

**House Judiciary Committee Informational Meeting
Majority Caucus Room
Room 140 Main Capitol
Harrisburg, PA 17120
April 13, 2026
10:00 AM**

PLEASE NOTE: SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES AND WRITTEN MATERIALS HAVE BEEN UPLOADED

Agenda

Welcoming Remarks

Representative Tim Briggs, Majority Chairman

Representative Jim Rigby, Minority Chairman

Panel One

Kristen E. Kenyon, Executive Director, Pennsylvania Commission on Crime & Delinquency

Will Kiefer, Founder & Executive Director, Bench Mark Program

Lashira Council, LPC, Executive Director, Chester Community Coalition

Cyrise L. Dixon, Community Violence Intervention Coordinator, CASA Youth Advocates

Questions for Panel One

Panel Two

Shaun Ali, Senior Justice Technical Assistance Specialist, WestEd's Justice & Prevention Research Center, PCCD's VIP Technical Assistance Initiative Partner

Tiff Lowe, Project Manager, York City Group Violence Intervention Initiative

Pamela Martin, LPC, Executive Director & Founder, Expressive Path

Dr. John Toleno, Co-Coordinator, Monroe County's Community Partnership for Gun Safety

Questions for Panel Two

Closing Remarks

Representative Jim Rigby, Minority Chairman

Representative Tim Briggs, Majority Chairman

And any other business that comes before the Committee

Adjournment

Please advise Maya Fitterer, MFitterer@pahouse.net, with your attendance plans. If you are unable to attend, kindly submit an Official Leave Request.

Attachments:

- Sunshine Memo
- 4.13 Judiciary Informational Meeting Agenda
- Kristen Kenyon bio
- Kristen Kenyon written material
- Will Kiefer bio
- Will Kiefer written material
- Lashira Council bio
- Lashira Council written material
- Cyrise Dixon bio
- Cyrise Dixon written material
- Shaun Ali bio
- Shaun Ali written material
- Tiff Lowe bio
- Tiff Lowe written material
- Pamela Martin bio
- Pamela Martin written material
- Dr. John Toleno bio
- Dr. John Toleno written material
- PA Alliance BGC written material

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House of Representatives
COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
HARRISBURG

April 1, 2026

COMMITTEES

JUDICIARY, *CHAIRMAN*

CAUCUSES

LIFE SCIENCE, *CHAIR*
BRAIN INJURY, *CHAIR*

PENNSYLVANIA STATE SYSTEM OF HIGHER
EDUCATION (PASSHE), *BOARD OF GOVERNORS*
PENNSYLVANIA COMMISSION ON CRIME &
DELINQUENCY (PCCD), *COMMISSIONER*

TO: House Judiciary Committee Members
FROM: Tim Briggs, Majority Chairman
RE: **Informational Meeting**

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Tim Briggs'.

The House Judiciary Committee will hold an **informational meeting** on **Monday, April 13, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. in 140 Main Capitol Building**. The purpose of this informational meeting will be to consider the following topic:

Information on the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency's Violence Intervention and Prevention Grant Program.

And any other business that comes before the committee.

Please advise Maya Fitterer, MFitterer@pahouse.net, with your attendance plans. If you are unable to attend, kindly submit an Official Leave Request. Thank you!

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Please see back of page

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And any other business that comes before the Committee

Adjournment

Kristen E. Kenyon – Speaker Biography

On April 7, 2025, Kirsten E. Kenyon was appointed Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD).

Ms. Kenyon previously served as PCCD's Director of the Office of Research, Evaluation, and Strategic Policy Development (ORESPD) since May 2014.

During her tenure, ORESPD played a critical role in developing and implementing various public safety grant initiatives, including programs supporting child abuse treatment and investigation, the administration of the School Safety and Security Grant Program, the First Chance Trust Fund Program, the Nonprofit Security Grant Fund Program, the Violence Intervention & Prevention (VIP) Grant Program, and the Building Opportunity through Out-of-School Time (BOOST) Program. Additionally, she provided key support to both the School Safety and Security Committee (SSSC) and the Children's Advocacy Center Advisory Committee (CACAC).

