

Mobilizing Boston Residents to Prevent Violence

Representatives from three UNITY cities presented at the Sixth Annual Youth Violence Prevention Conference in Charlotte, North Carolina, in March 2011, and the following narrative is excerpted from Catherine Fine's remarks. Supplementary content was drawn from a panel discussion titled "Prevention Works," part of The California Wellness Foundation's 2010 Conference on Violence Prevention in Los Angeles.

Residents are our communities' primary asset. We have a lot of great things in all of our neighborhoods, and people are our most important asset. They are the most knowledgeable about what's going on in our communities and the most powerful force for change if they're supported.

The research tells us that social cohesion—the extent that neighbors know each other, are connected to their community and their environment, and the extent that neighbors working together feel a sense of power and autonomy—is a protective factor against violence. We know that community mobilization can enhance social cohesion and efficacy.

We are a relatively healthy city compared to the rest of the country, but we do have areas that are more impacted by poor health outcomes than others. What you see in these areas are higher rates for hospitalization, heart disease, infant mortality and obesity. These neighborhoods that are deeply impacted by poor health outcomes line up exactly with where the violence is, and people feel less safe in these neighborhoods. That's where we concentrate our efforts to prevent violence. Our mission is to promote and protect the health and well-being of all of Boston's residents, with a particular emphasis on those who are most vulnerable.

Catherine Fine is a public health practitioner with more than 10 years of experience in the field of public health violence prevention. Based on her work in Baltimore and Boston, Ms. Fine's areas of expertise include leading teams to design and implement city-wide violence prevention strategies. The focus of her work includes developing strategies and programs that are grounded in understanding the root causes of violence and are aimed at increasing resident engagement, training and capacity building, and direct services for Boston's residents and community providers. In her role as the director of the Division of Violence Prevention for the Boston Public Health Commission, Ms. Fine oversees several federal initiatives funded by the Department of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as programs funded by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and private foundations. Ms. Fine is a graduate of the University of Rochester, and she holds a master's degree from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Engaging the Community

We started this initiative in November 2007 with a commitment from the mayor, the health commissioner and the police commissioner. We weren't going to launch any initiative without first talking to residents, and more than a hundred city staff from across all agencies and a huge number of volunteers got involved.

We knocked on the doors of every single house in those neighborhoods. We knocked on 1,700 doors, delivered 1,100 backpacks filled with resources introducing who we are and why we were there, and we completed 715 surveys to find out what was important to residents in terms of violence prevention. What did they like about their neighborhood? What did they feel were the biggest challenges facing their neighborhood? What did they think the city could do quickly to resolve some issues, and what did they think were longer-term strategies?

Residents told us that the police presence in the neighborhood was important and was working well. They felt that the city's services, such as trash collection, snow removal and street lighting, were working well. There were individuals who told us nothing worked well, and we took that very seriously. Residents also identified knowing each other, being part of a community and their neighbors, as a strong asset.

Residents said the top problems were young people hanging out late at night and speeding cars. Giving young people opportunities and connections to good programs was important, but the overwhelming issues were safety in the neighborhood and drug dealing. We asked what they felt would make their community and their neighborhood safer, and residents told us community policing, more youth programs, communities working together, removing guns, and offering programs that support parents.

We responded to all 715 individuals if they had specific requests for services, and at the mayor's direction, we developed a community organizing, place-based strategy to prevent violence. It's called the Violence Intervention and Prevention, VIP.

Supporting Resident-Led Coalitions

The Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative is at its core a place-based resident engagement strategy. The real emphasis of our work is on community organizing and mobilization to prevent violence. We work in five Boston micro-neighborhoods with elevated rates of community gun violence. In these neighborhoods, each comprising about 900 to 1,100 households, we fund community-based organizations to develop coalitions. We're working with residents to identify prevention strategies that work for them where they live.

"Resident engagement was so important for us [because preventing violence] is about a culture of building and these cultural norms. We're talking about resident mobilization where communities build a vision of what it takes to sustain peace, and we make sure the services and the support for that are available. This is a community organizing strategy at its heart."

— BARBARA FERRER
BOSTON HEALTH COMMISSIONER

We identified community-based organizations that could bring residents together to develop neighborhood violence prevention plans. Resident engagement is hard, so we provided funding for one full-time community organizer and two or three neighborhood block captains. We gave them grants to hire and train resident block captains who are engaged in peace walks in the community, and they've really been central in connecting us to residents who we might not otherwise know. We did a whole lot of work around technical assistance and support to really help these community organizers connect to residents and develop neighborhood-specific violence prevention plans.

