms used in violence is from the adults in their homes who fail to securely store the weapons. Approximately 5 million minors in the U.S. live in homes with at least one loaded, unlocked firearm. These guns can and are used in crime, but also in youth suicides and unintentional shootings. **Legislation to require that firearms be safely stored in the home when not in use has been shown to help keep guns out of the hands of kids.** Twenty-seven states have such laws – Pennsylvania is not one of them. **House Bill 699 and Senate Bill 581 would change that.**

Finally, as it relates to legislation: **Pennsylvania has a very strong firearm preemption law, meaning that local governments by and large are prohibited from enacting their own gun violence prevention ordinances.** While statewide gun safety laws would be most effective, if the legislature is unwilling to pass some of the previously-described policies into law, they should take the handcuffs off of local governments and allow them to protect their residents. **House Bill 1538 would remove this preemption language from state law and empower local governments to take action.**

The second category of my policy recommendations centers around sustained and targeted investments in programs that prevent and intervene in gun violence by addressing its social, emotional, and economic root causes.

I applaud the General Assembly for passing a fiscal year 2023 budget that includes a historic \$105 million in funding for violence prevention and intervention distributed by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) as competitive grants to community-based and non-profit organizations, municipalities, counties, District Attorney's offices, and institutions of higher education.

This type of funding is a vital investment in gun violence prevention. Some examples of the programs funded by this grant program include:

- Community-based programs that use credible messengers to identify potential violence and intervene before it occurs through targeted engagement. These programs have reduced violence by up to [73%](#) in targeted areas of Atlanta and Milwaukee
- Workforce development that is paired with support systems to provide alternative methods of conflict resolution such as READI (Rapid Employment and Development Initiative). A recent study by The University of Chicago Crime Lab found that READI participants saw [63% fewer arrests and were 19% less likely to be shot or killed](#) compared to a similar group of men that were not in the program. Targeted workforce efforts in Reading, Allegheny County and Temple have received state funding.
- Group Violence Intervention programs that partner law enforcement with community organizations to use a “carrot and stick” approach to engage individuals at high risk for being involved in shootings. In the City of Chester, this strategy has reduced gun homicides by up to [44%](#). Such efforts in York, Reading, Bucks County, and Harrisburg received funding last year.
- Hospital-based, trauma-informed care that supports victims of violence as they recover by providing services to them and the community, halting the spread of violence. Lehigh Valley Hospital and Children's Hospital of Philadelphia were funded last year by PCCD.

There are two key components to the success of these government grant programs: sustained, significant resources and targeting the programs to those most likely to be involved in gun violence.

By and large, PCCD does a good job of weighing the merits of each application and targeting grant support to those programs most likely to be effective at reducing gun violence. So at this time I am not recommending legislation to alter the program itself.

Rather, the sustained availability of this funding is my primary policy concern for future fiscal year budgets. **We must maintain a \$100 million annual appropriation for violence prevention over the next few years to ensure stability in these programs. We must also recognize the need to increase the level of state funds appropriated next year, due to the**

**fact that \$75 million of the \$105 million in this year's violence prevention budget was one-time federal American Rescue Plan dollars.**

**An analysis of other state violence prevention programs found that a steady investment of \$80,000 per homicide can reduce aggravated assault and homicides by 30% – and that doesn't account for recent levels of inflation or other impacts on costs. However, in order to achieve that, we estimate that state funding for community violence prevention must be sustained at \$400 million over five years. So far, over Fiscal years 2022 and 2023, Pennsylvania has seen \$150 million in state investment – an excellent start.**

I urge you to continue to serve as advocates for this funding with your colleagues and to engage the organizations in and around your districts who receive this funding to learn more about how their efforts reduce violence. CeaseFirePA is always willing and able to help make those connections.

I would like to close with this simple message: gun violence is a solvable problem, and its continued escalation is in many ways a policy and political choice. Despite talking points that you may hear from pro-gun organizations, study after study shows that the states with stronger gun laws have less gun violence. A growing body of research shows that investing in evidence-based community violence prevention programs is an effective way to reduce violence. I urge you to do whatever it takes to enact these lifesaving policies. Your constituents and all Pennsylvanians are counting on you.

Thank you for your consideration of my testimony. My contact information is below and I am happy to answer any questions and provide additional resources and support as we all work together to make a safer Pennsylvania.

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Submission of testimony regarding the prevention and reduction of youth violence in Erie  
Gary Horton, CEO, Urban Erie CDC  
President, Erie NAACP

The CDC says that some youth are at greater risk than others. "Black or African American youth and young adults are at higher risk for the most physically harmful forms of violence (homicides, fights with injuries, aggravated assaults) The CDC also tells us this: homicide is the third leading cause of death among persons age 10-24. An average of 12 young people in the age group are killed every day in this country, most with guns. Local data, reported by the students themselves to in-school surveys, tells us our kids are short on protective factors and high on risk factors.