Ms. Kenyon also led the agency's work as the Commonwealth's Statistical Analysis Center, overseeing the collection, analysis, and interpretation of criminal justice and public safety data to guide policy decisions. Under her leadership, PCCD expanded its research initiatives, partnering with institutions such as Indiana University of Pennsylvania to enhance data analysis and program evaluation, ultimately strengthening the agency's influence on public safety and policy development.

Beyond her responsibilities as Director, Ms. Kenyon also served as PCCD's legislative liaison, drawing on a decade of experience as a legislative director in the Pennsylvania State Senate.

She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Politics and Communication from Juniata College and a Master of Public Administration from Pennsylvania State University.



**House Judiciary Committee
Informational Hearing on Violence Intervention & Prevention (VIP)
Grants
Monday, April 13, 2026**

**Testimony of
Kirsten Kenyon, Executive Director
Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency**

Thank you, Chairman Briggs, Chairman Kauffman, and members of the House Judiciary Committee, for the opportunity to provide testimony to you today on behalf of the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD). My name is Kirsten Kenyon, and I have served as PCCD's Executive Director since April 2025. In my prior role as Director of the Office of Research, Evaluation, and Strategic Policy Development (ORESPD), I was responsible for overseeing the launch, implementation, and growth of the Violence Intervention and Prevention (VIP) grants program, which is the focus of today's informational meeting.

PCCD was established by state law in 1978 and serves as the Commonwealth's justice planning and policymaking agency. Our mission is to advance justice system collaboration, support victims, and promote safer schools and communities through planning, training, and financial assistance. The agency's work is guided by an overarching Commission comprised of appointed individuals representing a diverse range of organizations and agencies, including members of the General Assembly. To inform the Commission's work, PCCD is also comprised of seven Advisory Committees and three Training Boards, as well as the standalone School Safety and Security Committee (SSSC).

While we are best known for our investments in state and local public safety programs, PCCD's responsibilities extend well beyond grantmaking. The agency is responsible for supporting a wide range of training and certification programs, administering programs like victim's compensation, and setting standards for victims' services, school safety and security, county probation and parole, and more. PCCD is also tasked by state law with producing high-quality data and research focused on emerging public safety needs, including analyzing and publishing statewide crime trends and supporting novel research on topics like recidivism, prevalence and costs of firearm injuries, local policy implementation, and more.

