

Testimony of
The Honorable Antonio R. Villaraigosa

June 5, 2007

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The Honorable Antonio R. Villaraigosa
Mayor
City of Los Angeles
Examining the Federal Role to Work with Communities to
Prevent and Respond to Gang Violence: The Gang Abatement and Prevention Act of 2007
United States Senate
Committee on the Judiciary
Honorable Patrick J. Leahy, Chairman
June 5, 2007

Senator Feinstein, Ranking Member Specter, and members of the committee, thank you for holding this hearing on the pressing issue of preventing and responding to gang violence.

The federal government has a significant role in working with communities, such as Los Angeles, to prevent and respond to gang violence. It provides much-needed funding for evidence-based grant programs and supports the efforts of local cities such as Los Angeles in preventing our youth from entering gang life. But as the legislation before this committee recognizes, more must be done.

According to the FBI, the United States has approximately 30,000 violent street gangs, motorcycle gangs, and prison gangs with approximately 800,000 members. The National Gang Center estimates that there are sixteen notorious street gangs in this country with over 320,000 members. These gangs are well-organized and employ sophisticated tactics which have destroyed communities. They control neighborhoods through murderous violence and boost their illegal money-making activities, which include drug trafficking, robbery, theft, fraud, extortion, prostitution rings, and gun trafficking.

Los Angeles is no stranger to gang violence. We have more gang members than any city in the nation. More than 39,000 youth and adults are affiliated with over 400 different gangs. I am sure many of you have seen movies, most of them filmed in Hollywood, which depict the gang life. As real as they may seem, they cannot even begin to capture the impact gangs have on families and communities.

Nearly 60% of all murders committed in Los Angeles last year were gang related and 70% of all shootings involved gangs. Last year alone, gang violence claimed the lives of 272 residents of Los Angeles and 1,500 of our people were hit by a bullet fired from a gang member's gun. Most of these victims were innocent bystanders and too many have been young children with bright futures and dreams transformed into memories.

These facts are enough to shake any mayor to the core - even the Mayor of the shining city on the sea. But the truth is that the reach of gangs goes far beyond city limits.

Gangs are no longer a local issue and they are no longer isolated to urban cities. They operate sophisticated multi-state and multi-national networks that cannot be contained by municipal police alone. That is why we need a sustained partnership with the federal government if we are going to turn our neighborhoods around. If we fail to work together, we won't just be out-gunned, we will be out-organized.

To address the problem of gang violence, we need a balanced solution and a partnership of shared responsibility between Federal, State and local governments. In the world of responding to emergencies, our governments operate under a system of "mutual aid." For gangs, what we need from the federal government is "mutual effort."

The Gang Abatement and Prevention Act creates that platform, by creating a collaborative and shared environment for law enforcement to work together on gang crime. It creates regional task forces with city, county, state, and federal authorities specifically tasked with containing gangs and preventing gang crime. Importantly, it puts these task forces in the areas of most impacted by gangs, designated as "High Intensity Interstate Gang Activity Areas" (HIIGAs).

At the same time, the bill sustains the wide consensus of gang experts, academics, and local officials that the only sustainable and effective antigang strategy must include elements of gang prevention, intervention, suppression and community-based re-entry. To implement this approach, the Gang Abatement and Prevention Act provides necessary resources for this comprehensive strategy.

These resources are critically important for those of us who grapple with the gangs every day. I have submitted for the record my gang reduction strategy. You will see that my comprehensive strategy focuses on all of these elements. It is tough on crime and equally tough on the root causes of crime.

As proof of the effectiveness of collaboration, our model originates from a collaborative agreement between the City of Los Angeles and the U.S. Department of Justice. This joint effort, called the Gang Reduction Program, commonly referred to in Los Angeles as GRP, has resulted in the most significant drop in crime in any gang-impacted community in Los Angeles.

The original collaboration started with a \$2.5 million federal investment over five years with the goal of reducing youth gang crime and violence in the community of Boyle Heights. Boyle Heights is a predominantly Latino neighborhood where nearly a third of the 194,061 residents live in poverty and unemployment is twice the national rate.

GRP incorporates a comprehensive and collaborative approach to reducing gang crime and violence, including an inventory and integration of existing community services and the application of best practices and evidence-based prevention, intervention, re-entry, and suppression programs. GRP also focuses on accountability and employs ongoing evaluation to ensure the effectiveness of its taxpayer-funded programs.

Many successful gang prevention, intervention, re-entry, and suppression programs are currently being implemented through GRP in Boyle Heights. The federal resources fund organizations that provide afterschool programs, mentoring, truancy and dropout prevention, gang awareness trainings, intensive case management, job training and placement, pre-natal and infancy support, early college awareness, literacy programs, and tattoo removal. For example, the nationally-recognized Homeboy Industries, founded and led by Father Greg Boyle, is partially funded by the GRP and serves as a model for providing essential job training and other programs to get reformed gang members out of gangs. In addition, the GRP also has a very productive partnership with Big Brothers/Big Sisters of Los Angeles which provides mentors and positive role models for youth.

