



Boston City Council
Committee on Women and Healthy Communities
Ayanna Pressley, Chair

December 14, 2010

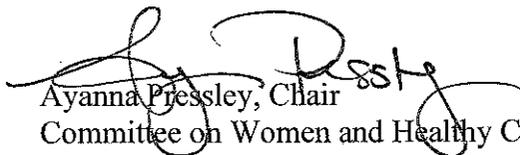
Dear Councilors:

The Committee on Women and Healthy Communities held a hearing to discuss Docket #0965, Order for a Hearing to Understand the Challenges Faced by Families Impacted by Violence and Gather Recommendations Regarding the City's Response System. This matter was sponsored by me and was referred to this Committee on June 23rd, 2010. The public hearing was held on August 11th, 2010 at which public comment was taking.

The Committee also held a held a hearing to discuss Docket #0209, Order for a Hearing to Investigate Social Services Available to Victims of Community Violence. This matter was sponsored by Councilor Yancey and me and was referred to this Committee on February 3rd. The public hearing was held on November 16th, 2010 at which public comment was taking.

Attached please find an informational report on Dockets #0965 and 0209.

For the Chair:


Ayanna Pressley, Chair
Committee on Women and Healthy Communities

Report of the Committee on Women & Healthy Communities:

**Family Voices: Strengthening Homicide Response
and Family Support in the City of Boston**



Report to Members of the Boston City Council

December 15, 2010

Presented for the Committee by Ayanna Pressley, Chair

INTRODUCTION

In response to an increase in homicides, Councilor Pressley, Chair of the Committee on Women and Healthy Communities held a hearing to understand the impact of street violence on families and to listen to their recommendations for best serving them. The Committee sponsored a follow-up hearing a few months later to analyze the effectiveness of the violence response and social support system in the City of Boston.

The first hearing, referred to as “Family Voices” allowed testimony from family members only. During that hearing the critical role providers play in the healing process was described by many. However, there were an alarming number of families who indicated they felt disconnected from the services that exist in the city.

During the follow-up hearing, city and state officials, hospitals, and many other providers shared information about the services they offer. In addition, many described immediate remedies they have put in place based on feedback they received during the first hearing. While the Committee is thankful for the fast response of the provider community, there is still more work that can be done to better serve individuals and families who have experienced a homicide or other violent incident.

This report summarizes findings from the hearings, describes improvements that have been made by providers, and makes additional recommendations for developing a seamless violence response and service delivery system in the City of Boston.

LISTENING TO FAMILIES

On August 11, 2010 Councilor Pressley, Chair of the Committee on Women and Healthy Communities sponsored a first-of-its-kind hearing, known as “Family Voices” (Docket #0965). Only surviving family members of homicide victims and survivors of street violence were permitted to testify. Numerous city and state officials, including representatives from the Boston Police Department, District Attorney’s office, Suffolk County Sheriff’s office, the

hospital trauma centers, grief providers, and faith leaders, rather than testifying, as is typical during City Council hearings, listened to the stories and recommendations for improving services. Families shared powerful testimony about their experiences but also offered an array of suggestions for better serving them. Below are many of their recommendations:

Boston Police Department (BPD) / Suffolk County District Attorney’s Office

- Every family should be assigned an advocate for ongoing contact¹
- Provide regular updates about cases to families
- Improve sensitivity and response by police officers
- Increase police presence in "hot spots" and relationship building with community
- Improve management of offenders exiting jail

Hospitals

- Improve the level of details about the incident in the Medical Report
- Improve hospital staff response and sensitivity to family members during hospital stay
- Improve hospital follow-up after an incident when referring families to services when they leave hospital
- Develop programs and other supports for those who are shot/stabbed and survive²

Emergency Medical Services

- Improve response time
- Allow families to ride in the ambulance or get police escort if they cannot

Boston Public Schools

- Have trauma response teams in all schools
- Require trauma training for all school staff so they are better equipped to refer students and parents to appropriate support services

¹ During the provider hearing, it was confirmed that the Boston Police Department and District Attorney’s office assign an advocate for every case. As noted below, the Committee recommends improved and proactive communication with families about services.

² During the provider hearing, it was confirmed that Boston Medical Center has Violence Intervention Advocacy Program (funded by Boston Public Health Commission), which offers community-based and case management services to victims of gunshots and stabbings. As noted below, the Committee recommends improved and proactive communication with families about services.

