

August 15, 2024

119K Commission  
Connecticut Conference of Municipalities  
545 Long Wharf Drive, 8th Floor  
New Haven, CT 06511

Dear Commissioners,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to your developing strategy for how to reduce by 50% the number of young people in Connecticut who are experiencing or severely at-risk of experiencing disconnection over the course of ten years. Our recommendations are focused on how to more effectively address community violence, which is a traumatizing, deadly, and costly issue that is an underlying cause of disconnection and negatively impacts young people, families, neighborhoods, healthcare systems, and businesses across Connecticut.

Through our many decades of combined experience as leaders in this field, as affirmed by the research on behavioral-science and evidence-informed interventions, we know how to effectively curb what Commissioner Juthani from the Department of Public Health recently coined a public health issue in Connecticut, and what the United States Surgeon General has declared a public health crisis in America.

It is through this lens and with this urgency that we offer the following evidence- and research-informed tactics to address Connecticut's unspoken crisis and reduce community violence.

#### **Development and Coordination of a Strong Ecosystem**

Community-based organizations working alone and without enabling policies, dedicated funding, and leadership from state and local leaders are impeded in their ability to implement interventions to combat community violence and provide the necessary supports to victims and perpetrators, as well as to their families and communities. It is, therefore, essential for municipal and other community leaders to establish and maintain strong local ecosystems. Through the intentional and strategic coordination of community-based organizations, government agencies, private industry, and individuals with lived experiences, these ecosystems foster trust amongst stakeholders and create opportunities for likely and unlikely partners to work together in implementing complimentary tactics in service of achieving their collective goals. Well-established and high-functioning systems also use data to understand whom is in need of which services, match effective interventions to service recipients accordingly, measure its own impact, and hold themselves accountable to their communities and the individuals they intend to serve.

And when state and local leaders dedicate funding to the service providers of such an ecosystem, the true power of the ecosystem can be tapped to drive transformative change in a community.

#### **Capacity & Field Building**

Community-based organizations providing violence intervention and prevention services are the frontline of a strong, interconnected, and collaborative community architecture working to curb community violence. To be effective, these community-based organizations need strong organizational capacities and a well-trained and compensated cadre of credible messengers.

Should the state, municipal leaders, and other funders be compelled to invest in violence prevention and intervention programs, it is critical for the organizations providing these services to be funded at the true cost of doing so, as well as to receive ongoing resources to continue strengthening every aspect of their operational capacity.

Helping organizations to strengthen their operational capacities drives increased effectiveness and impact, reduces staff turnover and burnout, mitigates risk of program failure or legal risk, and avoids missed opportunities for growth and innovation.

As we saw during the COVID-19 pandemic, the most effective messengers of critical public health and safety information were the individuals who had similar lived experiences as the people they were trying to educate and engage. Similarly, organizations working to curb community violence must be encouraged and resourced to hire, adequately compensate, and train and support credible messengers with lived experience, expertise, and a strong understanding of the communities with whom they are expected to engage.

It is imperative for organizations and funders to structure these employment opportunities with the understanding that this work is inherently stressful and risky, and that credible messengers come to this work with their own histories of psychological trauma and stress that are compounded by the vicarious trauma they experience as they engage in violence intervention and prevention. As they put their own lives on the line to save the lives of others, becoming highly trained in evidence-based practices to deliver intensive and complex program models, it is imperative that frontline staff in this industry be recognized as the professionals they are, and fairly compensated as such, as full-time employees with benefits and a living wage.

### **Implementation of Evidence-Based Practices**

The development of transformational relationships, the trauma-responsive provision of intensive wrap-around supports including access to pathways to supportive employment that pay livable wages, and the delivery of cognitive-behavioral theory-based skills by credible messengers and street outreach workers are evidence-based strategies to help a young person to change their behavior, reducing their engagement in community violence and increasing their readiness to engage in education and work.

There is extensive evidence for the efficacy of Cognitive Behavioral Techniques (CBT) also referred to as Cognitive Behavioral Strategies (CBS), in helping to mitigate the damaging psychological and physiological effects of experiencing a traumatic event or a series of traumatic events, including gun violence, community violence, and domestic violence, just to name a few.

