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Before the
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES - JUDICIARY COMMITTEE
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Re: Appropriations for Youth Violence Prevention

Congressman Ellison. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today regarding the appropriations related to youth violence prevention.

My name is Dr. BraVada Garrett-Akinsanya, and I am licensed clinical psychologist with 28 years of experience and an expertise in trauma survival and African American mental health. I serve as the Executive Director of the *African American Child Wellness Institute*, a children's mental health agency dedicated to the research, delivery and coordination of comprehensive wellness strategies for children of African descent. I also serve as the President of *Brakins Consulting and Psychological Services*, which has the mission of "providing excellent, culturally competent mental health and consultation services that meet the needs of children, adults, families and organizations." Finally, I am the mental health consultant to the *Social Wellness Cluster of the Minneapolis Urban League*. A majority of my clients reside within the urban Empowerment Zone neighborhoods of north and south Minneapolis, which represent the areas of greatest social and economic distress in the entire city. The residents of these communities suffer disproportionately from an array of social, health, and educational problems which include: poverty, unemployment and underemployment, poor academic achievement, lack of health insurance, teen pregnancy, infant mortality, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse, mental health issues, and gang violence. They also are characterized by disproportionate involvement in the foster care, child protection, and criminal justice systems. Accordingly, data from the Minneapolis Police Department's Criminal Investigations Division, suggested that a majority of violent episodes (both victims and perpetrators) involved African Americans between the ages of 13-29. **At that time** a focus group was held at the Minneapolis Urban League asking African American parents about their experiences and what could be done about the crime in the neighborhoods. The parents described feeling "battle-weary" and ill-equipped to handle the challenges of parenting today's youth who are inundated with exposure to drugs, guns, gangs and death. The African American parents in the focus group indicated that they felt as if they were fighting a daily battle for their children's lives and related that they needed new, innovative parenting strategies to reduce the risk of losing their children to "the streets," the criminal justice system. In response to this community-based need, the City of Minneapolis Department of Health and Family Support offered violence prevention support through a Community Development Block Grant. Project Murua: A Pre-meditated Parenting Boot Camp was one of the recipients of the grants. **Murua** is the Swahili word for respect.

Today, I am pleased to say that *Project Murua* is a key program within the Mayor's *Blueprint for Preventing Youth Violence*. As you are aware, the Blueprint contains four broad goals and thirty-four action steps. *The purpose of Goal One is to: "Ensure that every young person in Minneapolis is supported by at least one trusted adult in their family or their community."* To the end, this 10-week intensive parent training curriculum is focused on improving parent-child relationships among the most vulnerable population experiencing violence - African Americans. (*Note: For a detailed description of the modules of the curriculum see Appendix A*). Project Murua is based on the African-Centered Wellness Model©, which is a "multi-dimensional model of holistic health that represents a balanced way of viewing oneself in the world, especially in terms of traditional African principles and values." Thus,

parents use African principles on which they promote cultural (Kuumba), social (Umoja), emotional (Ujimaa), academic (Busara), vocational (Nia), physical (Kujichagulia), spiritual (Imani), and financial (Ujamaa) wellness in themselves and their children. In addition to utilizing this model, Project Murua combines the best practices of other nationally-respected parenting programs such as the CCIC Effective Black Parenting Program (EBPP), the HOMEBUILDERS Program, and the Parenting Wisely Program. Collectively, these programs focus on improving family function and communication, building adult and youth self-esteem, increasing social support, and facilitating efforts to combat child abuse, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency, gang violence, behavioral problems, and emotional disturbances. Thus, Project Murua provide African American parents the ammunition they need to win the war on violence by arming them with culturally-congruent knowledge, skills and resources to engage in responsible, respectful parenting strategies that promote wellness and reduce violence among high-risk youth ages 8 to 18.

As part of Project Murua, parents undergo a “family wellness assessments” in order to evaluate the family’s strengths and weaknesses as they relate to the promotion of wellness and the reduction of risk for violence and dysfunction. After the family wellness assessment is completed, each family is assisted in creating a “family wellness plan.” To date, close to 75 participants have graduated from the program. Upon graduation, program participants may opt to serve as co-facilitators for future Project Murua training courses and/or maintain connection to the program through the Project Murua Breakfast Club, which meets monthly. Using a “national guard model” The Breakfast Club is designed to continue to provide drills and a venue for continued training and support for Bootcamp graduates. Participants in the Breakfast Club may also be “deployed” as community peer educators to area schools, churches or events in which they, in turn, provide leadership, modeling and teaching about ways in which other parents can decrease violence and promote wellness in their children.

Pre- and post- tests are also given to assess exposure to violence, parenting skills and knowledge, knowledge of available resources. The expected outcomes from these both subjective and objective measures have been promising in that the following results have been found (See appendix B):

- (1) Program participation has positively affected parental knowledge & skills. For example, in the last boot camp class, 94% of the parents “very much agreed” that they **had improved their parenting skills.**
- (2) Parents report increased access to systems (such as healthcare) and resources that will enable them to meet their wellness goals. In the last class, 87% of the parents “very much agreed” while 13% of the parents “agreed or somewhat agreed” that they had improved their abilities to promote wellness in themselves and their children.
- (3) Parents and their children report decreased incidences of having been the victims or perpetrators of a violent act. Pre-intervention measures showed that 13% of the parents in the last class were victims or perpetrators of violence, while post-intervention measures indicated 0% (i.e., none) of the parents were victims or perpetrators of violence.
- (4) Likewise, data provides some support that the overall Blueprint is working with this population. For example, while 36% of the program participants in the first Project Murua class had been exposed to violence prior to intervention, only 6% of the program participants in the last class had been exposed to violence within the last two weeks.

With evidence such as this, it is my hope that the committee will continue to fund programs aimed at reducing Youth Violence through programs like the Mayor’s Blueprint. Such a bold move will help us all join the ranks of the Project Murua Parents whose mission is: “To fight the battle to save our children’s lives.” Thank you for your time.