

Testimony of
Mr. Gregg Croteau

June 5, 2007

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Executive Director

The United Teen Equality Center

"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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I would like to first thank Chairman Leahy, Senator Feinstein, and all of the distinguished members of this Committee for allowing me the opportunity to share some of my thoughts on this critically important issue. I should first note that my testimony today also incorporates many ideas and experiences from the wide range of partners we work with, streetworker staff that are building relationships with young people every day, and the stories and conversations we have had with so many teens over the years.

For the past 7 years, I have had the honor of working as the first Executive Director for the United Teen Equality Center, a youth organization located in Lowell, Massachusetts. Situated approximately 35 miles northwest of Boston, Lowell has a total population of 105,000 people. With a strong immigrant community, we are also home to the second largest Cambodian-American community in the country, often estimated around 25,000- 30,000 individuals.

With an estimated 25-30 active gang sets in our City, gang-related violence is a critical concern in Lowell as it is in so many other urban communities across the country. However, we are very proud to say that Lowell is also home to a very strong sense of community collaboration. It is within this community-centered context that UTEC has developed as a potential model for youth violence prevention strategies.

Just to provide a brief background on our organization, the United Teen Equality Center (UTEC) was established in 1999 from an organizing movement led by young people to develop their own teen center in response to the gang violence occurring at the time. From the very beginning, UTEC's emphasis on being "youth-led" was in the forefront of our work. This movement was propelled by a group of teenagers who stressed that there was no place to "hang out" in the downtown area. During this time, there was a high incidence of gang violence between Latino and Southeast Asian youth and, as is today, the downtown area was regarded by teens as the one true "neutral zone," a safe environment where they can freely socialize without fear of any gang or "turf" associations. As such, those involved quickly realized the need for UTEC to be located in the heart of downtown Lowell and UTEC soon opened its doors in March of 1999.

Through intensive street outreach, UTEC now serves over 1,500 youth annually and over 150 teens every day (ages 13-23), particularly those most often overlooked and labeled as "at-risk."

UTEC's mission is to be a youth-led safe-haven for youth development and grassroots organizing. Overall, our core values focus on peace, positivity, and empowerment within a multicultural and holistic learning setting. UTEC offers programming (all at no cost) in the following 4 main centers: Streetwork (outreach and gang peacemaking), Youth Development (cultural and performing arts), Education and Work Skills Training (new alternative diploma school program), and Youth Organizing (grassroots community organizing).

Soon after our establishment, UTEC created the Streetworker Peacemaking Project that aims to intervene in gang conflicts and mediate specific disputes between rival gang sets. Through our work in this area, our Streetworker Team implements a peacemaking process with rival youth gang leaders that ultimately lead to the facilitation of various peace summits between opposing gang sets. We have received significant recognition for our peacemaking work in this area. We are often called upon by City and state leaders to advise on a variety of youth and gang violence issues. We have presented at various conferences and have been invited to conduct peacemaking trainings throughout the country. Community-based violence prevention programs across the country are looking at the outreach activities of UTEC as a possible model. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recently funded researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health to evaluate our street outreach activities. This evaluation will identify not only the critical components necessary for a successful outreach program, but also how outreach activities that incorporate youth development can lead to reductions in youth violence.

UTEC was also recently recognized as Citizen's Bank and New England Cable Network's (NECN) Community "Champion in Action," chosen as the one awardwinning youth organization out of over 90 agencies considered throughout the state (www.boston.com/news/necn/Shows/champs/). A brief summary of some of our other accomplishments is also included as an attachment at the end of this testimony.

We feel as though we have significant "on the ground" knowledge of many of the issues being addressed through this new legislation through our partnerships and experiences in working with young people (both gang-involved and those non-affiliated), local law enforcement, our district attorney's office, our juvenile court, our school department and various other city and community-based agencies. After reading through the information provided on this new legislation, we have a range of thoughts we would like to share.

First, and most importantly, the federal government is absolutely on point in recognizing youth violence as a critical issue in our communities. One loss is far too many, and unfortunately, we have had to attend far too many funerals these days in our roles as youthworkers and advocates for young people. Funerals have become far too much like regular events in the lives of young people. In fact, when we were at one of our last funerals, walking toward the grave site of this 19 year old young man, I accidentally stepped on another gravestone. As I looked down, the gravestone was actually that of another young man shot and killed only weeks before. All I could think was that this is absurd. This cannot be seen as "normal." We cannot just walk past these gravesites.

