

## **Testimony of Constance L. Rice**

**Before the House Sub-Committee on Crime, Terrorism and Homeland Security**

**July 25, 2012**

### **How Holistic Collaboration and Comprehensive Strategies Are Transforming Los Angeles' Gang Epidemic**

I am a civil rights lawyer who for 30 years has been fighting for our poorest children to enjoy the basic right of safety. All children should, at minimum, be able to walk to and from school, play in a park and walk to the corner store without fear of getting shot or being accosted by thugs. In my view, the first of all civil rights is the right to safety and the first of all freedoms is freedom from violence. In short, without public safety there are no civil rights.

#### **The Los Angeles Context for Gang Hot Spots**

Since 1980, residents trapped in Los Angeles county's gang hot zones have suffered 7,000 gang murders, 50 police officer deaths, at least 16 gang intervention deaths and an estimated 100,000 people shot. L.A.'s violent gang crime costs California taxpayers more than \$2 billion every year, with each gang murder costing \$1 million dollars in direct costs and up to \$16 million in indirect costs. After 35 years of fighting a \$25 billion 'war on gangs', the County of Los Angeles found itself in the year 2005 with six times as many gangs, twice as many gang members, a gang violence epidemic, high gang homicide rates, and a legacy of hostility between police and residents of high crime zones.

By 2005, despite sustained declines in non-gang crime, L.A.'s gang crime and its youth gang homicide rate stayed stuck at epidemic levels. The 35 year 'war on gangs' had left Los Angeles county as the violent gang capital of the nation with over 100,000 gang members and 1,000 gangs, half of which operated in the city of Los Angeles. A former World Health Organization epidemiologist who studies violence as a disease, concluded that, in the city's gang hot spots, "Los Angeles is to violence what Bangladesh is to diarrhea, which means the crisis is at a dire level requiring a massive response." Worse, a criminologist for the California Attorney General's office concluded that the Petri dishes of L.A.'s high crime neighborhoods had spawned "a violent gang culture unlike any other...." —and L.A. was exporting it across the country.

By 2012, however, the city of Los Angeles had a much better story to tell. The city had achieved significant drops in gang crime, the first declines in gang homicides and the end of the

youth gang homicide epidemic that had raged since 1985. And by summer of 2012, as Chicago posted a 33% increase in gang homicides and Boston and Philadelphia struggled with increasing violence, L.A.'s gang homicides continued to drop, prevention programs had demonstrated a 35% reduction in gang affiliation, and in the city's Summer Night Lights parks, gang homicides plummeted an astonishing 57%.

What changed?

**The Report: *A Call to Action: The Case for Comprehensive Solutions to Los Angeles' Gang Violence Epidemic***

In 2007 the Los Angeles City Council's Ad Hoc Committee on Gang Violence and Youth Development commissioned the Advancement Project to explain why the city's gang reduction efforts had reduced neither gangs nor gang violence. In January 2007, we issued our one thousand page report, *A Call to Action: The Case for A Comprehensive Solution to Los Angeles' Gang Violence Epidemic*. The report, conducted with over thirty experts in areas ranging from the epidemiology of violence and gang anthropology to mental health and law enforcement, explained that the 'war on gangs' was the wrong paradigm to reduce gang violence, culture and crime. While police suppression would always play a prime role, suppression alone could not dent L.A.'s gang epidemic, and untargeted saturation- suppression ('war') had increased street gang cohesion and coincided with gang expansion and alienation of residents in gang neighborhoods.

One expert analogized solely arresting gang members to swatting mosquitoes in order to fight a malaria epidemic. By arresting one gang member at a time, L.A. was swatting mosquitoes—and doing too little to blunt the spread of the gang mentality, ideology or culture.

