



Spring Public Meeting—April 2019

Introduction

On April 25, 2019, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC) convened a public meeting at Anacostia High School to continue a series of solution-focused discussions intended to reduce gun violence. The meeting occurred with a capacity audience in the school's Media Center. The discussion explored the theme, *I Am the Solution – Creating the New Normal: A Community Conversation on Gun Violence*. The youth-focused conversation explored youth perspectives and recommendations to reduce violence.



CJCC Executive Director, Mannone Butler, and school principal William Haith delivered welcoming remarks. Director Butler emphasized that solutions to the dilemma

of gun violence are not rooted solely in governmental responses, but more so in collective community efforts. She stressed that ongoing gun violence reduction efforts are intended to achieve a new normal in thinking about and responding to issues associated with gun crimes.

Principal Haith highlighted school achievements, including winning the District's mock trials competition. He also challenged everyone to report their positive observations that Anacostia High School is a safe and healthy environment where students can learn and achieve. Principal Haith described how his students confront daily life challenges, including how to avoid the threats presented by guns. Finally, Principal Haith stressed the importance of Anacostia residents sharing their stories firsthand.



More than 100 persons attended and participated in the meeting. Program attendees and participants included CJCC partners, community members, community-based organizations, and youth student leaders.

Panel Discussion

Panelists

Councilmember Trayon White (Ward 8) moderated the panel discussion focusing on concrete ways to address gun violence. Panel members included: Troye Bullock, Good Projects; Samantha Cockrell, Anacostia youth representative; J'TA Freeman, Marion Barry Youth Leadership Initiative; Mikuak Rai, One Community Unity; Paul Taylor, Department of Corrections; Kaitlin Towles, Voice of the Youth Foundation; and Ronald Whaley, National Association for the Advancement of Returning Citizens and Cure the Streets (NAARC).



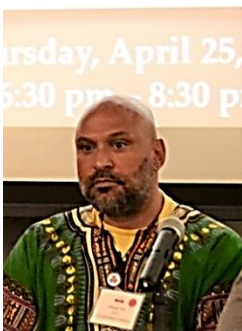
Councilmember White thanked Principal Haith for hosting the meeting at the high school. He underscored the importance of listening to the voices and ideas of young people and affirmed that they represent hope for changing attitudes and behavior related to violence. The Councilmember commented that “bad things happen when good people do nothing.” He emphasized that solutions to violence must be rooted in the communities affected. He introduced the panelists and asked them to share their background and efforts to reduce crimes.

Mr. Taylor, aka Big South, commented that he returned to the community from incarceration 14 years ago and committed himself to community engagement activities. He started a nonprofit organization and directed his staff to return to their communities and serve as examples of commitment, encouragement, hope, and resilience.



Troye Bullock, co-founder of Good Projects, explained that he grew up just outside of the District of Columbia, in Suitland, MD, but started a summer camp at Anacostia High School that continues to exist. He currently serves as a Credible Messenger for the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (DYRS) and provides mentoring and support services to youth.

Ronald Whaley works with the Cure the Streets initiative. He is a returned citizen and founded NAARC in 2000. He grew up in Southeast and perpetrated gun violence, was shot 14 times and was incarcerated for 10 years and returned in 2017. His motto is “save one, so they can save one.”



Mikuak Rai is a cofounder of One Common Unity (OCU). He started the organization in the aftermath of a tragic double murder. OCU utilizes the arts to encourage youth to tap into their creative instincts and share them with others. OCU reaches out to youth in the places where they are educationally, emotionally, experientially, and socially. The philosophy of OCU is to promote the perspectives of youth and create a pathway for them to participate in solutions and provide enlightenment about collective and collaborative approaches that can spark attitudinal and behavioral change. OCU administers programs in nine junior high schools and six high schools. The organization subscribes to a philosophy of “intention not detention,” and they employ mindfulness techniques and approaches in their workshops and collaborative projects.

Kaitlin Towles started Voice of the Youth Foundation in response to the death of her closest friend. She stressed the importance of youth connecting with each other, because it is more likely they will listen to each other as opposed to older adults. She commented that she lives in constant fear when she is not at home or travels to school.



J'TA Freeman is the District's co-youth mayor and participates in the Marion Barry Youth Leadership Initiative. She supports efforts to reduce gun violence and enact gun legislation. Ms. Freeman lost various family members to gun violence. She expressed concern that her little brother could potentially be victimized by gun violence. She stated, "If I do not fight for myself, I fight for him and the youth."

Samantha Cockrell, a sophomore at Anacostia High School, and a member of the Public Safety Academy, expressed her commitment to public safety initiatives and her desire to be a change agent for a brighter and safer future for youth.



Panel Discussion

Councilmember White asked the panelists a series of questions designed to elicit community-inspired proposals and recommendations to reduce violence. His first question was, "How does gun violence affect you and what can we do?"

Troye Bullock commented that gun violence keeps him up all night and that it affects everything he does, as well as the kids he mentors. He mentioned that he received an erroneous call regarding a friend who was killed. He relayed that he was distraught about the news and was relieved to learn the information was false.

Ronald Whaley provided a personal account. The District's 38th homicide victim in 2019, Eric Weaver, Jr., was the son of his friend, Eric Weaver, Sr.. Ronald believes that young people mirror what they see in their environment. Fundamentally, youth committing violent crimes are fearful too, and officials and community members should engage youth because that is what they want and need.

