

**Testimony before the House Judiciary Committee: Subcommittee on Crime,
Terrorism, and Homeland Security
By Robert L. Woodson, Sr.**

February 11, 2009

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the privilege of addressing you today.

The growing threat of youth violence is as menacing to the future of America as any terrorist attack from a foreign enemy. The problem is most severe within the black community where black-on-black murder rates soar, as does the rate of incarceration. In the bombing of the World Trade Center, over three thousand people were killed. Three thousand blacks are killed by other blacks every four months. At that rate, it would have been safer for a young black man getting off a landing barge in Europe during the Second World War than it is getting off a Greyhound bus in most major cities today.

It is ironic that in the depth of the depression--when the black community was in the iron grip of segregation and Jim Crow laws were enforced by both political parties--that the internal social, spiritual and moral centers of influence served as a bulwark against this kind of dysfunction.

Black males are incarcerated at more than six times the rate of white males and Hispanic males more than double the rate. In historical perspective, the astounding 910,000 African Americans incarcerated today are more than nine times the number of 98,000 in 1954, the year of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. At this current rate it has been estimated that with the next decade one in every three black males will have spent some time in prison.

Most of the crime reduction strategies employed today rely upon external remedies that seek to alter the *behavior* of young people through criminal sanctions, professional therapeutic intervention, or social incentives. The approach to crime reduction that is outlined in my testimony relies upon reaching into the life history of the youths themselves and helping them to alter their beliefs, values and attitudes with the goal of improving their behavior. We apply old values to a new vision that helped sustain low-income minority communities through the era of social injustice; we apply them in a way that meets the needs of today's youth.

While we must continue to strengthen and improve the external institutions that are in place to help young people, we cannot solely rely on them to bring about change; we must invest in the internal centers of influence.

Twenty-eight years ago, I founded the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise and over the past twelve years we have pioneered a youth crime reduction program called the "Violence Free Zone" (VFZ) initiative. Young adults are recruited from the same communities experiencing the problems, and they serve as moral mentors and character coaches to other young people. The community organizations that employ and redirect these young people have had some amazing results in reducing violence and bringing about stability to the most violence-plagued communities. The VFZ approach has been successfully implemented in more than 30 public middle and high schools in six demonstration cities throughout the country.

Researchers from Baylor University examined six Milwaukee, Wisconsin public high schools that had the Violence-Free Zone program for the full 2007/2008 school year and compared them pre-and post-VFZ. Three of the schools are large single faculty (Regular VFZ); and three schools have two or more sub-division schools housed on the same campus (Sub-division VFZ).

The research team, headed by Dr. Byron Johnson, Director of the Baylor Program on Prosocial Behavior, conducted in-depth interviews of Milwaukee Public School (MPS) staff, VFZ staff, Milwaukee foundations funding the VFZ program, and others with knowledge of the program. They also analyzed data provided by Milwaukee Public Schools, including Student and Parent Climate Surveys (questions about safety) and MPS data on suspensions, truancies, violent, non-violent incidents, and academic performance.

The researchers concluded that there was an immediate effect of the VFZ initiative on the schools in three areas: improved safety, increased presence of students (reductions in suspensions and truancies) and improved academic performance.

The full report is posted on the Baylor website at www.isreligion.org.

These are the highlights:

- Violent incidents were reduced 32% in the large, single administration schools and reduced 8% where the schools were subdivided into several small schools in the same building. Suspension rates were down 37% in large schools, down 44% in subdivided schools. This compares to an increase of 6% for the overall school system.
- GPAs in the large schools with the VFZ increased by more than 3% and almost 5% in subdivided schools. There was no reported GPA improvement in the schools that did not have the VFZ average.

Impact data collected from some of the other VFZ sites shows the same pattern of improvement and outcomes.

High Schools (Richmond): At the George Wythe High School (GWHS) in Richmond, VA--one of the most troubled schools in the city--Richmond Public Schools data shows that student incidents dropped by 22%; suspensions dropped 3%; expulsions dropped 71%; and drop-outs dropped 17% compared to the same period one year ago.

