

**Testimony of Leon Faruq
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**Domestic Policy Subcommittee
Oversight and Government Reform
Field Hearing – Baltimore, MD
Monday, October 1, 2007 – 9:30 a.m.
“Combating Drug Abuse and Drug related Crimes in Baltimore**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information on Operation Safe Streets. Operation Safe Streets is a community mobilization and outreach program based on CeaseFire, the highly successful Chicago program created by the School of Public Health at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Ceasefire was developed by public health practitioners to create behavior change through repetitive prevention messages and concrete services that support and give credibility to the message. In its first year of operation in high violence communities in Chicago, CeaseFire achieved reductions between 25% and 67%.

Operation Safe Streets (OSS) represents an important addition to existing programs by bringing a community-based and community-driven approach to violence prevention and intervention. The program is based on the CeaseFire model, which focuses on five core components: community coalition building, street outreach to at risk youth, public education, clergy involvement and law enforcement collaboration. Operation Safe Streets relies heavily on public education to change attitudes and behaviors toward violence, using both media campaigns and community organization techniques to change social norms. The primary messages of this program are that shooting is not acceptable in our communities, and that alternatives exist for our youth. OSS also incorporates and emphasizes a strong street outreach component, with outreach workers canvassing neighborhoods and connecting with at-risk youth and young adults during evenings and weekends to diffuse situations and link them to services, in order to bring about behavior change and develop alternatives to a life of violence.

Currently, the Baltimore City Health Department has awarded two grants totaling \$765,200 to two community organizations in high crime areas to implement the program. Funding for the initial two Operation Safe Streets sites comes from a grant award from the United States Department of Justice. This funding will support two sites for thirteen (13) months each, and is not renewable. Living Classrooms foundation was awarded the first award in April 2007. The program has been fully operational since July 2007 and has a complete staff including a violence prevention coordinator, outreach supervisor, 4 outreach workers and 1 community canvasser. The second community partner, Communities Organized to Improve Life (C.O.I.L.), was awarded a grant in August of 2007 and is in the beginning stages of the implementation process. Staff has been hired and will begin training with representatives from Chicago Ceasefire next week. C.O.I.L.'s OSS site is expected to be fully operational by November of 2007.

Living Classrooms' Operation Safe Streets Site focuses on police post 221 in the Southeastern police district. This target area is near McElderry Park and is bordered by Patterson Park Avenue to the west, Monument Street to the North, Linwood Avenue to the East, and Fayette Street to the South. This area was selected based on its high rate of violence including homicides and shootings.

The primary message of our program is "Stop Shooting". By focusing on the violent act, instead of other activities, we are able to build on existing anti-violence attitudes without making the most high-risk audience – youth involved in the drug trade – feel attacked or defensive. We deliver this message through our outreach workers, community leaders, posters, and flyers. We also emphasize this message at Safe Streets events.

Since launching our Operation Safe Streets site, our outreach workers have really connected with our target community in presenting the message of "No Shooting". Our workers are on the street Tuesday & Wednesday 2pm - 10pm and Thursday thru Saturday 6pm - 2am, which allows us to meet with and talk to youth during high-crime times of day. This allows us to learn what is going on in the neighborhood, who the key players are, and to identify and diffuse situations as they arise. Our outreach workers were hired from the neighborhood that they are working in, with similar backgrounds to those that they are trying to reach, and are respected in the community. This helps them to overcome barriers of mistrust and to reach those most at risk of shooting or being shot.

Our outreach workers seek to identify at-risk individuals and, if they are willing, have them become program clients. Outreach workers work with their clients and their families to help them disengage from the violent lifestyle and provide case management, helping clients to access needed services, such as employment, housing, and substance abuse treatment. We currently have approximately 30 clients on our caseload.

In addition to canvassing the neighborhood, serving clients, and working with youth, a key component of our outreach workers' activity is identifying and mediating conflicts in the community. Community members and outreach workers identify conflicts that may escalate into violence and the outreach workers do whatever is necessary to defuse the situation, including mediation between parties or rapid relocation of one of the parties.

As an example, one of our outreach workers recently mediated a conflict between two parties related to a theft from a drug stash. The situation had escalated to the point where friends were involved and violence was threatened. The outreach worker was able to get both subjects away from their friends and engage them in a mediation, where they discussed the situation and talked through the issues and misunderstanding relating to the conflict. This situation, which was likely to end in violence, was resolved in a peaceful manner. In another situation, while walking home, one of our outreach workers came upon two individuals making serious threats against each other. He was able to interrupt the argument and talk to both individuals, getting them to resolve their issues, hug each other, and agree not to use violence.

When a shooting occurs in our around our target community, we organize a response to the shooting. This can be a vigil, a march, or some other activity. We also mobilize community volunteers and outreach workers to canvass the area providing anti-violence messages for several nights afterwards. This serves emphasizes the message that shootings are unacceptable and also brings the community together and builds community spirit.

In order to engage and strengthen the community, we conduct community events, such as midnight barbecues, movie nights, and basketball tournaments. Our most recent event, Peace Night Out, was held last weekend in partnership with Amazing Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church and the McElderry Park Community Association. The event, Peace Night Out, included a Community Resource Area, free food and drink, a dance contest, and two musical performances. One of musical groups was Warzon Snakes, a positive rap group lead by one of our Outreach Workers. The event drew a crowd of approximately 250 community members and stressed the importance of reducing shootings and homicides in the target area. We have also brought together a strong community coalition of partners in and around the target area, and are holding coalition meetings on a monthly basis. These community-oriented activities promote confidence in the program and allow community members to take ownership of the program and its message.

We look forward to continuing to provide Operation Safe Streets to this community, and are optimistic about its success in Baltimore. Thank you for your time.