Councilmember White prefaced his second question with a cautionary statement, "There are leaders in this room, but a house divided will never stand. After this is over, how do you suggest people work to collaborate and solve this?"

J'TA Freeman said that the conversation cannot stop here. She added that people get shot, and community and individual emotions run deep, but that in a week or month, heartbroken family members and friends return to their normal routines. She stressed that everyone must resolve to hold public officials and community members responsible for the crimes and violence that occur across District communities.

Mikuak Rai responded that it is critical to establish unity among the organizations and leaders present at the meeting. He emphasized that District communities must own the narrative. He shared his position that the media amplifies negative stories, but it does not represent what is best for the community. Mr. Rai mentioned it is critical to employ alternative strategies that can create a different pathway to change.



Paul Taylor commented that he teaches his clients at the Department of Corrections how to use cognitive thinking as an effective tool for personal development and success. He offered that the source of many problems for system-involved clients is that they make poor decisions with profound and negative consequences. Mr. Taylor emphasized the importance of creating stability in the home and instilling positive self-esteem in young people. He mentioned it is critical to demonstrate ongoing sincerity and consistency when working with youth.

Finally, Councilmember White offered a scenario for consideration and response by the panel. The scenario involved a young man living near Anacostia. He mentioned that he goes to school, gets jumped on his way home and starts carrying a gun. The Councilmember inquired how to go about saving the young man's life, changing his social trajectory, and offering interventions.

J'TA Freeman commented that "hurt people hurt people" and that he carries a weapon because he was hurt. She explained that at times in her life, while attending different schools, she acted out and had personal problems. She said that instead of administrators and teachers inquiring about her welfare, they shunned and reprimanded her. J'TA recommended that adults, mentors, care providers, etc. demonstrate to youth that they support them, and that they will be their confidants. She stated that ultimately, the mentality of youth must be transformed to a different way of thinking and responding to life challenges. J'TA elaborated that youth require assistance in that regard, and that is the role adults must fulfill.



Ronald Whaley responded that social media perpetuates acts of violence, because young people film other youth being jumped or bullied, and Instagram viewers indicate likes or dislikes. He recommended that organizations step in to provide programming and supports that serve as an alternative to the norms to which youth are currently accustomed. Mr. Whaley indicated that in the absence of alternative realities for District youth, they will succumb to the streets-to-prison pipeline.

Troye Bullock recommended that an appropriate response to the scenario should involve determining who attacked him and find out who was involved. Next, designated community members should engage the youth and encourage him to put the gun down, help him address his challenges, and urge him to make better choices.

Councilmember White concluded the panel by acknowledging CJCC partners present, including Councilmember Charles Allen (Ward 6); Avis Buchanan, Director, Public Defender Service (PDS); Leslie Cooper (CJCC Co-Chair), Director, Pretrial Services Agency (PSA); Assistant Chief Robert Contee (MPD); Mannone Butler, Director, CJCC ; Michelle Garcia, Director, Office of Victims Services and Justice Grants (OVSJG); Cedric Hendricks, Associate Director, Court Services Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA); Cheryl Litsey, Bureau of Prisons (BOP); Judge Juliet McKenna, District Superior Court (DCSC); Teri Odom, Director, Court Social Services Division (CSSD); and Barbara Tombs, Director, DC Sentencing Commission.

Director Butler thanked the panel and Councilmember White. She mentioned that the first part of the program has concluded, and the next part of the program would include group work (solution circles) that would result in the formulation of recommendations and action items. She acknowledged the CJCC team and Khali Munir for organizing and executing the public meeting. Director Butler explained the process for group work in the solutions circles discussions. She recommended that groups consider the questions presented and formulate one to three solutions that individuals, community members, and government agencies should be prepared to implement.

Solution Circles Group Discussions



Meeting attendees participated in solution circle group discussions and brainstorming violence reduction strategies. The conversations generated numerous ideas regarding community needs and strategies to reduce violence, including:

- Assisting families to achieve social stability
- Facilitating community outreach year-round
- Providing greater mentorship opportunities
- Stigmatizing violent behavior
- Promoting greater proactive community engagement
- Providing expanded mental health and treatment options



After the group discussions, meeting attendees were polled regarding priorities and approaches in response to three questions (see responses below):

1. Top actions individuals can take to address gun violence?

- Mentoring
 - Building stronger and healthier relationships within families
2. Top actions communities can take to address gun violence?
 - Collaborating with organizations and institutions committed to systemic change
 3. Top actions government can take to address gun violence?
 - Supporting and expanding intervention and prevention efforts
 - Facilitating youth experiential learning opportunities
 - Expanding violence interruption approaches
 - Sponsoring workforce development opportunities
 - Providing support for youth outreach efforts
 - Funding and utilizing community-based wrap-around services
 - Destigmatizing mental illness
 - Supporting community wellness needs (trauma-informed care)
 - Incorporating cognitive thinking and mindfulness in the DCPS curriculum
 - Creating targeted public awareness campaigns

Conclusion



At the end of the program, Director Butler thanked everyone for attending the meeting and actively participating. She committed to continue the conversations and support the movement to decrease gun violence. She thanked Councilmembers Allen and White for their attendance and participation and concluded the meeting.