The Richmond Police Department reports that arrests of students dropped 38%. They also credited the program with reducing some crime in the immediate neighborhood. Motor Vehicle thefts are down 73% (from 64 to 17) in the sector around George Wythe High School. Police Lieutenant Scott C. Booth, has said, "I believe that the youth intervention aspects of the Violence Free Zone at GWHS has impacted Motor Vehicle Theft in Sector 312. With the introduction of the VFZ, kids are staying in school more and less of a negative impact on the adjacent neighborhood."

Middle Schools (Atlanta): In two Atlanta middle schools, results before and after the Violence-Free Zone show the same kind of impact. Fighting was reduced by 29% in one school and 39% in the other. Class disruptions dropped 85% in the first school and 88% in the second.

Gang Activity Dallas): (Gang activity in Dallas' Madison High School made it one of the most violent places in the city until the Violence-Free Zone was introduced there several years ago. Gang activity dropped from 113 violent crimes to ZERO in two years. With the VFZ, the culture in the school was literally changed, and students began to pass it on to new classes as they entered the school. Today, Madison is considered so safe after several years of the VFZ that the principal says the VFZ is no longer needed.

The Source:

The idea and approach for the VFZ initiative was actually formulated outside of the public school environment. I had a great deal of experience studying and working with the House of Umoja in my home town of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania--known in the early '70s as the youth gang capital of America. An enterprising mother and dad, David and Falaka Fattah, discovered that the eldest of their six sons was an active street gang member. The mother, Sister Fattah, invited fifteen of her son's friends to come live with them and worked to help them survive. This unique community-based approach became a national phenomenon three years later when the Fattah's and their extended family brokered a city-wide gang truce that saw the gang murder rate drop from an average of 48 down to just 2, and remained there well into the future.

I authored a book entitled, *A Summons To Life*, that identifies the elements of her informal approach that was so effective in transforming these young people. These principles gleaned from the Fattahs and The House of Umoja are the philosophical and programmatic underpinnings of the Violence Free Zone.

Effective neighborhood leaders share the same zip code as those they help. They operate like healing agents that make up the immune system within the human body. They are indigenous antibodies that heal from the inside out. Police and those from the helping profession industry apply remedies that are parachuted into communities and are rejected as the body responds to a transplant.

Effective neighborhood renewal relies on the following principles:

Parental Role:

Grassroots leaders fulfill the role of a parent, providing not only authority and structure, but also the love that is necessary for the individual to undergo healing, growth and development.

Reciprocity:

The young people are required to give to others in order to be eligible to receive support. Thus, they avoid becoming clients, and they become positive forces in their communities and thereby gain self-respect.

Availability:

Leaders are available 24/7 to those they serve. The young people being mentored are given the cell phone numbers of the helpers.

Long-Term Commitment:

The grassroots leaders make a life-long commitment to those they serve and their service is not determined by the length of a grant or the terms of a contract.

Respect the “Need to Belong:”

Grassroots approaches do not try to destroy youth gangs but provide a healthy ways to fulfill the “needs the gangs provide—status, excitement, power, praise, profit, protection, mentoring and an opportunity for advancement.” (*From Fox Swatt report page 4.*)

Transformation—Not Rehabilitation:

Once young people are transformed from predators to ambassadors of peace and their character changes, their characteristics have a market value that goes far beyond that of simply being a mentor. They are witnesses to others that it is possible to improve one’s life even in a toxic, violent, drug-ridden environment.

Exportability:

Armed with this knowledge, I was able to travel to other cities and successfully identify other grassroots leaders that had the trust and confidence of troubled youth and could influence their behavior.

In 1981, I brought ten such leaders from around the country accompanied by some of the young people they had successfully changed. They met for three days and shared with one another what had changed them from their predatory life styles. From these stories, I wrote my second book-- *Youth Crime and Urban Policy: A View From The Inner City* (The American Enterprise Institute 1981). The conversations and solutions from this conference deepened our understanding of what is required to change young people. We now understood it more from their perspective.