So, yes, we truly appreciate your initiative in prioritizing this critical issue in our communities and agree that a major statement must be made to best address the violence too often found in our streets.

However, we respectfully express our concern that this major statement, this unique opportunity to significantly affect change that lasts beyond the current moment, must include a balanced approach of enforcement along with intervention and prevention. In our opinion, enforcement is indeed a much needed component of an overall approach to best reduce youth and gang-related violence. However, enforcement is also only at its strongest when there is a very solid complementary force of intervention and prevention services in the community.

As I mentioned before, in Lowell, we have been very fortunate to conduct our work in a community that truly values the power of partnerships. Currently, Lowell's City Manager recently formed a Gang Advisory Task Force. As part of this board, we regularly meet with the City Manager, the Chief of the Lowell Police Department, the Middlesex County District Attorney, Superintendent of Lowell Public Schools, President of Middlesex Community College, Director of the Workforce Investment Board, Juvenile Probation, and various other community partners. The Chief of Police and District Attorney have actively participated in youth dialogues and we are developing forums to best involve youth in the decisions affecting their communities. The result is that all of the "players" are at the table to best ensure that community collaboration is emphasized within a holistic approach to addressing the complexity of those root causes of youth violence. Moreover, through state support from a new funding stream to address the rise in youth violence, better known as the Senator Charles E. Shannon Community Safety Initiative, the City of Lowell was awarded funds to best implement the range of services that intersect and reflect a balanced approach of enforcement, prevention, and intervention.

Intervention and prevention cannot be seen as an "add-on" to a community approach heavily weighted toward enforcement and prosecution. As many other researchers have commented, we cannot just lock away the problem. As indicated in a letter from the National Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Coalition (with over 31 agencies, such as the Child Welfare League of America and the American Corrections Association signing on), this bill "contains 23 substantive sections; of those, 21 focus solely on creating new crimes, expanding culpability for the accused, and enhancing penalties for the convicted. Similarly, of the \$240.5 million in appropriations the bill requests, less than 20% is allowed for prevention and intervention." Moreover, for communities like Lowell, if we are not designated as a High Intensity Interstate Gang Activity Area (HIIGAA), the proposed legislation authorizes only 25 million dollars a year for gang violence prevention services for communities such as ours across the country, communities that are also battling complex issues with a tremendous need for additional prevention and intervention funding. If prevention and intervention is seen as equal to enforcement strategies, one should expect an infusion of 120 million dollars per year. As Streetworkers, our dream is that funding for such services as ours will be seen in the

same light as enforcement and prosecution. Our dream is that these type of services will also be seen as essential.

Moreover, the "gang problem" is not an easy one to pinpoint and define. In fact, we often try to stray away from categorizing the violence in our communities as a "gang problem." All of the complex forces and rooted causes of gang-related violence will never be adequately portrayed when defining it with a singular name. The issues of poverty, racism, education, and other

complex forces all impact the violence in our streets. There is no one "fix" and there can be no one name that encompasses all our concerns.

That being said, we do have concerns that this new legislation takes a very broad approach to solving problems that are often locally distinct and community centered. As Senator Kennedy mentioned in his statement of June 22, 2006, there is a "one-size-fits-all approach" to this legislation that is of considerable concern. From our experiences, it is incredibly clear that the gangs in Los Angeles are radically different from the gangs in Lowell. The approach to best address this problem must also allow for the opportunity to be radically different.

As the Committee may know, Paul Logli, Chairman of the Board of the National District Attorneys Association, recently testified at the House Judiciary Committee Hearing on: "Making Communities Safer: Youth Violence and Gang Interventions that Work." He stated, "As a cautionary note, however, I would like to emphasize that the federal tendency to make "one size fit all" works counter to the strength of utilizing community efforts. Our communities differ, our gang problems differ and accordingly our responses must differ. What Congress can bring to this is the flexibility and adaptability to meet the will of our communities."

Federalizing certain "gang crimes" can make the local approach that much more difficult to address, never mind the notion that "federal prosecution is more expensive than state level prosecution (as stated in the Heritage Foundation's report entitled "Federalizing 'Gang Crime' is Counterproductive and Dangerous").

