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Testimony before the HEE Committee of the Minneapolis City Council

Re: Violence as a Public Health Issue Resolution

Folks, tomorrow is election day. From TV ads we have learned that a Governor is to be blamed for the problem of crime, an Attorney General is to be blamed for the problem of crime, various state legislators are to be blamed for the problem of crime, certain congressional candidates will prove unsuitable in addressing crime, the next county attorney will better address problems of crime, the next Sheriff will better address problems of crime. Just so you don't feel left out, it has also been alleged that Minneapolis elected officials have not properly addressed issues of crime. Last year, many of you won elections, as did the Mayor, in which inability to address issues of crime was made the central campaign issue. A frequent, but absolutely incorrect, target for the problem of crime are our county judges. In short, everyone in positions of power seemingly has the power to improve public safety.

With the central importance of this issue to every political office, and to nearly every elected and trying-to-be-elected public official, why hasn't crime been well addressed?

I put forward today that the simplistic messages in political campaigns regarding crime reflect a wrongly simplistic, and often plain wrong, understanding of why crime occurs and what can be done to reduce it. Sometimes, the way to win votes is to put forward solutions that have no basis in criminal justice research. These messages become self-reinforcing; when public understanding becomes more and more misinformed, demands are made on public officials, and police, that are not helpful. There is no proof, for instance, that vigorously enforcing and prosecuting misdemeanors deters felonies. There is no proof that raising a criminal sentence from five years to seven years will mean an offender who would have otherwise committed a second crime will now reform, or that a person considering a crime will say: if the sentence was five years I'd do it but now I think it's too risky. But that doesn't stop a lot of nonsense that to get tough on crime you need to increase sentences.

The fact that so many youth of color in this city who live in economically and family-stressed circumstances, who are the ones at risk for being offenders or victims, are in their situation is not unrelated to last decade's "get tough on crime" approach, saturation deployment and corresponding arrests in certain neighborhoods, which has made so many parents unemployable due to employer attitudes about those with criminal records – not to mention caused broken homes, because psych problems such as addiction are dumped into criminal justice, jails. And the sentences keep getting longer.

For each paragraph of the resolution before you there's so much that could be said. But most important about the resolution is the call to move beyond shallow rhetoric and truly look at youth

violence in brand new ways, ways that should be supported by scientific study demanded of the health field and not the politics-as-usual that dominate criminal justice solutions. Consider that one of the reasons there's never-ending tensions between communities of color and police – and by extension to the criminal justice system as a whole – is because those community members know, by living through it, that whatever short-term safety police or prosecutors accomplish in an individual intervention, the cumulative or long-term effect is harmful. I therefore urge that the committee to arise from this resolution appropriately reflect the self-sufficiency of communities of color to achieve their own solutions, based on knowledge all the well-meaning outsiders plain don't have.

I also am compelled to say that this issue is too important to devolve into the politics of self-interest. The criminal justice players should not use this proposed committee as a way to promote their own departmental funding and organizations. And nonprofits should not be participating if their true purpose is only to sniff out some funding.

We need a fresh start in addressing the problem of youth violence, one that is driven by the most affected communities but not driven by self-interest, shallow rhetoric, or political considerations. I thank the community members, foundation officers, and city staff who have made a way to proceed as such possible.

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