

One Safe America

Prepared for the Democratic Platform Committee

July 9, 2024

My name is Dr. Chico Tillmon and I am the Executive Director of the Community Violence Intervention Leadership Academy at the University of Chicago Crime Lab. I was born and raised in Chicago – a city that has beautiful skyline, incredible architecture, and delicious foods but which is better known for its rates of gun violence. Just this weekend, 19 people were killed and an additional 86 were wounded by gun fire. As we celebrate our country's independence, we must ask—what is freedom if our children can't be free from violence?

For the past 15 years, I've spent countless moments supporting individuals and families impacted by gun violence, helping them through grief, loss, and finding a pathway to healing. In my current role, I work to ensure brave leaders in community violence intervention, who promote safety, health, and healing, have the leadership education required to improve the conditions of their communities.

A few weeks ago the Surgeon General declared gun violence a public health crisis in America. As with any epidemic response, the solutions for progress arise from data, evidence, and a willingness to transfer those learnings into practice and policy; without harming and marginalizing vulnerable communities of color.

To address gun violence in America, what is needed is not simply ever-harsher punishments but community violence intervention efforts, referred to as CVI to mediate conflict and prevent shootings from happening in the first place. We must also address the root causes of gun violence by increasing access to opportunity in vulnerable communities, particularly quality healthcare and education.

Data and evidence show that CVI programs can be highly effective in reducing gun violence. CVI programs interrupt violent events in the community as they escalate and work with people in advance to anticipate these moments of conflict and learn new strategies for resolving or mediating these conflicts. Research has shown that CVI programs can prevent shootings and homicides, and that these programs return benefits between \$4 and \$20 to society for every \$1 invested. Anything that would help scale CVI across the country, including for example a permanent item line in the federal budget to fund both CVI program implementation and CVI infrastructure building, would therefore have great public health value.

The data have also shown the great value of simultaneously addressing the root causes of gun violence. I have seen firsthand how the lack of access to safe housing impacts violence. And we know from research that increasing access to quality healthcare and public education are among the most important things we can do to keep communities safe. Strengthening these parts of the social safety net in particular will not just reduce gun

violence overall, but also reduce disparities in rates of gun violence along the lines of race and class and disproportionately help those individuals who are furthest from opportunity.

It is my hope that this august body would adopt a platform and policy agenda that moves our divided country of rich and poor, liberal, and conservative, into one America that provides equitable access to opportunities for all Americans.