Some of the most troubling issues for our youth include violence, bullying, and low educational achievement. Middle school and high school youth report higher levels of bullying than the state average, particularly in physical and verbal abuse (Pennsylvania Youth Survey/PAYS). The things we hear at Urban Erie suggest that New Americans face higher levels of bullying than their peers, frequently being told "go back to where they came from" and are harassed in the hallways, on the bus, and in their neighborhood. Youth in Erie show signs of poor school and community engagement because they see too few opportunities or rewards for pro-social involvement and are negatively affected by family and community disorganization factors. (PAYS).

As many people have been hearing me say locally, all kids aren't bad. I brought 80 students to City Council to say that and to let them show the community that a large group of diverse teens know how to sit in a public meeting, be quiet and respectful - and to use their voice to ask for the funding the programs like the ones we offer at Urban Erie and four other cultural affinity sites need to serve youth. Regular interaction with caring adults outside the home, good role models, mentoring, civic engagement, community service - these are some of the pro-active things we can do that serve to reduce the risk that young people will be victims or perpetrators of violence. Waiting until a young person commits a crime and making an example of them is reactive, not preventive.

I'm going to briefly talk about three programs we offer. For 30 years, I have been taking students on a five day bus trip - a modern day freedom ride - from Erie to Selma, Birmingham, Montgomery and Tuskegee Alabama, Atlanta, Georgia and Washington DC. We visit major cultural and civil rights history sites, including the 16th Street Baptist Church, the Birmingham National Civil Rights Museum, the National Memorial to Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum in Birmingham. We explore Moton Field in Tuskegee, tour HBCUs, and walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

This trip, Walking in Black History, is Erie's premier experiential learning program for youth. Why is it special? The Walking in Black History trip is a truly a unique way to emphasize moral and ethical values especially among our city's youth. WIBH represents an effort to use the life and philosophy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement to teach tolerance, respect, and understanding among youth and adults alike. The negative influences of violence, drugs, crime, and anti-social behavior are all addressed by supporting a positive sense of identity, demonstrating the value of education, and learning tools for non-violent conflict resolution.

UECDC envisions a change in community and school climate where young people can learn and participate in an open environment free from violence, discrimination, and hatred. Instead of a criminal

justice approach that poses a reactive solution to student behavior, this program seeks to reduce antisocial behavior and address intolerance through culturally responsive experiential learning.

WIBH is designed to raise awareness of African American accomplishments and inspire youth to rise above obstacles facing them in their daily life. Students learn non-violent alternatives to problems facing youth today and promote appreciation for important figures in Civil Rights history.

Also importantly, this program offers a unique experience to New American children who comprise a growing population in Erie, oftentimes not as familiar with Civil Rights history as American students. They also experience bullying at school and are ostracized by other students. More than 70% of the students attending youth programs at UECD are New Americans from African, Middle Eastern, and Central Asian countries. WIBH represents an opportunity both for learning and for breaking down cultural barriers.

UECD serves these students in additional out-of-school time programs. We have after school and summer programming at our center and four cultural affinity sites. We hire multicultural and multilingual staff to supervise these programs because representation and cultural responsiveness matters. We serve Pre-K to 12th grade students with educational, cultural, special interest and workforce development programs. UECD also supports educational achievement for the whole family with adult GED and ESL classes.

In the interest of time, the last program I will go into in more detail is our teen summer work experience program. We have used a variety of funding sources to provide a paid work program for teens for at least a decade. Some programs, like the Summer Jams and TANF are a heavy paperwork burden when looking to put 50-100 kids to work. With Erie School District funding, we streamlined our hiring and training program this summer and have now hired more than 120 teens. These students put in some hard work - cleaning up hundreds of bags of trash from the neighborhood, cutting the grass and trimming around a 19 acre property that's on its way to becoming a hub of green employment, and mowing for people in the neighborhood.

They also have participated in public meetings, visited with community leaders, learned about financial literacy and opened bank accounts, and enrolled in both college prep and coding programs. Some served as program aides in our Pre-K-grade 5 summer learning program. The cost of just payroll for this work program will exceed \$150,000 - and will go higher as I hope to offer a few hours a week for some of these kids through the fall and winter after school. To prevent violence in our community, we need to be pro-active, pro-education and learning, and pro-positive parent engagement. We need to support the expansion of programs and services that are proven to increase protective factors, and reduce risk factors. That requires funding.

Being reactive and solely law enforcement oriented isn't effective. Erasing history, taking books off the shelves, and going backwards on civil rights and bodily autonomy also not only isn't going to be effective, it will actively harm our youth and our communities.

Testimony offered on August 23rd, Erie, PA