Before concluding, we also wanted to urge your support on another important and related matter. The Federal Youth Coordination Act passed last year in the 109th Congress. As the Youth Policy Action Center states, "The Federal Youth Development Council would bring together those Department and Agency members along with members from the private and youth-serving non-profit sectors, and youth themselves, to increase communication among federal agencies; develop a comprehensive plan to more strategically implement federal youth policy; recommend objectives and goals for federal youth programs; facilitate collaboration on interagency demonstration projects; and provide technical assistance to state-funded youth coordinating councils. It also creates the Federal Youth Development Council, and requires only a modest \$1 million appropriation to implement one of the only pieces of legislation ever passed that will potentially impact millions of youth in the United States." As we embark on initiatives to best coordinate various youth-related initiatives, we also ask for your support in urging Congress to fund this new Act so that a new Federal Youth Development Council can begin the work of best coordinating our nation's policies affecting younger people.

Ultimately, we believe that not all youth who are gang-involved are doomed to one similar path. Youth who are in gangs also have the capacity to create change, not only in their own lives but in the life of their community. We know too many young peacemakers that have brokered peace between their rivals. There is no one face of a gang member. There can be no one overarching solution that is perfect for Lowell as it is for Los Angeles. However, we do know that the intervention and prevention strategies can provide the hope that some young people have lost sight of. Without a balanced effort in these areas, the hopelessness that already surrounds too many young people will continue to grow that much stronger. There is no greater foe, no greater

frustration...than the sense of young person who feels like nothing can change...that "this is the life I am cornered into."

There is a critical problem in our communities. And yes, we need to make a MAJOR STATEMENT in our policies to best address it. We urge you to consider the concerns we have raised and the hope embodied in increased funding for prevention and intervention services.

In the remaining pages we have included two stories that exemplify a glimpse into the power behind young people who have benefited from such intervention services. Rather than the normality of youth funerals, it is these type of stories that need and can become commonplace in our discussions around the complex issues of violence. Thank you again for all your consideration and we look forward to working with you on this critical issue.

The Courage to Make Peace

The Streetworker program of the United Teen Equality Center focuses on developing a peace process among the many rival youth gangs in Lowell. Here is one of their success stories.

The other day Bun was talking about how he first got involved with UTEC. He laughed as he talked about how one of the UTEC staff kept "harassing" him and his girlfriend at the movie theatre, trying to let him know about some of the programs UTEC offers. Bun never signed up for any program that day. In fact, he now states that he thought this particular staff member was somewhat of a "whackjob." Weeks later, we heard that he was involved in a fight with another rival gang set. Because of this initial conversation at the cinema, we now knew how to contact him. After meeting with him again, it was clear that this young man was someone well respected within his gang set (a "shot caller"). Over the coming months, another one of our staff continued "harassing" him...this time it was focused on helping him out with his current court case. Later, it was around helping him find a job.

As the months passed, our staff had earned Bun's respect. So, when it came down to organizing a Peace Summit with his rival gang set, we knew that Bun was the one who could really make this happen. And although many of his friends distrusted the whole idea of being in the same room as their "enemies," Bun convinced them to give it a shot. We conducted circle meetings with just his "boys," building relationships with them all and planting a seed of what the peace summit might look like. During the 3-day summit, Bun was as loud as he usually is...often trying to challenge any and all of the staff on the trip. However, after various teambuilding and discussion activities, our last night was upon us.

To close this particular summit, we asked all teens to join together standing in circle in front of the fire they built themselves. We asked them to write down one thing they wanted to get rid of in their life and toss it into the fire. We then asked them to find a stone from the beach that represented one thing they wanted to take away from this trip and share that with all around the fire. After a significant period of silence without anyone starting this last piece of sharing, Bun once again shined as a leader. This time, it was a leader for peace. He quickly threw his rolled-up paper into the fire and shared how he didn't want to upset his mother anymore...didn't want to see her cry anymore, not knowing if her son was going to be killed one night by rival gang members.

He then showed us his rock...a rock he had chosen because it symbolized the hope he gained from this trip. Peace between these two rival gang groups occurred this night by the fire. And it was not the result of any one particular topic mentioned by an adult. It was a result of all the relationship-building groundwork that occurred prior to this trip...and it was the result of such courageous words from a young leader.

After debriefing on this night, our staff only wished that the police officers and court officials that have often labeled Bun and his friends could see their stereotypes being shattered in front of this booming fire. When we all returned back home, we knew that peace was relative. Indeed, there were a couple incidents of violence between other youth in these gang sets who were not a part of this summit. However, the success of this summit was still as present as it was during this trip to a remote island. A tone was already set that weekend that these youth had a unique talent, a talent that revolved around their ability to be the peacemakers that no one else in their community could be.

