

Testimony to Committee on Education and Labor

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WRITTEN SUBMISSION

Thank you for your invitation to address the Committee on Education and for the Subcommittee on Healthy Families and Communities' interest in preventing gang proliferation and protecting our community's children.

Like many suburbs around the country, gang proliferation and gang violence are on the rise in Nassau County. Our community is feeling the effects of their violence and our children are becoming prey to their growth. Neighborhood gangs, homegrown and isolated to specific streets within communities, wreak havoc on innocent bystanders and contribute significantly to an area's crime rate. These gangs destroy the quality of life of their neighbors and make it nearly impossible for a neighborhood to embark on redevelopment or to attract sustainable jobs for its families. These gangs recruit local kids and often use incredible violence to defend their turf or the image of their gang.

Nassau County and Long Island have also seen an influx of national and international gangs. National gangs, with strongholds in nearby New York City, recruit young children from all over the county to participate in their criminal activity and to fuel their enterprise. These gangs have tentacles in most towns, villages and neighborhoods in Nassau County. Their web extends throughout the New York City region and up and down the east coast. Many of their crimes involve state border crossing and many of their members have been a part of a variety of their gang chapters since their childhood.

International gang activity has spread across Long Island like wildfire over the course of the last decade. These gangs have international origins and are usually nationality-specific. They migrate to areas of possible recruitment and are destroying our neighborhoods and ruining the lives of the promising young children they recruit.

All of these gangs prey on our children. They use children for their most dangerous and violent acts. They prey on their innocence, on their education, and on their lack of alternatives.

The answer to stopping gang proliferation is not a simple one. Many of the reasons gangs are growing in our community have regional, if not national, foundations. However, while the underlying issues may be broader than our jurisdiction, we believe we have an obligation to address their impact and an equally important obligation to develop local strategies that will protect our children.

There are some traditional methods to gang prevention through “enforcement” that certainly have an impact on the results of gang activity. While these strategies do little to prevent gang growth, they are important to protecting the quality of life of a neighborhood and can result in the ‘worst of the worst’ being removed – temporarily or permanently – from a community.

Legislative efforts to toughen sentencing guidelines for gang-related crimes have had some impact on gang violence over the years. For instance, we have supported legislation that would enhance the penalties for carrying an illegal weapon. We know from experience: where there are guns, there are gangs. We are looking forward to supporting future efforts that target as fervently the guns coming into our communities as we have the guns in the hands of children on the street.

For some gang members, lengthy incarceration is the only option. Especially in the case of a high-ranking member, this can severely disrupt – at least temporarily – the recruiting performance of the gang. Lengthy incarceration for the ‘worst of the worst’ can also have a deterrent effect on those contemplating gang life or those contemplating their criminal involvement in a gang.

Disrupting the recruiting efforts of gangs is the only way to truly decrease their proliferation. Disrupting their recruiting efforts means not only incarcerating and

infiltrating their command structure, but limiting their ability to recruit children from our neighborhoods and families.

In addition to the traditional methods of gang suppression outlined above, my office has advocated for the adoption of an “intelligence-led” policing model in Nassau County. The key to this modern, proactive approach is developing, analyzing and sharing gang intelligence among law enforcement. Gangs are sophisticated and generally have a strict hierarchy that is tough to penetrate for undercover operatives. Because of this, the gathering of information, electronic surveillance, and gang debriefings – both after arrest and in jail or prison – become crucial to understanding and dismantling the core of a gang or one of its subsets.

Our office was a leader in the push for the newly-created Lead Development Center, a centrally located repository designed to collect, analyze and share crime data and intelligence with law enforcement of all levels. The LDC takes advantage of some of the most advanced technology available today to aggressively target gang activity and proliferation. Intelligence sharing between local, state and federal governments is as crucial in the war on gangs as it is in this country’s efforts to protect itself from terrorism.

While traditional “enforcement” strategies are essential to combating gang violence, and embracing “intelligence-led” law enforcement is critical to developing successful “enforcement” strategies, to curb gang proliferation we must focus on reaching children *before* they join a gang. We must think ‘outside the box’ and be ready to invest in children and in communities preyed upon by gang activity.

I believe a local district attorney can have an impact on gang proliferation and can do things that provide children with opportunities and alternatives to gangs.

Children join gangs as a last alternative. As a community, and as a law enforcement agency, we have a responsibility to provide our children with education and with positive activities while they are out of school. We have a responsibility to provide them with

mentors and with role models from whom they can learn. We have a responsibility as a law enforcement agency to re-direct them after an initial contact – often at a very young age – occurs. As a community, we have an obligation to provide them access to work and the ability to earn a living separate and apart from a gang structure. Finally, I believe law enforcement has a role to play when it comes to post-jail, re-entry programs for those willing to abandon the criminal life.