Two years later the city of Philadelphia faced a major crisis as small bands of marauding youth began to attack shoppers, knocking them to the ground ripping off watches, necklaces and taking wallets. Within a short time other copycat crimes occurred that spread like a wild fire. People were attacked on buses, subway trains and at shopping centers. Increased police patrols failed to stop the outbreak. The city was in a virtual lockdown. The press labeled these "wolf pack attacks." Umoja immediately took action. They summoned some of the former older gang leaders called OG's (old gangsters) to seek their assistance. What transpired next was unprecedented.

Accompanied by the staff of the House of Umoja the group met with the leadership within the County Prison to seek their help. One-hundred and thirty-five of these men formed a crime prevention taskforce and collected the names of over one-hundred youth from their various neighborhoods. Umoja arranged to rent school buses that brought the youth to the prison. The inmates made it clear to the youth that their behavior was unacceptable. Within two days the wolf pack attacks stopped.

Exporting the model:

Let me share another example of work that has shaped our development of the Violence Free Zone model. In 1997, I was working with grassroots organizations in Washington, D.C. when a 12-year-old boy named Darryl Hall was killed in the violence between warring factions in an area called Benning Terrace, just 4.5 miles away from this very building. In the previous two years, gang rivalry had claimed 53 young lives—just in a 5-square-block area.

Using some of the principles I had learned from the House of Umoja, my organization and a courageous grassroots group called the Alliance of Concerned Men negotiated a truce between rival groups in the Benning Terrace area.

Following the truce, we worked with the D.C. Public Housing Receiver, David Gilmore to offer employment training and jobs to the same young men and women who had once been part of the problem. These young people had the creativity, energy, and talent to be part of the solution. As of today, 12 years later, there have been no crew-related deaths in Benning Terrace.

Attorney General Eric Holder, who formerly served as U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia, was familiar with this tragic incident and helped draw attention to our efforts. He, the Chairman of this Committee John Conyers, and the late Congressman Henry

Hyde visited Benning Terrace to ascertain the situation. Attorney General Holder spoke at a CNE event and shared the following thoughts:

“Children who are victimized by, or are witnesses to, violence suffer devastating consequences, long after the physical scars have had the time to heal. Exposure to violence affects how children see, how they feel, and how they learn. Children who are victims, or witnesses, of violence are at a higher risk of developing behavioral problems, substance abuse, depression, suicidal tendencies, and violent criminal behavior. Being abused or neglected as a child increases the likelihood of arrest as a juvenile by 53% and the likelihood of arrest for a violent crime as an adult by 38%. Darryl Hall’s own life bears these grim realities out.”

Attorney General Holder also discussed the various prevention strategies to address youth violence and noted that there is a limit to what federal law enforcement can do—even in its own backyard.

“But police officers cannot offer young children living in Benning Terrace and elsewhere a decent education, a summer job, or a way out of poverty. To effectively combat the plague of violence in our most troubled neighborhoods, the only life that Darryl Hall knew, requires a mutual and unflinching commitment from community leaders, local businesses, lawmakers, philanthropists, and residents themselves to literally recreate the social fabric.”

I agree with the Attorney General. We must not merely instruct our children to “say ‘no’ to drugs,” we must also provide them with the tools, options, and motivation to live different lives.

In light of these stories and trends, I would recommend that we review where our monies are being spent.

Recommendations:

The Department of Justice has spent millions of dollars researching the causes and cures for youth violence. The majority of these funds have been devoted to documenting the problem. The Center for Neighborhood Enterprise has produced documented evidence that its Violence Free Zone approach work. Despite this proof, Baylor University and the University of Pennsylvania are the only research institutes that have demonstrated any interest in studying the success of community and faith-based programs within our network of effective providers.

I therefore recommend that the Justice Department direct additional research dollars to studying indigenous successful efforts to reduce youth violence.

The most important element of the Violence-Free Zone program is the measurable impact that it has had in reducing disruptive behavior at its various sites, as outlined in this testimony. These reductions in violence, and in rates of suspension and school drop-outs, have been accomplished without increasing the arrests of young people. We believe that measurable outcomes should be the standard against which all intervention programs should be measured and funded.

