

Testimony of
David Fair

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U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee
Public Hearing on Youth Violence and Mentoring
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Good morning.

Thank you for this opportunity to come before you on behalf of the Board of Directors of United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania, our 120,000 annual donors and our over 50,000 volunteers dedicated to improving the quality of life of all of the residents of southeastern Pennsylvania.

Since 1921, our United Way has raised and invested several billion dollars of financial contributions and countless hours of volunteer energy to relieve the pain and suffering of vulnerable people throughout our region. And in those 86 years we have learned again and again a very obvious lesson:

We as a community have a much easier time despairing that problems facing our community are intractable than we do in making the effort to actually solve them.

We commend Sen. Specter and the members of the Senate Judiciary Committee for taking leadership in this hearing today to help us focus on real solutions that have a proven track record, not only in reducing the level of violence in our community, but also in assuring our young people of a future in which they can be successful and self-reliant. For too long we have invested both taxpayer and charitable dollars in experimenting with ever-new approaches to the same old problems, while failing to direct adequate resources to the strategies that have already been shown to work in today's world.

Mentoring of children and adolescents - assuring that each and every child has a mature adult in their lives to look up to, to learn from, and (dare I say it?) to even teach - is one of those rare approaches that has a strong academic backing and also makes common sense. All of us in this room who believe we've had some measure of success in our lives know that it's true - that there was some grownup, whether it was a parent, a relative, a teacher, a neighbor, or somebody we met down at the rec center or at our summer job, who helped us through our growing pains and who was there for us when we thought no one would be.

As you've heard this morning, there is a wealth of evidence that by increasing the opportunity for a young person to bond with a caring adult we can make miracles happen. Yet despite the fact that we know this to be true, we continue to not do enough to make sure those relationships are encouraged, supported and adequately resourced.

And we are suffering the consequences.

Despite some signs of progress earlier in this decade, in Philadelphia we have recently been making a U-turn in our efforts to assure a safe and stable environment for our children to grow up in. Philadelphia's children and youth are facing ever-greater challenges to their future success as adults, and as parents of the region's next generation.

A few years ago in Philadelphia we were proclaiming a major reduction in the number of serious child abuse cases reported in our city - almost a 1/3rd reduction between 1996 and 2004. But now the number of reported cases of serious abuse is rising again.

After consistent reductions in the number of children we were placing in foster care and delinquency facilities over several years, we are now returning to the approach that the only solution to threats to family life is to take the children away from their families and put them somewhere else. And not only are we increasing the placement of children in foster homes, group homes and institutions, but the proportion of those placements occurring among older youth has also skyrocketed - from less than 20% in 2001 to over 50% today.

Similarly, the number of arrests of juveniles for serious crimes dropped by 22% between 2000 and 2004. It's now going up again, but perhaps of more concern, the proportion of those arrests related to violent crime is rising even faster. Other indicators - the number of youth placed in delinquent facilities, the well-publicized increase in the number of homicides claiming juvenile victims as well as the increase in the number of juvenile perpetrators of homicide, the vast increase in the number of petitions for misconduct filed in our Family Court system annually - all show that after several years of positive results, the clock is turning back.

Before I came to United Way in late 2005, I had worked for almost ten years in city government in the behavioral health, child welfare and juvenile justice systems. In that time, I and my colleagues oversaw the expenditure of billions of dollars every year. But because of the play of a variety of forces, most of that money is spent, not in preventing the situations that lead to violence, but in ineffective temporary fixes and the haphazard symptom relief.

In the behavioral health world, we focus on new methods of treatment with only a small nod to recovery from mental illness and addiction.

In the child abuse world, we focus on protecting children after they had been threatened, rather than preventing the threat in the first place.

In the juvenile justice world, we tend to warehouse and punish children in trouble rather than take full advantage of the opportunity they are giving us to show them a better way while we still have a real chance.

In each of these areas, we've always recognized the importance of mentoring as an essential component of any solution-focused effort to help our children. But because of regulations, politics, habit - when it came to spending the money, priority has always had to be given to hiring and supporting more and more professional staff to do what we used to rely on families and communities to accomplish.

United Way defines its overarching mission as "mobilizing the caring power of people to improve lives."

We believe that solutions to the problems of youth violence can best be found in those families and communities.

We believe that being more creative and supportive of the variety of approaches we mean when we use the word "mentoring" will provide the foundation we need to make that effort stronger and more effective. We are committed to redoubling our efforts to build that foundation through our leadership, our fundraising, and our call on everyone, in government and out, to action.

As you've heard today, there has been significant research on a variety of mentoring approaches and what makes them work and what undermines their effectiveness. Of course, we need to continue to study these efforts and learn from them. But we don't have to wait for more studies to know what we need to do.

Expansion of quality programs matching adult and peer mentors to youth, such as those demonstrated by Big Brothers Big Sisters and others, is needed in all parts of our region.

United Way believes we also need to find new approaches to offering mentoring support that fit with today's urban realities. Traditional mentoring models, while still effective for many youth, sometimes fall short in helping today's highest-risk youth face the many complicated challenges and obstacles that limit their chances for future success.