Since that summit, we now know who to talk to when we hear that there might be problems on the street. We also know whom to call when there are questions as to how to resolve fights on the street. Just as importantly, our ability to empower each one of these youth to help themselves is that much greater as a result of the work accomplished on that island.. and all the follow-up that occurred since then...whether it be comforting Bun at the funeral of his friend who was recently shot or helping his girlfriend with the many health questions she has around her pregnancy.

Bun is now preparing himself to go to counseling with his girlfriend. He is now looking into a new type of promotion through his job. He is also still hanging with his "boys" on the street and in the gang. However, it was those initial crises in his life that provided an opportunity for all of us to work together...and it is his own experiences and resiliency that have provided him the opportunity to be a unique leader in our community.

The Courage to Leave

It's hard to accurately describe a story that often takes you back to an image of a hospital room, praying for one of your teens to survive the night. And hoping...just hoping...that other teens you knew were not responsible for the violence that placed him in that very same room.

From the age of 5 years old, Ricky spent many years of his life growing up in a foster home. At the age of 12, he finally got his chance to live with his biological family. Having to move to a new, much bigger city, Ricky talks about getting lost quickly, having trouble adjusting to a new city life. At school, things seemed to get worse. He struggled with keeping up at school, had few friends, and no one to talk to. Ricky quickly found himself desperately trying to reach out to connect with anyone that would befriend him.

The Moon Light Strangers, aka MLS (a local youth gang in Lowell), welcomed him with open arms. In the beginning, Ricky's new friends made him feel incredible comfortable. They were the cool kids in school, and they wanted to spend all their time with him. Ricky quickly felt as though he belonged. MLS gave Ricky an instant family, protection, and a good time almost every night.

Ricky was so wrapped up with MLS that everything else in his life didn't matter anymore. School became a distraction and hard to manage. His family's concerns turned into arguments and he felt misunderstood. The only place where he felt as though he wasn't questioned, yelled at, or treated with disrespect was with MLS.

Ricky decided to pledge his life to MLS and was "jumped in" to his new family (a ritual of being beaten and punched while surrounded in a circle by fellow gang brothers). After that day, many more days occurred filled with a different kind of violence, one that found him and his fellow gang members fighting other teens that he never saw in his life. He was now living in fear, creating new enemies every day.

One day after school, he found himself in another fight. This time, the fight was broken up by Sako and others from UTEC's Streetworker team. Sako convinced Ricky to get a ride home with him so that he would not run into further trouble on the street. The Streetworkers explained to Ricky what they did and some of the programs that UTEC had to offer. Though appreciative, Ricky was still distant and apprehensive of getting further involved. However, after Sako and others kept "chipping away," continually staying in contact with Ricky and urging him to get more involved with UTEC, Ricky eventually stopped by and a connection was quickly made. The relationship between Ricky and Sako focused on building upon his strengths, helping him identify short and long-term goals.

Soon enough, they began talking about why he was involved with MLS and the effects of his involvement (both positive and not so positive). Sako never preached to him about getting out. Having himself been gang-involved in the past, he knows far too well that his effectiveness as a Streetworker does not lie in preaching and convincing. Rather, his talents usually lay in his ability to consistently "chip away," knocking at that door which leads into a more two-way dialogue on all that is going on in a young person's life...not just that surrounding gang life and violence on the streets. Sako knows that the true skill simply lies in creating a place where Ricky could come to once he chooses change...once he chooses to transform his own life.

On a September night, one in which Ricky often describes as being a particularly windy one, he made such a change. He decided to break free from his gang set. Unfortunately, Ricky felt that he didn't want any "loose ends" and wanted to do it "the real way." This particular way involved him skipping school and meeting up with his fellow gang brothers at a local park in order to be "jumped out." Similar to the initial ritual he endured, he expected to be beaten and punched by his gang brothers for a specific number of seconds while he stood still within the circle enclosing him. Unfortunately, these expected seconds turned into horrific minutes. Ricky was severely beaten that night by a group of his "former" gang brothers.

They dropped him off at the hospital when they thought they heard his neck crack and he lay in a coma for 10 days.

The Streetworkers eventually received word that Ricky was at the hospital and the entire team rushed to the emergency room. Sako and other members of our team continued to be a support for Ricky during various periods while hospitalized. Unfortunately, the Streetworkers endured another loss this evening, as we had known several of the teens allegedly involved in committing this awful crime.

Although one of the teens we had worked with is now in prison, we are so proud to say that Ricky has now been recovering and recuperating over the past 3 years, trying to regain all the movements and speech that we often take for granted. Fortunately, Ricky returned back to Lowell about a year ago and instantly stepped back into UTEC. Today, Sako and other UTEC staff have assisted him in finding employment, working toward his GED, and most importantly, trying to deal with the new challenges in his life due to his traumatic brain injury.