According to David, Cristea, & Hofmann (2018, as cited in Marques, 2019) and Hofmann, Asnanni, Vonk, Sawyer, & Fang (2018, as cited in Marques, 2019), “Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy is the gold-standard for mental health treatment and is empirically supported by more than 400 randomized control trials across different populations and disorders.” Further, Hoffman, et al., 2012 (as cited in Marques, 2019), along with Warwick, Reardon, Cooper, Murayama, Reynolds, Wilson, and Creswell, (2017, as cited in Marques, 2019) reflect that the implementation of CBT with youth at risk helps the youth change their problematic thinking, emotions, and behaviors, further reinforcing the model’s efficacy.

Cognitive-Behavioral Strategies (CBS), a modular skill-based version of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, has been shown to be equally as efficacious at increasing emotion regulation strategies (Chorpita, Daleiden, & Weisz, 2005, as cited in Marques 2019). Ursache, Blair, & Raver (2012, as cited in Marques, 2019) found that “The ability to effectively regulate emotions has been associated with increased academic performance, particularly among youth, and decreased likelihood of engaging in impulsive and risky behaviors such as substance use (Silk & Steinberg, 2003, as cited in Marques, 2019).

Organizations that respond to and prevent violence whose staffs do not have quality training in these strategies are operating without critical tools they need to support the true behavior change that moves individuals involved in violence away from it. Organizations doing this work need more affordable, accessible, and high-quality training in CBT/CBS, that is specifically designed for delivery by community-based professionals who do not have formal clinical training; as well as ongoing support and professional development to ensure these techniques are implemented well and in a way that is appropriate within the context of their roles.

### **Access to Hospitals**

The staff at our organizations work tirelessly to prevent shootings from happening; and, when they do occur, our staff respond to the crisis immediately at any hour of the day or night. A lack of planning, coordination, and adequate training for violence intervention and healthcare staff creates dangerous situations for those closest to both the victims and perpetrators of the shooting.

While the immediate goal of the medical professionals following a shooting is to treat the patient, hospital policies, security staff, and law enforcement personnel must simultaneously discern and inform how, when, where, and with whom violence intervention staff are able to meet. The absence of a previously agreed upon plan that clearly articulates the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder as well as restrictions that are sometimes placed on trained violence intervention staff that limits their access to victims and their families in the hospital creates a precarious situation that potentially and unintentionally escalates the risk of continued or retaliatory violence.

We ask that your strategy encourage and incentivize hospitals to more effectively partner with local leaders, law enforcement, and trained staff from community-based organizations like ours.

### **Revisiting “Section 230”**

We urge your strategy to call upon the federal government to revisit Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996, the provision that protects social media platforms from being held liable for content posted by their users. Alan Rozenshtein (2023) from the Brookings Institution declared that “no statute has had a bigger impact on the internet than Section 230, and that after 30 years of its enactment, the meaning and scope of this section of the law continue to be uncertain.”

As currently written, parts of Section 230 stand as a significant barrier to curbing community violence, and therefore the federal government should consider reclassifying social media platforms, requiring content moderation standards, or the creation of content taskforces to oversee harmful interactions that may escalate into interpersonal violence.

Levinson-Waldman, Panduranga and Patel (2022) reflect that, “Social media conversations are difficult to interpret because they are often highly context-specific and can be riddled with slang, jokes, memes, sarcasm, and references to popular culture; heated rhetoric is also common.” This is why bipartisan legislation such as the bill introduced by Senators Blumenthal (D-CONN) and Blackburn (R-TENN) and recently passed by the United States Senate ([Kids Online Safety Act, S.1409, 118 Cong. 2023-2024](#)) is critical to helping clarify the complex and ambiguous roles and responsibilities of social media companies to help keep our young people safe.