In short, the report concluded that Los Angeles could not arrest its way out of an entrenched gang culture. L.A. police would always need to remove violent criminals, but by stopping there, we were leaving over 850,000 innocent kids in Los Angeles County gang hot spots, 90% of whom have been exposed to felony violence, and a third of whom suffer from civil war levels of post traumatic stress. The report recommended to the City that it focus its resources in gang hot zones and switch from ad hoc suppression to holistic collaboration aimed at fixing the root causes of the gang epidemic. Instead of 'war', the city needed data driven strategies that reduced youth attraction to gang life, prevented gang joining, and aligned law enforcement and other agencies with the comprehensive public health approach.

Upon its release in January 2007, the Los Angeles Daily News hailed *A Call to Action* as "A Marshall Plan for Gangs," and LAPD Chief Bratton later cited it as the catalyst "...that changed how the city of Los Angeles deals with gangs."

## The Comprehensive Violence Reduction Model

The comprehensive violence reduction model requires a centrally directed, adequately funded, network-based and relationship-based strategy that forges cooperation and aligns missions across sectors, disciplines, agencies, institutions and individuals. Through the networks and coordinated programs, agencies, advocates, police, families, schools and faith based organizations jointly forge neighborhood-based and family-based strategies to reduce violence, keep kids safe, create alternatives to gangs and change norms. The comprehensive model's theory of change is that dislodging an entrenched epidemic of gang culture cannot be done by arresting one gang member at a time or rescuing one child at a time. It requires an 'all hands on deck' collaboration that is centrally coordinated to carry out neighborhood strategies that bring help to families trapped in gang zones.

Hallmarks of the city of Los Angeles' comprehensive "wrap around" approach are as follows:

- Mayoral/Executive leadership that strongly insists on focusing funding on gang hot zones; that is willing to run the office responsible for executing comprehensive strategies; that accepts the uncertainty inherent to the experimentation needed to find out what works; that insists on police department cooperation; and that accepts the high risks inherent to effective gang intervention. *(In L.A., Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa accepted responsibility for a new office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD), launched the only city-funded gang intervention academy, insisted on LAPD cooperation, and refused to cut GRYD funding during budget wars.)*
- Law enforcement leadership that aggressively seeks to increase trust between police and communities. *(In L.A., LAPD Chief William Bratton insisted on "high road" and "public trust policing" and current LAPD Chief Charlie Beck has created the first community policing unit that will promote officers based on how they helped families keep kids from being arrested.)*
- Law enforcement leadership that is willing to pull back counterproductive and overly aggressive suppression; that supports and works closely with Mayor GRYP staff; that works in tandem with professional gang intervention. *(In L.A., Chief Bratton, Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca and LAPD Chief Charlie Beck strongly backed the Call to Action mandate to bolster suppression with comprehensive community strategies, enthusiastically support working with professional gang intervention, and continue to be key partners in carrying out the comprehensive strategy.)*

- Establishment of a single accountability structure under the Mayor's GRYD Office that has sufficient political insulation to take risks, and sufficient clout to command cooperation from disparate departments and sectors. GRYD requires a creative, politically skilled director and non-bureaucratic staff who are mission-driven. *(In L.A., the five year old Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development operates out of the Mayor's office, is headed by Deputy Mayor Guillermo Cespedes and has achieved remarkable milestones in establishing L.A. city's comprehensive footprint —see attached data for GYRD Milestones)* GRYD Zones are established only in high gang violence, high need areas to focus resources where the violence and need is greatest. Each of the 12 GRYD zones receive city resources that support year-round prevention and intervention programs as well as have Summer Night Light parks located inside the zones.
- Data-driven operations and trial programs that synthesize the best research, examine results, use sensible evaluation and change course to pursue what works.
- GRYD Office success with the Summer Night Lights safe parks program has been key to building the political support necessary to weather the risks taken to reduce gang violence: *(In L.A., crime reductions in GRYD zones outpaced reductions in comparable non-GRYD areas of the county and city).*
- GRYD coordination of multiple agencies, advocates and neighborhood leaders, to carry out strategic suppression, prevention, intervention, re-entry, and community investment.
- Family-based prevention strategies. GRYD is pioneering a family health and treatment regimen designed to reduce gang risk factors. Outside evaluators have already documented decreases in participants' antisocial behavior including a 47.3% reduction in gang fights and 48% decrease in gang activity.
- Professional gang intervention based on the social networking model of intervention and has the backing of law enforcement as an independent resource in a comprehensive violence reduction strategy
- Gang intervention training to enhance the professionalism of intervention workers, done in a city-funded intervention training academy: the LAVITA (Los Angeles Violence Intervention Training Academy) Academy is conducted for GRYD by the Advancement Project's Urban Peace Academy.

