

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, last week on the night of Martin Luther King Jr. holiday I attended a truly amazing event at the Westside Community Center in Asbury Park, New Jersey.

The city is in my Congressional district and has been plagued in recent months by gang violence. This is a phenomenon shared by many New Jersey municipalities, including my hometown of Long Branch, which recently witnessed several gang members. It has all the outward signs are of a seaside resort that is coming back big time, so why, you might ask the gang violence? Why the murders - one of which took place in front of the Westside Community Center where the Dr. King celebration took place? The plight of the have-nots, the other America, has gotten worse in the last few years.

The event was organized by Kevin Nunn, leader of Spirit of Outreach. Fifteen local clergy testified to the difficulty of young people in getting an education, avoiding drugs and preventing a return to prison because of the lack of economic opportunities. The recreation programs which had been the backbone of the Westside Community Center are at risk because of a lack of funding.

The most important theme I could convey about Monday night's event was the message of hope. Dr. King was the symbol that pervaded the audience as the speakers talked about the need to vote, go to church and unite as a community. Most who spoke give shelter to the homeless, food to the needy and promote economic opportunity. The people present Monday night are proud Americans, but they need help.

They are not looking to the government to solve all their problems, but they believe that government can make a difference and they look to us, as their Representatives, to make the changes necessary so they can continue to have hope.

Mr. Speaker, Senator Bob Menendez and I will soon introduce legislation to address gang violence. Our first goal is to provide after-school programs for students so they have a place to go instead of joining a gang - the type of recreation and mentor programs that were discussed in Asbury Park, for instance.

The second goal is to prevent recidivism, the idea that people who leave jail don't get caught up in a gang once again because they have no job, family or home to return to after jail. The legislation expands adult and juvenile defender projects to help with post-release housing and programs to hire former prisoners.

Last, the legislation addresses better police enforcement and gang suppression initiatives. The legislation will direct more resources to towns to create a new cop's grant program to put more police on the street. Penalties would increase for those convicted of gang crimes; particularly those using fire arms, and communities could create their own task forces.

All of these ideas require more dollars and on the day when President Bush is making his State of the Union Address, I want to make one very serious point about federal resources. We can't continue to escalate the war in Iraq with no positive consensus for America and a continued drain of hundreds of billions of dollars. President Bush needs to redeploy our troops out of Iraq. The money and manpower are not only needed for the fight against terrorism elsewhere - for example, Afghanistan - but at home to fight the criminals on our streets.

The need is for more policemen, housing, health care, education and life supports to make it possible to get rid of the poverty I saw on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in my community of Asbury Park. I yield back the balance of my time.