The unanimous support in the United States Senate for needing to further clarify the laws the govern social media companies is best captured by Senators Blumenthal and Blackburn, who had this to say about their *Kids Online Safety Act* (Blackburn & Blumenthal, 2023, May 2):

“Big Tech has proven to be incapable of appropriately protecting our children, and it’s time for Congress to step in. The bipartisan Kids Online Safety Act not only requires social media companies to make their platforms safer by default, but it provides parents with the tools they need to protect their children online.” – Senator Blackburn

“Our bill provides specific tools to stop Big Tech companies from driving toxic content at kids and to hold them accountable for putting profits over safety. Record levels of hopelessness and despair—a national teen mental health crisis—have been fueled by black box algorithms featuring eating disorders, bullying, suicidal thoughts, and more. Kids and parents want to take back control over their online lives. They are demanding safeguards, means to disconnect, and a duty of care for social media. Our bill has strong bipartisan momentum. And it has growing support from young people who’ve seen Big Tech’s destruction, parents who’ve lost children, mental health experts, and public interest advocates. It’s an idea whose time has come.” – Senator Blumenthal

We urge the United States House of Representatives pass this legislation and for congress to continue to clarify social media companies’ roles and responsibilities as it relates to the proliferation of harm and violence impacting our young people.

Qualitative research (Elsaesser et al., 2021) has documented that social media platforms have become breeding grounds for internet banging, the process by which online threats escalate to offline, in-person violence. The proliferation of harmful content, including hate speech, cyberbullying, and incitement to violence is a public safety issue. Under Section 230, social media platforms are shielded from accountability, allowing such content to be shared unchecked and without regard for the healthy development and safety of impressionable youth.

Because there is little threat of liability written into Section 230, social media companies deflect responsibility and minimize their respective platform's role in this cycle of violence. The federal government should require social media platforms to adopt more responsible content review practices that would help mitigate the dire and deadly impacts of internet banging and the ensuing violence.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our input. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any follow-up questions that you may have about any of the topics covered in this testimony.

With appreciation,

Jaqueline Santiago, Executive Director  
COMPASS Youth Collaborative

Sunindiya Bhalla, Executive Vice President, Women & 2Gen  
Roca, Inc.

Len Jahad, Executive Director  
Connecticut Violence Intervention and Prevention

Marc Donald, President & CEO  
Catalyst CT

Ebony Epps, Director  
StreetSafe Bridgeport, Catalyst CT

## REFERENCES

- Blackburn, Marsha. & Blumenthal, Richard. (2023, May 2). [Blackburn, Blumenthal Introduce Bipartisan Kids Online Safety Act](#) [Press release].
- Beck, J. S. (2011). *Cognitive behavior therapy: Basics and beyond*. Guilford press.
- Chorpita, B. F., Daleiden, E. L., & Weisz, J. R. (2005). Identifying and selecting the common elements of evidence based interventions: A distillation and matching model. *Mental health services research*, 7(1), 5-20.
- David, D., Cristea, I., & Hofmann, S. G. (2018). Why cognitive behavioral therapy is the current gold standard of psychotherapy. *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 9, 4.
- Elsaesser, C., Upton Pattonb, D., Weinstein, E., Santiagod, J., Clarke, A., & Eschmann, R. (2021). *Small becomes big, fast: Adolescent perceptions of how social media features escalate online conflict to offline violence*. Children and Youth Services Review.
- Hofmann, S. G., Asnaani, A., Vonk, I. J., Sawyer, A. T., & Fang, A. (2012). The efficacy of cognitive behavioral therapy: A review of meta-analyses. *Cognitive therapy and research*, 36(5), 427-440.
- Kids Online Safety Act, S.1409, 118 Cong. 2023-2024. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/1409>.
- NBC Connecticut. (2024). [Tackling Gun Violence: CT DPH declares community violence a public health issue](#).
- Rozenshtein, Alan, Z. (2023). Interpreting the ambiguities of section 230. Brookings Institution.
- Silk, J., & Steinberg, L. (2003). Adolescents' emotion regulation in daily life: Links to depressive symptoms and problem behavior. *Child Development*, 74(6), 1869-1880.
- United States Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Surgeon General. (2024). [Firearm Violence: A public health crisis in America](#).
- Ursache, A., Blair, C., & Raver, C. C. (2012). The promotion of self-regulation as a means of enhancing school readiness and early achievement in children at risk for school failure. *Child Development Perspectives*, 6(2), 122-128.
- Warwick, H., Reardon, T., Cooper, P., Murayama, K., Reynolds, S., Wilson, C., & Creswell, C. (2017). Complete recovery from anxiety disorders following Cognitive Behavior Therapy in children and adolescents: A meta-analysis. *Clinical psychology review*, 52, 77-91.