Government

- Regulate knives sold in convenience stores
- Increase number of bereavement days after loss of immediate family member
- Improve gun control laws
- Establish city fund, to supplement state fund, to help defray burial costs

Grief and Trauma Services

- Improve access to grief counseling, including for those who cannot pay
- Train youth to provide grief counseling to peers
- Develop specialized trauma support for siblings

Community

- Increase reporting of suspicious behavior in neighborhoods
- Improve parental and community responsibility for youth

Media

- Notify victim's families before publishing information
- Be accountable for reporting inaccurate information

Miscellaneous

- Develop a pre-release victim/offender dialogue program
- Increase support for young men with criminal records
- Increase access to substance abuse programs for youth

PROVIDERS RESPONSE TO FAMILY VOICES

On November 16th, the Committee on Women and Healthy Communities held a follow-up hearing (Docket #0209, co-sponsored by Councilor Yancey) where representatives from the provider community (see Appendix A for complete list and contact information) described the services they provide and shared what, if any, changes they made as a result of hearing recommendations from families. For the purposes of this report, the summary below focuses on specific concerns and recommendations raised by families and describes the actions that various

providers have already taken to improve service delivery³:

Boston Police Department

- Confirmed they have a Victim Witness Advocate Program that was established in 2006 and serves all families impacted by homicide
- Launched a resource section on BPDNews.com that will provide updates on death investigations, information about a variety of BPD and other resources available, and tips for navigating the complex criminal justice system
- Implementing a trauma training for Homicide and other units to address grief that officers may face as a result of responding to violent crimes
- Exploring sensitivity trainings to help officers respond more effectively and compassionately to victims and their families after a homicide
- Continues to explore funding to develop an annual resource fair for survivors and a program to better serve youth siblings of homicide victims

Boston Public Health Commission

- Funds the Violence Intervention and Advocacy Program at Boston Medical Center, which works with survivors of shootings and stabbings, from the Emergency Room to the home via intensive Case Management
- Extended funding to Louis D. Brown Peace Institute for two more years and is working with them to develop a program to provide additional stipends to families for burial support
- Continues to explore funding for a variety of trauma initiatives, particularly within the Boston Public School system

Boston Emergency Medical Services (EMS)

- Makes every effort to transport families in the ambulance with the victim as long as it will not impact the care and generally have others at the scene who can assist with transport
- Priority 1 responses, for the most serious incidents, are prioritized and EMS has very good response times for these types of incidents

³ This list may be incomplete; it includes changes confirmed during or after the hearing but is not comprehensive. Several providers who did not testify have committed to working cooperatively to make improvements.

- Has programs that empower youth to learn CPR to instill the value that it is “harder to take a life if you can save a life”

District Attorney’s Office, Victim Witness Assistance Program

- Assigns an advocate to every case whether it is bound for trial or unsolved
- Has two staff solely dedicated to assisting young survivors of shootings and stabbings who are interfacing with the court system as victims, connecting them with necessary services and assisting with relocation if needed
- Developing additional programs to reach young survivors of violence to prevent them from becoming perpetrators

Boston Medical Center

- Working with Emergency Department Staff to identify private space where families can spend time with their loved one after they have passed
- Implementing training for Psychiatric Nurses, Emergency Department Staff, and Social Workers on providing consistent and compassionate death notification to families
- Working with the Emergency Staff and Trauma team to ensure that there is always a doctor available to answer questions from the family
- Developing a systematic and consistent follow-up approach with families, including:
 - identifying a family member who can assist with the resource information provided at the time of death,
 - developing a follow-up system for Psychiatric Nurses (who are the staff that interface with the families in the Emergency Room)
 - ensuring every family receives a phone call after they have left the hospital to ensure they are connected with needed services

Victim Compensation and Assistance Division, Office of the Attorney General,

- Highlighted new regulations for victim crime compensation, including an increase in the funeral/burial reimbursement to \$6,500 (up from \$4,000) and a new benefit for crime scene

clean up services for victims and their families, up to \$1,500⁴

Massachusetts Office of Victim Assistance/Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center