Both the Department of Justice and the Department of Education should explore with the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise how these neighborhood-based violence reduction approaches can be implemented in other communities around the country.

We are all very conscious of the fact that communities across the country have reduced spending, including cutting back teacher and police department budgets. The Violence-Free Zone offers a way not only to save lives, but to reduce costs. In Richmond, the sharp reduction in motor vehicle thefts that is attributed to the VFZ is just one example. We also see savings in ambulance and police calls to the schools, emergency room costs, court costs, and the high price of incarceration of so many of our young people.

We believe this approach to be a cost savings measure. We invite you to visit one of our sites, and welcome your further interest in how we can as a nation reduce the human and economic cost of youth violence, and save resources that can be applied to education and other positive measures for our youth.

APPENDIX

What They Are Saying About the Violence-Free Zone

Superintendents and Principals:

MILWAUKEE:

William Andrekopoulos, Superintendent, Milwaukee Public Schools:

"We are expanding the Violence Free Zone initiative because it works. This pilot program, using community engagement and the support of key community organizations, has proven to be a pro-active way to support the needs of young people in lieu of having them get trapped in the criminal justice system."

"I think that if you're looking for things that make significant change -- and as superintendents you look for what are the things that give you significant impact, not little impact, not incremental impact, not continuous improvement, but significant change -- this is a program that will bring about significant change in the culture of a school and community."

Mark Kuxhause, Principal, South Division High School, Milwaukee WI:

"The program has a proactive way of reducing violence in and around the school. It has added another level of intervention in addressing students' behavior, and every day the program became more effective as the students and the staff members of the school and Violence Free Zone employees of the Latino Community Center began working together."

ATLANTA, GA:

Royce Sublett, Principal Ben Carson Middle School:

"The impact on the school has been in a lot of key areas: student discipline referral decrease; increase in mentoring and a good positive role model for our students; and also decrease in our students being in off-task behavior, such as in the hallways, our cafeteria and at bus dismissal. They [Visions Ambassadors] provide an extra round of support and security for our students to make them feel safe, to be able to get a good sound education each and every day."

Lucy Motley, Assistant Principal, Harper-Archer Middle School:

The VFZ program has impacted the school tremendously. "We see an increase in our student achievement. Overall, we have monthly benchmarks, and we're able to see in the areas of reading, mathematics and writing, increases in our student scores. Additionally, we see more students coming to school. So our student attendance has improved. As we look at the discipline piece, we're able to see also a decrease in the number of referrals to the assistant principal's office. I see our Visions Ambassadors as an intervention piece which helps us to decrease the number of out-of-school or in-school suspensions that we have."

Atlanta Police Department School Resource Officer Bennie E. Bridges:

"Once the Visions program came in, it gave us another outlet to deal with whatever problems that were happening in the community because there was someone there to mentor the children. There was someone that the children could go to outside of the police because quite often, children, they don't want to talk to the police about personal problems, things going on at home. But the program gave us filling edge for the gap where the kids were able to come in, talk to someone, and they were able to just mentor them. And it brought a lot of our problems down. It decreased them. It has made my job easier—a whole lot easier!"

ANTELOPE VALLEY, CA:

Eric A. Riegert, Principal, Eastside High School:

“The youth advisors who work with our kids on a daily basis have made a remarkable difference in the lives of the students and families that they work with. Many students have been able to improve their grades, and the teachers tell me that students who were formerly unmotivated and disruptive in their classes are not some of their hardest working students. Our youth advisors are there whenever students are having problems and issues in their classes or with other students on campus. They provide a place where students can talk candidly about the issues that are affecting their everyday lives, including what’s happening at home and out in the community. This program has allowed our students to connect with their teachers and the community in a meaningful way.”

Chris Haymond, Director of Security, Eastside High School:

“I have worked with this group since January and they have made great strides in dealing with some of the discipline issues at Eastside High School...They work well with the security staff and freely share information that is helpful in keeping a safe and secure campus. I feel that they are an asset to our campus as evidenced by the decline in fights, tardies and disrespectful behavior by the students they have interacted with.”