We are increasingly concerned about the shortage of male mentors and mentors of color, at the difficulties many mentors have in relating to and supporting more troubled youth, at the resistance many young people have to trusting mentors because of bad experiences with other adults, and at the lack of resources at hand to be more creative in defining what a mentor is and ways of mentoring that are designed for today's world. As we've heard, more and more of our young people are facing more serious and numerous risks, and the mentoring they need is much more complicated than it used to be; more and more of our adult mentors are finding they can't handle the challenges presented by their mentees because they have not been adequately trained or did not realize what they were getting into. Even our best mentoring initiatives, such as those led by Big Brothers Big Sisters, are relieved when they can successfully match mentors with mentees in relationships that last at least one year - but data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health showed that for a mentoring relationship to have a life-long positive impact, it needs to last for as long as nine years.

In addition to preserving and protecting what has been created, it is clear that we need to establish a greater dynamic aimed at dramatically expanding, enhancing and improving this work. We need to accept that, at least for those youth at higher risk of committing or being

victimized by violence, we need to do more than set up more opportunities for volunteer adults to play only a glancing role in the lives of the youth they are trying to help.

Mentoring is not about hanging out, and it's no longer about simply providing a way for kids to get to ball games they might not have been able to get to on their own.

We need to be serious, treat mentoring as a serious intervention, support real standards of quality, and provide serious amounts of money and attention.

We have an urgent need to create a much larger cadre of mentors that is serious about this work, is willing to learn new ways of engaging and working with their mentees, and comes from the communities where the youth live.

We need to make sure that these mentors learn the skills they need to overcome the barriers that keep them from being more effective with their mentees and discourage them from sticking it out when the child tests their commitment.

We need community organizations to find more effective ways to nurture and support both mentors and mentees in what for both can be among the most important relationships they ever have.

United Way of Southeastern Pennsylvania has embarked on a campaign, which we call our Campaign for Mentors, to support new partnerships around mentoring so that the concept of a caring adult for every child regardless of their circumstances is something we can take for granted as part of our community and family life.

This is not going to be easy. Today's young people are not growing up in the world that most of us did.

I grew up being afraid of brass knuckles and a kick in the pants. Today, the increased availability of guns to young people has been matched by their increased willingness to use violence to achieve their goals. Standing up for oneself, and using force to maintain "respect," are essential elements of what is sometimes called the "code of the streets." Study after study has shown that for kids who grow up with and live by this code, it is unthinkable to walk away from a fight.

Physical confrontations have always been a part of adolescence in our society. But if both parties are armed, the result is too often deadly. Research has shown that the realization that many youth on the street are carrying a weapon increases the potential for an immediate and exaggerated response to real or perceived threats. As we've read all too often in recent years in our daily newspapers, even trivial disputes can end in death when guns are involved.

It's sad but true that this behavior also results from "mentoring," of a sort. Adults model or even facilitate much of this behavior. Although many young people benefit from the influence of a responsible, caring adult, others are led down a different path. The principal commodities of violence -- drugs, alcohol, and firearms -- are produced by adults, as is the media that glorifies them.

We're not ignorant of these realities but we are somehow disconnected from our power to do something about them. Why do we prefer to build enough prison space for 15,000 Philadelphians to be incarcerated every year, but are dumbfounded about what to do about the 13,000 who stop regularly attending school? Why do we wait for a teenager to be murdered before we realize that we could have helped them when they started having behavior problems in the 5th grade? Why does what we know from science and research about the confluence of psychological, social and spiritual factors that make some young people become violent seem so little reflected in our public policy and in how we invest tax dollars in addressing these issues?

We often respond to the crisis facing so many of our children as if it was a forest fire. As you may know, there's a couple of ways to fight a forest fire. You can put it out, or you can set up a firebreak. A firebreak creates a barrier around the fire so it doesn't spread. Then you wait for the fire to burn itself out.

When it comes to the violence that so many of our children grow up in today, too many of us have decided not to put out the fire, but to set up a firebreak and let the victims burn.

At United Way, we are suggest a new approach.

As part of our new plan for making a real impact on the community, which we are calling our Agenda for Community Solutions, United Way is pursuing a range of strategies aimed at mobilizing the caring power of our communities to put a stop to the violence facing our children.

In the public policy arena, we are calling on the various public systems of care - public health, mental health, substance abuse treatment, child welfare, juvenile justice, youth development - to recognize that quality mentoring can be an essential tool that they each must use to achieve their objectives for the people they serve.

In the field of mentoring, we seek to create new and stronger training of mentors, especially those working with children with intensive challenges, help programs meet higher standards, and develop stronger networks of support for mentors so that they can keep their own hope alive even when their mentees try their patience and commitment.

In the community, we are investing in new strategies to recruit mentors, especially mentors of color and male mentors who are in short supply. We are facilitating unique partnerships - for example, a project in Germantown that brings together youth from Germantown Public High School and Germantown Friends School, a preparatory private school, in a theater project to help erode class and cultural barriers that have been known to feed tension and violence in that neighborhood; another project with the Philadelphia Mural Arts Project and the Philadelphia Police Department, bringing together police officers with troubled youth in creating public art in the neighborhood in which they work and live; yet another project that supports high school sophomores in mentoring children from a neighborhood middle school, so that the middle school child can have a senior champion once they arrive at high school.

I mentioned some previous experience in the behavioral health field, and one thing I learned from those days was how important hope and expectation are to the success of psychotherapy. I think that is also true about mentoring.

We ask that we choose to invest in hope for our children rather than in simply managing their pain.

We ask that we don't just build a firebreak and let the fire burn.

We know we have it within us to put the fire out.

Thank you.