A partnership between the communities, their stakeholders, law enforcement and private business, is essential to our efforts to attack gang proliferation and to save the lives of “at-risk” youth in Nassau County.

My office has embarked on several gang prevention initiatives aimed at reaching kids before they are entrenched in a gang and before they have a criminal history.

Through our community outreach team we have established Gang Abatement Program (GAP) teams in two of the five “Corridor” towns suffering from gang and gun related violence in Nassau County. The “Corridor” is comprised of the Village of Hempstead, Village of Freeport, Roosevelt, Uniondale, Westbury and New Cassel. These areas are disproportionately impacted by gun crime and gun violence. The GAP team is composed of the District Attorney’s Office, the Nassau County Police Department’s Task Force Against Gangs (TAG), local law enforcement, probation, local schools, community/faith based organizations, county service providers such as mental health and the youth board, and business owners. The idea is for “at-risk” youth to be identified through the people in the community. He or she is then connected to an assistant district attorney in my office. That attorney guides the youth to the service providers for evaluation. The hope is that the service providers determine what the youth needs, i.e., education, job training, socialization skills, housing, counseling, and medication.

It is my hope that we will soon expand the GAP program to communities outside of the Corridor and that several other programs identifying “at-risk” youth in the community will use GAP to address the specific needs of each child.

We have partnered with schools in Hempstead and Westbury to offer summer school programs centered on athletic activities. With the help of these school districts, and some private and charitable resources, we've been able to make these programs successful and have had hundreds of participants during what is usually the most unstructured time of the year for any child. These summer camps offer children a safe alternative to the streets and give our office a glimpse into the life of a child possibly in need of further proactive outreach. Very often "at-risk" children will be discovered in these programs and we can keep in touch with the child, their family and their school to provide additional assistance well after the summer is over. We anticipate that these summer camps will grow and that we will be able to expand into additional communities around Nassau County in the coming years.

Our office provides mentors to "at-risk" children in a middle school during the school year. This program allows a child to interact with a positive role model on a consistent basis. Assistant district attorneys and support staff volunteer their valuable time to this mentorship program and we believe its effects are significant.

Most, if not all gang members, have had contact with law enforcement at an early age. What this tells us is that in addition to our "enforcement" strategies and our proactive identification strategies, we must have a plan for those who have had some contact with the criminal justice system.

These diversion efforts are crucial and require a partnership between law enforcement, private business, the child's school, community members and very often, the Department of Social Services.

Our office is looking to implement a new program in which a youth facing jail time will have the opportunity of having his or her charges lowered or sealed if he or she finishes school and works toward their individual goals. The "contracts" are structured around the needs of each individual and rely on law enforcement asking each participant about

their personal interests and goals. For many kids, this is the first time they have been asked this question and it goes a long way toward their eventual success. This individualized attention increases the likelihood of successful diversion and fosters real trust between law enforcement, community stakeholders and community members. It is this trust that will allow this program and others to succeed.

The “contract” program has already been launched in one community and it is our intention to replicate it throughout Nassau County, taking advantage of the services identified by the GAP teams.

While the vast majority of our programs strive to reach kids before they have a brush with the law or before they have a criminal conviction, it is incumbent upon us to develop a strategy for those who may not be hardened criminals and who we may be able to divert from their short criminal history. The final proactive strategy to preventing children and young men and women from joining gangs focuses on re-entry from jail or prison. Our office has launched an unprecedented effort to identify and target inmates eligible for this effort. The strategy partners inmates with a support network and a peer group familiar with their situation and equally eager to give up their criminal past and live a positive life.

In addition to the “enforcement” initiatives, the proactive identification efforts (GAP), the diversion program, and our re-entry plan, it is critical for “at-risk” youth to be able to find work. It is equally imperative that those eligible for the re-entry program be partnered with local employers once they are out of jail.

My office holds two job fairs per year that provide valuable manpower to local businesses and critical jobs to those looking to make an honest living and avoid the gang lifestyle. Local businesses are essential to this partnership and we’re looking forward to increasing the size and the number of employers in the coming year.

As I've said, traditional "enforcement" strategies and an increased multi-jurisdictional commitment to procuring and sharing gang intelligence all play a role in disrupting gang activity and in preventing the inevitable violence that occurs after their proliferation.

But if we are serious about protecting our children from gangs we must be willing to embark on unconventional and proactive strategies. We must be willing to aggressively target "at-risk" children and provide them with education and access to a variety of work experiences and positive role models. A successful approach must include a comprehensive plan for diversion for children experiencing their first minor brush with the system. Finally, we must be willing to implement bold programs to deal with post-jail re-entry and joblessness among those young adults convicted of a crime.

As you can see, local prosecutors have a role to play in these efforts and my administration will remain committed to pushing the envelope and looking for aggressive strategies that will save the lives of our children and protect our neighborhoods.