Susan McDougal, Ph.D., Principal, Knight High School:

“I can say with honesty and sincerity that the establishment of the Violence-Free Zone at Knight High has been a positive influence on our campus. Youth violence intervention has been a major goal of the Violence-Free Zone, but it has in this short time, grown to so much more. Students recognize the Youth Advisors as additional staff members they can use as resources when they need an adult to assist them or someone with whom they can talk. Students go to the Violence-Free Zone room for tutoring as well as mentoring.”

Karen Mobilia-Jones, Assistant Principal, Knight High School:

“Administrators are grateful of the services offered by the VFZ program, especially when they assist with our issue with tardies. Also, many disagreements between students occur after school on the way home for students. Knowing the Youth Advisors are creating a safe passage home for many of our students is a huge relief. It is very comforting knowing our students will arrive home in a safe manner.”

Ann Kerr, Knight High School:

“I find it extremely help to have the VFZ here and available to counsel students or attend the classroom to observe/help the student within the classroom. The students receive the one-on-one attention that they need for that particular moment, and the class is able to move forward with the lesson plan. The need to send a student to the on campus detention is reduced, especially for students who do not have home support—these students are receiving the attention and support they need from an adult within the VFZ.”

BALTIMORE:

Cecelia McDaniel, Assistant Principal, Southwestern High School:

“New Vision has helped us move students forward who had given up on themselves. There are no words to express how important this has been. New Vision is our eyes and ears. When the students know you care, it makes a difference. We no longer see the large traffic jams in the halls. The program has moved the kids out of the halls and given us the tools to learn academic rigor. They don’t allow the kids to give up.”

DALLAS:

Robert Ward, Principal, Madison High School:

“I think this program has helped us in a number of ways to increase the overall effectiveness of this campus

**... A reduction in a number of negative interactions between children
... the number of fights have dropped off
... the numbers of students who leave school, drop
... increase in the attendance rate
... increase in the number of students who are college bound.”**

PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY, MD:

Dr. John Deasy, Chief Executive Officer, Prince George’s County Public Schools:

“I have extremely positive things to say about the Violence-Free Zone program. It brings a huge chunk of support to the schools. The Youth Advisors are some of the most talented people I have ever met. We have been trained by the Youth Advisors. They made an immediate connection inside the schools. They are incredible. Their ability isn’t just in the schools, they are in the homes and in the community, so they have immediate rapport with the students. Few adults fill that role.”

Andrea Phillips-Hughes, Principal, Bladensburg High School, Prince George’s County, MD:

“The Youth Advisors have become the listening ear. The students can go to the Youth Advisors and know they will be listened to. The Youth Advisors have walked in their footsteps and they can relate to the students. They can open up the possibilities and show them there is a world they can succeed in. This program is a way of helping me with 500 students at one time. But it also helps the students in the community. They [Youth Advisors] have communications with the families when I can’t because there’s always that barrier. They help me keep an eye on students. But most importantly, they help our students.”

WASHINGTON, DC:

Darrin Slade, Principal, Ron Brown High School, former Principal, Fletcher-Johnson K-8, Washington, DC:

“Before this program was put into place in Fletcher-Johnson, we had a student killed on the parking lot. We had fights. We had stolen cars on the playgrounds. We went from that to zero. We went from gang fights every week to zero. We had order, a 100% change in climate. We had never made AYP [Adequate Yearly Progress under the No Child Left Behind Act] before in any area. In 2005-2006, we made it in all areas. It is the best program I’ve had in any school I’ve been in. The program is outstanding in treating students with respect. Because of the program in Fletcher-Johnson, my [new] school is outstanding, and I attribute that to Curtis [East Capitol Center for Change] and his program. [Editor’s note, graduates of Fletcher-Johnson go on to Ron Brown.] “

Robert Saunders, Principal, Johnson Junior High School, Washington, DC:

“The program came in last year and immediately made an impact. They supply us with support in areas that with a three-man management team we cannot do. They motivate students academically and mentor them socially. They’ve been able to do things we haven’t been able to do. They create relationships between the community and the school. They have been able to really, really help us.”