

**Commentary**

# Work with youth to end neighborhood violence

BY CARLOS MORENO AND SHAUNA RIGAUD

With the violence epidemic in Boston, young people are hurt, angry, and frustrated. We are advocating for youth voice in decisions and more youth opportunities in order to save lives this year. \$8 million more is what 150 youth and youth workers screamed for at the top of our lungs rallying in Downtown Boston before entering the Boston Youth Fund hearing last Thursday. There, we shared stories of lost loved ones, describing how friends and family shed tears for them.

But we shouldn't have to march and rally for the city to take action. Does it take 74 or 75 homicides to do something?

As young people in United Youth, it's not just another number to us. One of us testified: "You would think losing eight friends would be the worst part of my life, but it's not. The worst part of my life is that violence is normal to me now. I actually expect my friends to die." The quote, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste," pops to mind—everybody has something special within them, and when somebody dies, that's being taken away from the world. We're losing these gifts—a terrible thing to waste. Why don't politicians see that?

As youth workers with United Out, we feel deep pain as well. We are tired of seeing young people's fear, and going to funerals. We want to do what we love: see sparks of potential in young people

and help them thrive. It hurts that there aren't resources to support solutions we know will work. It hurts to see that young people are not seen as experts on their lives, and that their solutions are often disregarded.

Together, we—youth and youth workers, from more than 100 organizations—have advocated for three years for increased funding. This year, United Youth and Youth Workers of Boston is calling for \$8 million additional city funding for youth: \$4.5 million for year-round and summer jobs; \$2 million for grants for youth organizations; and \$1.5 million for a new total of 50 streetworkers starting at \$35,000 each.

These solutions aren't complicated. We need jobs year round to make ends meet and to build our ability to reach our goals. Organizations need support to implement neighborhood strategies to reach young people. Streetworkers need the numbers and the pay to stay in a community to defuse crises and connect with teens.

We believe in working with elected officials. We continue to meet and plan. How do we get more organizations to hire youth? How do we provide more opportunities to youth with CORIs? How do we get more State funding? How can city and community-based programs collaborate?

At the same time, we must advocate for more resources. Mayor Thomas Menino has announced \$300,000 more for summer jobs, \$300,000 in grants, and 4 new streetworkers—all positive steps. When

we ask for more, officials say there is no money. Yet money is added every year; the question is, where? City funding for youth jobs dropped from \$8.7 to \$4.1 million over 6 years, cutting 1,972 jobs while the teenage population increased by 2,500. Police spending increased from \$217 to \$260 million. In a \$2.3 billion budget, \$8 million is a modest amount for the city's top priority today.

To the Mayor and the City Council: We need you all to stand with us, and invest to make youth a priority in this year's budget. We all love this city and applaud what we've accomplished so far supporting young people. Together, we can build on our past successes and be proud to live in a city that invests in year-round jobs and expanded summer jobs, and that invests in the organizations and streetworkers that reach young people.

At last Thursday's budget hearing, we spoke for those who have died. We don't want to do so again—we don't want anyone else dead. We don't want to constantly wonder, "Who's next?" The situation is urgent and we want the violence to stop. Please help us stop it this year—don't wait till we're dead, because some of us might not be here next year.

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