- Provides funding to the Cambridge Center for Homicide Bereavement, a program that serves many families in Boston
- Recently awarded the Center for Violence Prevention and Recovery Program at Beth Israel Deaconess to provide additional homicide bereavement services to residents of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan in partnership with Bowdoin Street Health Center and the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute:
 - The Center is exploring ways to improve the sensitivity of staff response to families in the Emergency Department and consistency of follow-up with families to ensure they have been connected with services
 - Committed to coordinating with providers across the system to improve service delivery

Finally, the Committee on Women and Healthy Communities conducted research on existing gun and knife control laws. Massachusetts boasts the 4th toughest array of gun control laws in the country. However, illegal trafficking of guns from states with less stringent laws is of paramount concern. The City of Boston also has a few regulations that prohibit sales of certain knives to minors, prohibit sales of knives and other weapons by transient vendors, and prohibits any person from carrying certain types of knives and other weapons.⁵

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The testimony from providers, paired with the knowledge gained from families in August, not only lead to some immediate changes but also gave a clearer picture on what is working and what still needs improvement. Below are additional

⁴ Promulgated under CHAPTER 256: An Act Reforming the Administrative Procedures Relative to Criminal Offender Record Information and Pre- and Post-Trial Supervised Release. Approved by the Governor, August 6, 2010.

⁵ City of Boston Municipal Code 16-39.1 Prohibition of Sale of Dangerous Instruments and City of Boston Municipal Code 16-45 Prohibiting the Carrying of Knives or Similar Weapons.

recommendations for improving the homicide response, and support system in our city:

Short-Term

Communication with Families - The burden of communication should rest with providers; it is unrealistic and unfair to expect families dealing with profound loss to follow-up.

- Providers should develop systems of regular check-ins with families (e.g. hospitals should follow-up with families after they leave, the police department should pro-actively provide updates about cases to families).
- When families express need for services, the provider should directly connect them with the relevant provider rather than simply giving them the contact information. Every effort should be made to follow-up with families to ensure they are receiving the requested services.
- Providers should utilize (and regularly update) the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute's Resource Guide for Professionals.

Communication Across Providers - It is critical that the lines of communication remain open between community, providers, and government and that each partner recognize the shared responsibility in maintaining those lines of communication.

- Each provider should continue to develop clarity about their role/specialty and clearly delineate when and how to communicate with the appropriate provider(s) when a service is needed that is not within its capacity.
- Providers should implement regular status updates and opportunities for ongoing communications including attending the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute's monthly provider breakfast.

Response System – Providers should develop and implement a standard protocol for responding to all homicides that includes at minimum:

- Clear delineation of what provider(s) respond at what points during and following an incident;
- Process for how/when providers will communicate with each other throughout the duration of the case; and
- How the protocol will be evaluated and revised on a regular basis to ensure remains effective.

City Council – The City Council should continue listening to and raising awareness about the needs of survivors of homicide and street violence, as well as providing a venue for families and providers to explore violence response and service-delivery improvements, including:

- Holding a hearing on trauma response in Boston Public Schools; and
- Developing a protocol for Councilors to refer to when responding to homicides or survivors.

Long-term

In addition to the above recommendations, providers and government should continue to explore:

- Additional funding to support families in covering burial and related expenses;
- Measures to curb trafficking of illegal guns;
- The adequacy of knife sales regulations;
- Strategies to improve access to mental health and substance abuse services for families of all income levels; and
- Programs to increase post-release victim/offender dialogue, as well as reentry support for offenders.

CONCLUSION

Several of the long-term recommendations above require monetary resources from the City of Boston, the State, as well as community agencies. In these economic times, it may be difficult to fund these proposed initiatives. However, improving communication across providers, as well as a commitment to developing a standard protocol for response to homicides, requires minimal, if any funding, and will go a long way in serving families impacted by street violence.

Following a homicide, families face a number of challenging decisions and must navigate complex criminal justice and social services systems, all while experiencing unimaginable grief. There is no single agency that can adequately serve survivors alone. It is imperative that providers continue to collaborate and communicate across agencies and systems to develop a seamless and consistent homicide response and family support system.

