

Karen Kelley-Ariwoola Testimony

May 1, 2009

Good afternoon Congressman Ellison, Mayor Rybak, Elected Officials and Members of the Community.

My name is Karen Kelley-Ariwoola and I am the Vice President of Community Philanthropy at The Minneapolis Foundation. I am also pleased to serve as one of the co-chairs of the Minneapolis Youth Violence Steering Committee. I join you here today to share The Minneapolis Foundation's commitment to reducing youth violence in Minneapolis and to urge you to join us in this effort. I also have a personal stake in this conversation as a resident of North Minneapolis and a parent of two African American boys.

There is an Ethiopian proverb that says "When spider webs unite they can tie up a lion." In Minneapolis the "lion" is a metaphor for the gripping toll that violence is taking on our community. The "spider web" is represented by the people in this room, who have committed themselves to the vision of a violence-free community as reflected in the goals of the Blueprint for Action.

The development of the Blueprint was I believe a defining moment for the City of Minneapolis. It was recognition that our City was losing a generation

of youth to violence, especially youth of color. It represented a conscious choice to walk away from a set of approaches that had us on a path that was leading to the destruction of our community, to step on a new path that has the hope of saving this generation of youth and those yet to be born. This new path required the City to acknowledge that youth violence is preventable, has identifiable risk factors, that we can design interventions that address the risk factors, and that we are committed to measuring and evaluating results. We needed this smarter, targeted problem solving approach to move forward on the issue of youth violence. I think this approach is starting to payoff in small but significant ways, ways that other communities in our nation can learn from; but we cannot rest until the ringing of gun shots cease, until we as a community choose to hold every life as sacred, and until no more lives are lost to senseless violence. We cannot stop until we “tie up the Lion.”

Imagine a vision that every child in Minneapolis is wrapped in a “web” of supportive programs, of caring adults, of responsive and respectful police, of public places and organizations that are safe havens, and of an entire community who constantly give and reinforce a message that violence in our homes, schools, and community is unacceptable.

Over the years, The Minneapolis Foundation has approached the issue of youth violence from a variety of angles. We have supported Gun Buy Back efforts, convened the community to discuss the problems and solutions, funded advocacy and organizing efforts designed to address the underlying causes of violence in our community and we have invested in organizations who are on the front lines of reducing youth violence. Many of these organizations are working with youth already affected by violence to help them find a new life. Others have been successful in preventing youth from engaging in a violent lifestyle and it is more of this preventative, youth development approach that our city needs. This approach demands that we not look at violence as just a public safety issue – but that we take into account all of the cultural, developmental, familial, social and economic factors that impact the issue of violence as well as those that serve as protective factors. It also demands that we consider the role that bias and discrimination play in the overrepresentation of youth of color —especially Black males in the youth violence statistics.

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The Minneapolis Foundation’s particular interest in the Blueprint is Goal #4: Unlearn the Culture of Violence in our Community. As one of the co-chairs of the Youth Violence Steering Committee I and my Committee members were privileged to listen to the voices of many youth in the process of

developing the Blueprint. One particular conversation that was held at the Lao Cultural Center, just blocks from here, sticks in my mind: members of the Committee sat in a circle with a group of diverse youth—they talked about their day to day existence, about the role that violence plays in their lives and they said something that was so troubling to me: they said that in their lifetime, violence has become the norm. They see violence in their homes, in their schools, in their dating relationships, in the music, in the media, perpetrated by adults and by other youth. The “web” they knew was one that constantly reinforced the notion that violence is “ok,” it’s normal and it is to be expected.

As I reflected on my own childhood I recall how violence was an anomaly. I never saw a man hit a woman, or a child carrying a gun, or felt unsafe walking down the street or playing in my own back yard. Violence was something I saw on TV, in cartoons or on the news, but it wasn’t my reality. Yet it is the reality of too many Minneapolis children. The youth were so right when they said that “it shouldn’t have to be this way.”

And that’s why The Minneapolis Foundation is investing in the development of a “Public Information and Mobilization Campaign” designed by youth and

adults to give voice to the many ways young people experience violence today and what can be done to help prevent it. Conducted in partnership with the University of Minnesota Extension, Center for Youth Development and a public relations/marketing firm yet to be selected, the project will combine traditional awareness-raising mediums like billboards, text messages, web links, [street theater](#), radio or TV [and now Facebook](#) PSA's with face to face community conversations [and events](#), particularly in those neighborhoods that have been most impacted by [violence](#). This campaign will be shaped by messages that are crafted by youth from across Minneapolis with an ambitious goal of changing the culture of violence in Minneapolis by changing and reframing the constant drumbeat of messages that says "violence is normal, it's ok, and that's life in Minneapolis." We believe this Campaign will help to lay the groundwork for changing the tone and climate for violence in Minneapolis and in tandem with work in the other three goal areas; we believe there is a promise of creating a violence free community in Minneapolis.

Comment [u1]: Consider the following? We will follow-up this campaign that acknowledges the expertise of those most affected by the violence—youth themselves—with grants based on the recommendations of these youth and adults. This gives legs to the campaign and moves from awareness-raising to mobilization, further strengthening the web of support.

So as you leave this place and return to Washington, I send you back with this message: this "lion"—the violence in our community—is under threat in Minneapolis. The lion is scared because he can see that we as a community

are joining forces to tie him up. I invite you—our elected officials who represent our government, the government that is by design “by and for the people” to join us in this fight. Grab your edge of the web; help us wrap a supportive community around our children. We need your partnership, your resources and your commitment to realize this vision. “When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion.” Thank you.

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