The GRP programming in Boyle Heights has resulted in a coordinated effort to prevent gang recruitment and future involvement, provide opportunities for offenders returning to the community, and rid communities of violent gang leaders. In this community, gang-related crime has been reduced by 44% during a period where we have experienced an increase in gang crime in virtually every other part of the City.

Consequently, our current strategy expands the GRP and targets resources in the areas most impacted by gangs - eight "Gang Reduction Zones." These areas were selected based on an objective assessment of gang-related crime rates while also taking into account other factors such as poor academic performance, truancy, dropout statistics, and conditions of joblessness and poverty - all factors that have been shown to be precursors to gang involvement and activity. Through our strategy, what we hope to bring to these communities is hope. What we hope to bring to the youth is safe passage into responsible adulthood.

As I stated, the GRP started with a federal investment, but it did not end there. Many of the programs that have played a part in the recovery of Boyle Heights were funded with City, County, State, and private dollars. Over the years, the City has allocated significant resources to programs and services geared toward at-risk youth. Now we must expand and leverage those resources through multi-jurisdictional cooperation while ensuring that every dollar is spent effectively and efficiently.

It is my plan to replicate our successes, and it should be Congress' plan to replicate them in communities across the country. But to make it a reality, we need the federal government to make an investment and play its part. You just heard what we did for \$2.5 million in one of the most gangimpacted communities in the nation. Imagine what we could do with the \$1 billion authorized by this bill.

The Gang Abatement and Prevention Act of 2007 also has many aspects that complement and support my Gang Reduction Strategy for Los Angeles. While establishing new crimes and tougher federal penalties to deter and punish members of illegal street gangs, this bill also seeks to provide more than \$1 billion in funding for enforcement, prevention, and intervention programs over five years

Under this bill, recruiting minors to join criminal street gangs will be a federal crime. Penalties for recruitment can be up to 20 years in prison. This legislation also creates tougher laws for certain federal crimes like carjacking, conspiracy, and other gang-related offenses. The focus on

suppression sends a clear message to current gang members that we will no longer tolerate their predatory practices on our youth and communities.

While collaborative law enforcement efforts are a key component to our comprehensive strategy, the bill recognizes the critical importance of balancing enforcement efforts with effective prevention, intervention, and re-entry programs. Suppression, we know, works effectively in the short term. Prevention, however, is an essential part of a long term strategy to end gang violence.

In sum, the bill parallels many of the efforts of our most effective antigang program. Like the GRP, it funds prevention, intervention, and re-entry initiatives that will provide the alternatives our youth need to stay out of gangs. Just as we have done in Los Angeles by putting an additional 1,000 police officers on our streets, it provides funding for dedicated, federal antigang personnel. Finally, it aims to stop the spread of gangs by concentrating all of these resources into the areas where they are at their worst.

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As the Mayor of Los Angeles, I have seen gang violence destroy families and communities within our City.

On December 20, 2006, I received a call from my staff informing me that there had been a shooting in Angelino Heights. At about 8:30 at night two gang members - one barely 20-years-old - were seen driving down a quiet residential street. Neighbors heard the sound of gunfire. Shots rang from the car toward a nearby house. The car sped off. But one stray bullet pierced the front window of a neighboring apartment. That bullet crossed the living room and penetrated a wall into the kitchen, where stood a lovely 9-year-old girl. Her name was Champa Wongwisetsiri. She died a few days later in the hospital.

Champa, or Zsa Zsa, as her neighbors nicknamed her, had been in America for only a year, but her neighbors already called her a pint-sized ambassador for the whole community. They told stories about how she walked her little Chihuahua around the block, about how she talked unabashedly to every neighbor like she was the Mayor of Angelino Heights. They said she had a way of softening even the most recalcitrant of hearts with her relentless enthusiasm and her infectious warmth and humanity. The next day I met and grieved with Champa's mother. She told me she had brought her daughter to Los Angeles - and to America - on the promise of a better education and a brighter future.

This incident occurred only a week after 14-year old Cheryl Green, a beautiful young girl, was murdered by gang members in the Harbor Gateway area of Los Angeles because of the color of her skin.

Senators, it is my hope that as a result of my testimony and others' you hear today that you support this gang abatement and prevention bill. Making this bill law is a critical step in helping cities throughout the nation best confront the gang violence plaguing our neighborhoods and provide the resources necessary to defeat it.

Your vote on this legislation is about the Cheryl Greens, the Champa Wongwisetsiris, their families, and all the communities who will continue to young children to this war we are fighting

on the streets of America. It is no longer okay for us to just sit and say this is an important issue to us; we must enact policy that reflects our commitment and its growing impact on the constituencies we serve. The balance between suppression and prevention efforts is a critical component of any strategy to rid the country of gang violence and the federal government's leadership in this area is essential.

Senator Feinstein and members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to speak today on this important subject. I enthusiastically support this bill and ask that you pass this important legislation.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.