APPENDIX A. List of Providers who Testified November 16, 2010 (Docket #0209)

Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Center for Violence Prevention & Recovery

330 Brookline Avenue, Boston, MA 02215
(617) 667-8141
<http://www.bidmc.org/violenceprevention>

Boston Area Rape Crisis Center (BARCC)

989 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215
99 Bishop Allen Drive, Cambridge, MA 02139
Business line: (617) 492-8306
24-hour hotline: (800) 841-8371
<http://www.barcc.org/>

Boston Centers for Youth and Families

1483 Tremont Street, Boston, MA 02120
(617) 635-4920
<http://www.cityofboston.gov/bcyf/>

Boston Emergency Medical Services (EMS)

767 Albany Street, Boston, MA 02118
(617) 343-2367 or 911
<http://www.bostonems.com/>

Boston Institute for Psychotherapy

1415 Beacon Street #120, Brookline, MA 02446-4820
(617) 566-2200
<http://www.bostoninstitute.org/>

Boston Medical Center

One Boston Medical Center Place, Boston, MA 02118
(617) 638-8000
<http://www.bmc.org/index.htm>

Boston Police Department

One Schroeder Plaza, Boston, MA 02120
Homicide Unit: (617) 343-4470
Family Resource Officer: (617) 343-5543
Victim Witness Advocate: (617) 343-6512
<http://www.cityofboston.gov/police/>

Boston Public Health Commission

1010 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, MA 02118
(617) 534- 5395
<http://www.bphc.org/Pages/Home.aspx>

Brigham & Women's Hospital (attended only, did not testify)

Trauma, Burn, & Surgical Critical Care

75 Francis Street

Boston, MA 02115

617-732-7411

http://www.brighamandwomens.org/Departments_and_Services/surgery/services/burntrauma/

Cambridge Center for Homicide Bereavement

130 Bishop Allen Drive, Cambridge, MA 01239

(617) 792-7830

<http://www.challiance.org/vov/vov.shtml>

Children's Hospital Boston (submitted written testimony)

300 Longwood Ave, Boston, MA 02115

(617) 355-6000

<http://www.childrenshospital.org/clinicalservices.cfm>

The Child Witness to Violence Project, Boston Medical Center

88 East Newton St., Vose Hall

Boston, MA 02118

(617) 414-4244

<http://childwitness tov violence.org/pmwiki.php?n=Main.HomePage>

City Mission Society

14 Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108-3704

(617) 742-6830 ext. 203

<http://www.cmsboston.org/>

Fenway Community Health Center, Violence Recovery Program

Ansin Building, 1340 Boylston Street, Boston, MA 02215

(617) 927-6250

http://www.fenwayhealth.org/site/PageServer?pagename=FCHC_srv_services_violence

Greater Love Tabernacle, First Response Program

101 Nightingale Street, Dorchester, MA 02124

(617) 740-9480

<http://www.gltabernacle.com/index.cfm>

Harbor Health Services

1135 Morton Street, Boston, MA 02126

617-533-2358

<http://www.hhsi.us/metro-boston/>

The Home For Little Wanderers (submitted written testimony)

703 American Legion Highway, Roslindale, MA 02131

(617) 469-8500

www.thehome.org

InnerCity Weightlifting

23 Hardwick St #2, Cambridge, MA 02141

413-335-3547

<http://www.innercityweightlifting.org/>

Jamaica Plain Violence Intervention & Prevention Collaborative

Children's Hospital Boston @ Martha Eliot Health Center

75 Bickford Street ME-192, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

(617) 919-3427

Louis D. Brown Peace Institute (attended only, did not testify)

1452 Dorchester Avenue, 2nd Floor, Dorchester, MA 02122

(617) 825-1917

<http://www.louisdbrownpeaceinstitute.org/index.html>

Massachusetts Office for Victim Assistance (MOVA)

One Ashburton Place, Suite 1101, Boston, MA 02108

(617) 727-5200

<http://mova.state.ma.us/>

Renewal House

10 Putnam Street, Roxbury, MA 02119

(617) 277-4194

<http://www.uuum.org/templates/System/details.asp?id=42140&PID=567026>

Victim Compensation & Assistance Division, Office of the Attorney General

One Ashburton Place, 19th floor, Suite Boston, MA 02108

(617) 727-2200

<http://www.mass.gov/ago>

Victim Witness Assistance Program, Suffolk County District Attorney's Office

1 Bulfinch Place, Boston, MA 02114

(617) 619-4192

<http://www.mass.gov/dasuffolk/gvs.html>