Over the past year, Ricky has also spent considerable time presenting his story with UTEC staff at various conferences and events in the hope of reaching out to parents, police officers and other youth so that they can best understand how to support teens who may be going through similar issues with gang involvement. He has become a leader for peace by transforming a horrific tragedy into a powerful story of change. And today, he has already begun the process of fulfilling his dream to write a book detailing his life story.

We look forward to getting one of the first copies of his book.

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UTEC Streetworker Pyramid Model

The following pyramid model provides a visual representation of the overall flow of services within the Streetworker Program. Thanks to Song Sao (Streetworker) for creating the initial design of this model. In short, the pyramid shows how the four main components of a Streetworker's role all flow together (outreach, access to resources, peacemaking, and intensive follow-up).

A summary of the four overall aspects of a Streetworker's mission are described as follows:

- 1- Everything begins with outreach (whether it is on the street, in the neighborhood, or through referrals from other systems-based agencies). Meeting teens "where they are," a Streetworker's role always begins by building relationships and identifying the needs of those young people most overlooked and labeled as "atrisk" in the community. Streetworkers can be found building relationships throughout the community ... whether it is in the downtown after school lets out, by a park or the courthouse in the late afternoon, or at Showcase Cinemas on a Friday evening.
- 2- Streetworkers serve as a broker in helping youth access the community's resources as well as providing advocacy services. Streetworkers assist young people by connecting them to existing resources in the community... everything from help getting back into school to assistance in getting health insurance.
- 3- Available 24/7 on an on-call basis, Streetworkers develop various peacemaking processes between those youth that are most often involved in street violence or other crises. The primary theme of our approach centers around the strength of using every crisis an opportunity for building a positive change in a young person's life. These are the moments when transformation can most often occur!
- 4- And lastly, the glue that holds this whole approach together is the Streetworkers' attention to intensive follow-up services for all those teens they work with (i.e. home visits, nightly phone calls, or visits to other support people in their life). Through such follow-up, we focus on continuous relationship-building - the strength behind our overall approach.

UTEC Accomplishments:

The following are but a few highlights from our major departments that speak to the way in which teens can excel in non-traditional, multi-cultural learning environments. Youth Organizing/Youth Development:

? In 2005 our Youth Organizing Center facilitated their second Youth Candidates Forum, where all 18 City Council candidates came to hear concerns and questions from the 250 young people in attendance.

? UTEC conducts a yearly voter registration/education drive for teens throughout Lowell.

? UTEC partnered with Rape Crisis Services of Greater Lowell for the third year in a row to organize Lowell's Take Back the Night rally and march.

? In 2005, UTEC's Youth Organizing Center partnered with Boston-based organizations, Health Care for All and The Public Policy Institute, to spearhead a youth-led statewide organizing initiative called Teens Leading The Way. They are now working on a campaign to fund 10 drop-in mental health centers across the Commonwealth and recently had our own bill created to sponsor such legislation.

? In May 2006, our Young Women's Programming was honored by the Boston Women's Fund at their annual Take A Stand ceremony.

Streetworker Team

? The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Local Initiative Funding Partners Program also awarded UTEC a grant of \$460,000 (funding only 17 projects out of over 300 applicants). RWJF has profiled UTEC as the "project spotlight" for our peacemaking work through the Streetworker Program.¹

? Our Streetworker team organized 3 Peace Summits between rival gang sets last year.

? UTEC Executive Director, Gregg Croteau, was recently honored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation as a 2006 Community Health Leader. As one of 10 awardees out of over 300 nominations, this prestigious award is an exciting recognition of Gregg's and UTEC's accomplishments in supporting and enhancing community health through violence prevention and peacemaking.²

? Sako Long was awarded Reclaiming Youth's "Spirit of Youth" National Award for his work as a peacemaker among gangs in Lowell.

Educational/Work Skills Training

? Our Computer Repair/Networking met with the Lowell Small Business Assistance Center to develop a new youth-run computer repair business and just recently completed their own business plan.

? UTEC is in the process of developing a new alternative school program in partnership with Lowell Public Schools where 15-20 students who have dropped out of school can receive a Lowell High School diploma from a new project-based, individually tailored program.

1 Please see http://www.lifp.org/html/project/focus_UTEC.html for more details.

2 Press release available at: http://utec-lowell.org/press/gregg_comm.health.award.shtml