- Philanthropic, business, faith-based and academic support for the Summer Night Lights safe parks program, a successful public-private partnership with one half of the \$6 million annual budget being contributed by philanthropy.
- Relationship-based networks that enact congruent programs driven by the same theory of change.
- Sustainable community policing that is backed by departmental leadership and by incentive structures that reward problem solving policing. LAPD, in agreement with the Housing Authority of City of Los Angeles (HACLA) established its first unit of problem solving police officers through its Community Safety Partnership (CSP). These 45 officers are deployed to four housing developments for 5 years, and will be rewarded for developing relationships and innovative community driven solutions to achieve safety. For the first time LAPD officers will be promoted for demonstrating how they *avoided* arresting a kid. In the first six months of deploying these officers, their areas of Watts saw a 43% drop in crime and a notable retreat of gang activity.

### **The Office of Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD)**

The GRYD Office, headed by Deputy Mayor Guillermo Cespedes, was established five years ago in response to the *Call to Action* recommendation to create a single accountability structure responsible for implementing and coordinating comprehensive violence reduction, intervention and prevention. It has approximately 40 staff who carry out the family treatment prevention program, oversee street gang intervention, develop re-entry strategies, make Summer Night Lights happen and engage law enforcement. Deputy Mayor Cespedes would say that GRYD is just getting starting, but the office has documented the following milestones:

#### **GRYD Prevention**

In 2011, outside evaluator Urban Institute documented for the 10 to 14 year old program participants:

- 23% decrease in antisocial behavior
- 29% decrease in lack of parental supervision
- 35% decrease in critical life events
- 47.3% decrease in gang fights
- 35% decrease in hanging out with gang members
- 48% decrease in participation in gang activity

### **GRYD Summer Night Lights Safe Parks Program**

The Summer Night Lights (SNL) program keeps parks in gang zones open at night, offering neighborhood families food, sports, music, games and a chance for neighborhoods to keep kids safe. SNL is the most publicly recognized activity of the GRYD office and has been noted as a remarkable success. Between 2008 and 2011 the SNL program had produced significantly higher reductions in crime even compared to comparable county parks with similar programs:

- 55% reduction in shots fired
- 43% reduction in aggravated assaults
- Served over a million meals
- Served 1.8 million visitors
- Created over 3,000 job
- 11 times higher drop in gang crime compared to county park programs

### **Conclusion**

Aggressive law enforcement to counter gang crime will always be necessary, but entrenched gang violence and culture cannot be addressed by suppression alone. In areas like Los Angeles that have epidemic levels of gang crime and violence, it is also necessary to launch comprehensive, wrap-around strategies described in this presentation.

LA still wrestles with serious gang threats in its gang hot spots, but 2012 also marks the ninth year of significant citywide drops in non-gang crime, the fifth year of significant reductions in gang crime, and continued success in the Office Gang Reduction and Youth Development's prevention, intervention, re-entry and Summer Night Lights programs. Indeed, through this collaborative model, Los Angeles' current crime rates have declined to levels last seen in 1952. This progress, while partial, is clearly due to the city of L.A.'s decision to move away from a 'war on gangs' and move to adopt the comprehensive violence reduction paradigm.