

Testimony of
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Uhlich Children's Advantage Network (UCAN)
Testimony to the US Senate Committee of the Judiciary
Examining the Federal Role to Work with Communities to Prevent and Respond to Gang
Violence: The Gang Abatement and Prevention Act of 2007
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Room 226, Senate Dirksen Office Building

Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today about S456. We are thrilled with the attention this critical issue is receiving and are humbled by your invitation to share information that may help shape the solution. Uhlich Children's Advantage Network, known as UCAN, has been helping Chicago area children, youth and families stop their cycles of often intergenerational violence and despair since 1869.

Any given month or year will offer numerous memories for us to reflect on at another time. Perhaps Chicago's most indelible memory for the 2006-2007 school year will be the 28 teens who have lost their lives to gun violence, many while traveling to or from school, from September 2006 through May 31, 2007. One is too many. Twenty-eight is unconscionable. Twenty-eight young lives cut short, futures unfulfilled; the impact ripples through our neighborhoods, schools, families and friends. Gun violence in Chicago, once on a slight decline, seems to be once again on the rise. In 2004, Chicago saw almost 500 homicides, the lowest number in more than decade. The number decreased in 2005 but increased in 2006. Nationally, young people aged 18- 24 have the highest homicide victimization rate.

Thanks in large part to federal funding through the US Department of Justice! Safe Schools Initiative and through Project Safe Neighborhoods, UCAN is helping to shape our next generation of leaders to be violence-free. Project Safe Neighborhoods is a public-private partnership that included provider partners with law enforcement partners, underscoring the importance of having alternatives to incarceration for young people. This partnership included the US Attorney's office, ATF, the Chicago Police Department, and the Cook County State's Attorney's office.

During the past two years, UCAN has provided 720 hours of classroom-based violence prevention workshops to 3,000 non-duplicated 6th - 10th grade students in more than forty Chicago schools, many located in the Chicago Police District "hot zones" - the 7th, 9th, 10th , 11th, and 15th districts. These services were possible because of support from US Senator Richard Durbin, funding from the Department of Justice and from PSN. In the past five years, UCAN has recruited and trained forty young people, ages 13-18, in our Young Leaders Development Institute. These young leaders engage in extensive education with peers, family

members and adults to steer individuals away from destructive lifestyles, promote community safety, and educate leaders about the importance of violence prevention programming.

UCAN's violence prevention programming has steered 2,000 young people away from gangs, away from guns, and towards a strong future. These are not young people who romanticize violence. They're brothers, sisters, friends, and cousins who have said enough is enough! I will not lose any more family members to violence!

UCAN's annual national poll asks more than one thousand young people about their views on violence, prevention programs, and adult engagement. Every year we learn that youth nationwide want the same things- safety, adult understanding and engagement in the fight against crime, and the opportunity for a seat at the table to contribute to a solution.

UCAN firmly believes in the need for more resources, more diversion programs and more opportunities like the youth-led programs at UCAN, to give our young people real alternatives to violent lifestyles. For those young people who do engage in minor offenses, they need alternatives to incarceration so that one mistake can positively inform and direct the rest of their life, rather than closing the book on it.

There is tremendous value in having all parties work together in a cohesive, cooperative manner. With everyone at the table, open communication allows for information and knowledge to be shared. Successful partnerships are integral to programs being able to reach their intended participants and to achieve intended program goals.

These partnerships made it possible for students struggling through the war zones of their streets and blocks to experience an alternative to violence that resonates with them. Based on the successful Boston Model, which was named a Promising Practice Model by the US Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in 1993, UCAN's youth-led violence prevention program uses a holistic, interactive, public health and education format to introduce students to the very real and far-reaching impact of living a violent life.

UCAN has been fortunate to partner with various state and national advocacy organizations and foundations to further our commitment to help young people live nonviolent, productive lives and to help shape the world around them. We are excited about the at least one hundred twenty-five million dollars that would be made available under S456 for prevention and intervention services. This level of funding underscores the importance of prevention services. and the commitment of our elected leaders to support proven, successful programs.

Additional funding will allow us to reach another 800 hundred students in the Chicago Public Schools and across the city in just two years. It will allow 50 more young people to become engaged leaders and informed decision-makers.

It will allow UCAN to begin a critical diversion project that would afford young people with a single offense, non-weapon related, to change their personal direction and lead strong, productive lives. This partnership with the Chicago Police Department is ready to begin today, but has been put on hold for three years due to redirected funding from our intended funding source. It will answer our young people's pleas for quality services. Our young people speak directly to us

when they ask us to reduce the level of violence in their neighborhoods. They want adults to take charge, as we hear from one young leader in his freshman year of college who says: "Halloween isn't scary. What's scary is that 49% of my peers are telling you to stop cutting violence prevention programs and you're not listening!" He goes on to say that "Violence prevention should be part of the defense budget- homeland security begins at home."

Ladies and gentlemen of the Committee, in my twenty years of working with and learning from youth, I know without doubt that it is essential to have partners who work hand in hand for the protection and safety of our youth. Prevention services work, our young people won't let us think otherwise, and adults owe it to our next generation of leaders to start listening now.

Thank you for your attention this morning.