

Testimony of

Mr. Charles L. Curtis

May 13, 2003

Introduction

Chairman Hatch and distinguished members of the Committee, my name is Charles Curtis. I am the President of the Kansas City Metropolitan Crime Commission. Thank you for holding these hearings on "Project Safe Neighborhoods: America's Network against Gun Violence."

I would like to take this opportunity to tell you about the Kansas City Metropolitan Crime Commission, and our role in Project Safe Neighborhoods. This encompasses an effort that began in 2000 and has yielded some impressive results. These results include awareness among felons of strict enforcement of our Federal gun laws and a concurrent reduction in violent crime among felons.

The Kansas City Metropolitan Crime Commission

The Kansas City Metropolitan Crime Commission was established in 1949 as a watchdog group to improve law enforcement in our community. It is composed of a Board of 40 business and civic leaders.

In recent years, the Crime Commission has raised funds for our local Tips Hotline and a program that supervises those sentenced to community service. However, a new program was brought to our attention in 2000 by the U.S. Attorney for Western Missouri.

Operation Ceasefire

The U.S. Attorney noted that Kansas City, Missouri suffered from a high murder rate. Our city ranked number four in the nation for murders on a per capita basis. Because of this high rate of violence, the U.S. Attorney suggested that local law enforcement join Federal prosecutors to enforce the Federal law and strict sentencing guidelines for convicted felons who continued to carry firearms.

He explained that Richmond, Virginia and Milwaukee, Wisconsin had implemented this program and they felt it had reduced violent crime in their neighborhoods. The Kansas City implementation of this program - named Project Ceasefire -- emphasized three items.

1. Cooperation between Federal and local law enforcement as well as cooperation among officials in both the Missouri and Kansas sides of our metropolitan area.
2. Not only enforcement of the no-gun law for felons, but aggressive publicity of this fact to prevent felons from carrying guns.
3. Independent research and tracking of the impact of this publicity.

The U.S. Attorney asked the private Crime Commission for help with the second and third points - publicity of Ceasefire and tracking of its impact. As you may have heard in earlier testimony, the Ceasefire program has sentenced nearly 400 gun-carrying felons to Federal prison. However, we have more than 12,000 felons under some form of supervision in the Kansas City metropolitan area. In addition to strict enforcement of the law, we wanted felons to stop carrying guns.

We developed an advertising campaign to warn felons that strict penalties awaited them if they violated this law. The purpose of the advertising was to persuade the felon not to carry a gun. In addition, we wanted to reach his mother, wife, girlfriend and others so they would also discourage this dangerous practice.

Operating Ceasefire Funding

The Board of the Kansas City Metropolitan Crime Commission began a fund-raising effort to build a war chest to advertise the penalties of Project Ceasefire. Several months of fundraising from private companies and foundations enabled us to launch a multi-media campaign.

The campaign used television advertising, billboards and signs on buses. We also prepared brochures in English and Spanish for parole officers to review with their parolees. The television commercial we used was originally created in Milwaukee by Steve Laughlin, the president of ad agency Laughlin/Constable. The television commercial featured well-known defense attorney Johnnie Cochran. After explaining off-camera that a good attorney could get you off if you weren't read your rights or if the prosecution didn't have credible witnesses, he concluded with this line: "But if you're a felon and you carry a gun, even I can't get you off." He leaned into the camera as he said this line so you could see if came from Johnnie Cochran.

The billboards and bus sides featured a gun and the line: Felons with guns burn five years in Federal Prison. These ads ran in 2001 and 2002.

Research Methodology

The Crime Commission assigned the task of tracking the results of the advertising campaign to two professors from the University of Missouri - Kansas City. Alexander M. Holsinger, PhD. and Kenneth J. Novak, Ph.D. from the UMKC Department of Sociology/Criminal Justice & Criminology conducted interviews with the general population and the offender population before and after the campaign ran to determine awareness of the program. They also analyzed the crime statistics from the police departments of Kansas City, Missouri and Kansas City, Kansas.

Even before the formal research was completed, we received anecdotal stories indicating the message was getting through. A suspect who confessed to a robbery told detectives he "went to his friend Leon to ask him if I could borrow his gun. He said, 'Sean, you know if you take this gun, it's gonna be five years if you get caught.'" A defendant who confessed to passing bad checks denied having a gun. He told the detective that he was a convicted felon and not even Johnnie Cochran could get him off if he carried a gun.

Research Results

In their final research results, the Professors reported the following:

? Murders in Kansas City, Missouri declined 23% to a 30-year low.

? "Awareness of Ceasefire was strongly related to the belief that felons, caught with a firearm, would serve 5 years or more in prison."

? "80% of the offender population had been exposed to some form of the Ceasefire campaign."

? Of those who had been exposed to Ceasefire, 91% answered 'five years' to the question 'how much time do felons with guns get?'"

? "Ceasefire exposure was the only significant predictor of a felon's belief that those caught with a gun will serve time."

Crime Statistics

The report also included this analysis of crime statistics from 2001 to 2002:

? In Kansas City, Missouri, violent crimes by non-felons increased by 23%, while violent crimes by felons increased only 7%.

? In Kansas City, Kansas, violent crimes by non-felons increased by 58% while violent crimes by felons decreased by 18%.

? Metro wide, the report concluded that Project Ceasefire has prevented 22 homicides and 50 violent crimes.

Conclusion

We have just launched our third year of Ceasefire advertising. Television commercials and billboards will again remind felons that they can burn five years in federal prison if they are caught with a gun. It's our hope that the anecdotal information and research data that has been so promising thus far will continue.

Thank you again for this hearing and for giving me the opportunity to share with you our experiences advertising Project Ceasefire and its role in Project Safe Neighborhoods.