Each coalition is charged with developing a violence prevention plan that is very much resident-informed and resident-led. The coalitions all share these five main goals, and the health department supports the coalitions in achieving them:

1. **Foster true and authentic resident engagement** in developing and actualizing neighborhood plans to prevent violence. We've spent a lot of time on technical assistance and training, working with residents to develop neighborhood violence prevention plans.
2. **Promote positive out-of-school activities and employment options** for middle school and high school youth living in these neighborhoods. We focus on enrolling middle school students in positive out-of-school opportunities. Another way we raise awareness in the community about what we're doing is to host neighborhood fairs to promote programs for youth.
3. **Address the built environment**, the structural issues and the ways our neighborhoods are constructed that promote or prevent violence. This means giving residents the tools to understand the things that promote and prevent violence, and make sure they demand that the city resolve those issues as quickly as possible. When there's a perception of neighborhood disorder—such as potholes, streetlights that are out, graffiti—that promotes behavior consistent with that disorder. We trained residents to call City Hall's 4500-number if they see a pothole or graffiti, and they are notified when the city has taken care of it. Representatives from the Departments of Public Works, Parks and Recreation, Transportation, from the health department and from the mayor's office seasonally walk through neighborhoods with residents, and often times those city services will bring crews so they're either taking note of the pothole or they're fixing it right there. Residents really appreciate that.
4. **Work with the city to prioritize health services for residents.** As the health department for the city of Boston, we feel a real commitment to organizing our health services in a way that is most accessible for residents in these neighborhoods. This includes

VIP COALITION GOALS

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2. Promote positive out-of-school activities and employment options
3. Address the built environment
4. Work with the city to prioritize health services for residents
5. Develop community-wide responses to violence

connecting people to primary care physicians and health insurance, providing food and fuel assistance to eligible families, and home visitation programs to promote maternal and child health.

5. **Develop community-wide responses to violence** to reinforce that violence is not acceptable. When a neighborhood experiences a lot of violence, it can sometimes start to feel like a “normal” part of living there. We need to start reversing this social norm because it’s not OK for violence to happen where we live. It’s important to help residents articulate loudly and clearly that this is not OK. Every time there is a shooting or homicide in the neighborhood, the community coalition gets out to march and is very visible. Neighbors come to the door and they peek out their windows, and when we host a street event after this march, a barbecue or some fun activities, then neighbors come out, start talking and get engaged. Community coalitions have formed basketball leagues, hosted peace marches and healing sessions for the community every time there’s a violent incident, held Thanksgiving gospel dinners and holiday parties, things that respond to violence and also bring residents together. Periodically, we will bring the mayor, police chief and health commissioner to these events so that residents can talk face to face with our public leaders about what violence means to them in their community.

Lessons Learned

Community organizing is hard. It takes an extra level of work to get connected, and it can be hard to get people to commit to this issue that feels like it’s too hard a problem to solve. These are some things we’ve learned first-hand that enhance community mobilization:

- **Ensure diverse leadership in the community coalition.** This means having young people at the table and really giving them a voice, not just having them there and not letting them talk. This means having people who have lived in the community for a long time and have some historical perspective. Involving local businesses is important. If this is a multi-ethnic community, make sure that the residents involved represent the entire community to help sustain momentum.
- **Provide training and technical assistance.** You cannot expect people to do this on their own; you have to help people do this work because it’s hard and complicated. Besides dedicating around \$75,000 per neighborhood, we provide any technical assistance that community organizations want us to and have developed a series of trainings over the past year. For example, we help them learn to run a good meeting, and train them to talk to any residents who have no interest in talking to them.

“History tells us that it is movements of people that bring about change and sustain that change. Evidence tells us that feeling connected in your community is a protective factor for a whole host of things, but especially for preventing violence. We decided that working more closely with residents was probably the most important piece of [preventing youth violence]—being able to listen to what residents were asking for and then responding in an organized way.”

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- **Assign dedicated staffing.** Have at least one full-time person in each community-based organization working on this. The funder also needs to be visible in the community and door-knocking too; it can't just be the residents. You need to be out there and your staff needs to be out there, so people see that you and your staff are as committed to this as they are. If your staff doesn't want to go to a community meeting at night and doesn't want to work on Saturday afternoons, it's not the right staff to be involved in a community organizing strategy.
- **Clearly communicate expectations to funded organizations.** The funder should be clear that the community organizations must be committed to the goals that they set out for themselves to prevent violence. It can be very easy for all the staff working on one project to shift to another project because there's new money coming in. Community-based organizations with stronger infrastructure—more of a team and stronger leadership—will likely be more able to respond to residents' needs.
- **Leadership, data and accountability.** Provide feedback to people who share information with you on how well they are doing. We need the data to know what they're doing and to see if it's working. We've started an advisory meeting that is chaired by our health commissioner who is well respected and has the ear of the mayor and the governor. She is visible in our communities and residents know her, and it's important to have her level of leadership involved.
- **Promote partnerships between coalitions.** We are building a coalition among the coalitions, and working with five neighborhoods in different parts of the city that usually never talk to each other. Usually the violence that happens in my neighborhood is my own problem, and those who live two miles away in another neighborhood won't understand. What we've found in bringing these five organizations together is that they have built relationships [and support each other]. We bring coalitions together, so the leadership and residents from each of the coalitions learn what each other is doing.

Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth (UNITY) builds support for effective, sustainable efforts to prevent violence before it occurs, so urban youth can thrive in safe environments with ample opportunities and supportive relationships. A Prevention Institute initiative, UNITY is funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and in part by The Kresge Foundation. For more information, visit www.preventioninstitute.org/unity.

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- Assign dedicated staffing
- Clearly communicate expectations to funded organizations
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