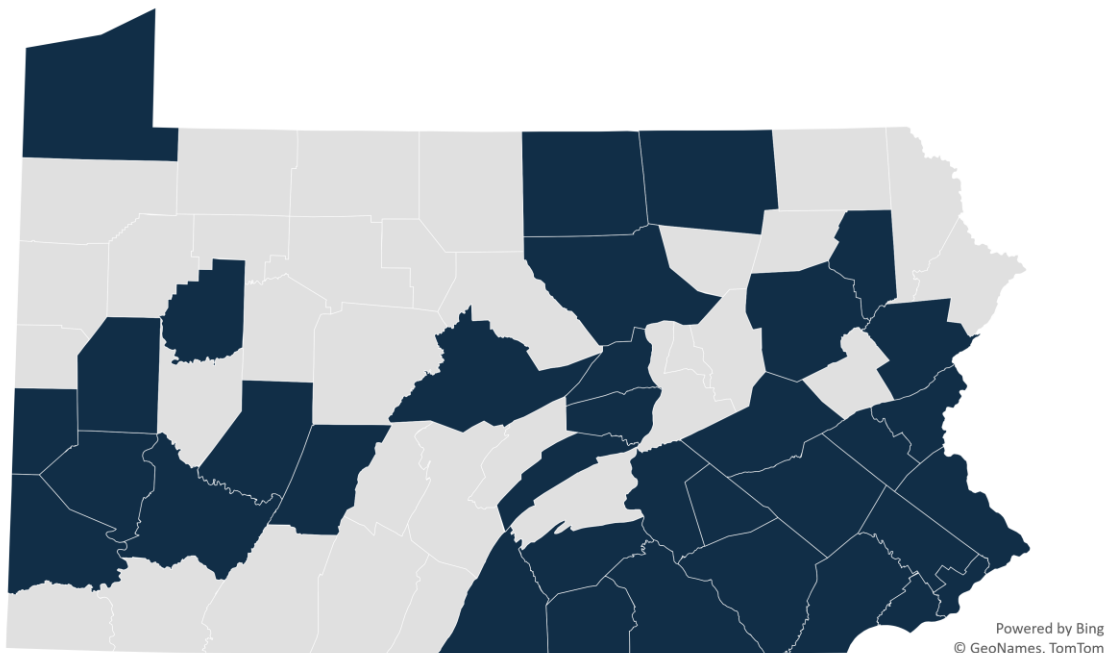
Investing in Safer Communities

At the core of our work, however, is investing in evidence-based and promising strategies that help build a safer Pennsylvania for all. Supporting violence intervention and prevention

strategies that combine community-based and law enforcement-led approaches, improve clearance rates, and promote healing and recovery for individuals and communities is one of our agency's top strategic priorities.¹

The VIP grants program, established in FY 2021-22, is central to our efforts to achieve that goal. State appropriations for the VIP program totaled \$62.15 million for FY 2025-26 - more than double the initial \$30 million state investment authorized in the program's first year. Additionally, Act 45 of 2025 (Fiscal Code) directed PCCD to reserve at least \$11.5 million of appropriated VIP funds for Building Opportunities Through Out-of-School Time (BOOST) grants, first established in FY 2024-25, which support after-school and mentoring programs for at-risk school-age youth.

Since the VIP Grant Program's inception in FY 2021-22, PCCD has approved more than 390 grants totaling \$216 million to support organizations and projects in 35 counties.



VIP Grants Program Structure

As with most PCCD-administered funding streams, much of the VIP grants program's structure is guided by statute. Section 1306-B(i)(1) of the PA Public School Code establishes community-based organizations, counties, municipalities, district attorney's offices, and institutions of higher education as eligible applicants for VIP funding,³ while section 1306-

¹ [2026-2030 Strategic Framework](#), PCCD.

² Additional information about VIP and BOOST grants is available on PCCD's interactive [VIP and Gun Violence Grants Dashboard](#).

³ Act 54 of 2025 (Fiscal Code) established eligible applicants for BOOST grants, including statewide youth-serving 501(c)4 nonprofit organizations, community-based organizations, school districts, career and technical centers, and libraries.

B(j)(22) outlines allowable activities:

(22) Programs designed to reduce community violence, including:

(i) Increasing access to quality trauma-informed support services and behavioral health care by linking the community with local trauma support and behavioral health systems.

(ii) Providing health services and intervention strategies by coordinating the services provided by eligible applicants and coordinated care organizations, public health entities, nonprofit youth service providers, and community-based organizations.

(iii) Providing mentoring and other intervention models to children and their families who have experienced trauma or are at risk of experiencing trauma, including those who are low-income, homeless, in foster care, involved in the criminal justice system, unemployed, experiencing a mental illness or substance use disorder or not enrolled in or at risk of dropping out of an educational institution.

(iv) Fostering and promoting communication between the school entity, community and law enforcement.

(v) Any other program or model designed to reduce community violence and approved by the committee.

In addition to these statutorily designated categories, the SSSC has also identified other community violence reduction strategies that can be supported with VIP funding, including (but not limited to) the following:

- Youth-focused prevention programs serving school-age youth who are at risk but are not high risk for violence involvement (e.g., mentoring and out-of-school time programs).
- Other violence prevention strategies designed to address broad, community-wide risk factors (e.g., firearm safety campaigns, greening and Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design strategies, Safe Passages/Safe Corridors).
- Violence intervention programs designed to address violence that is already happening within communities, with a focus on reaching youth and adults at the highest risk of victimization and/or perpetration (e.g., street outreach initiatives, focused deterrence strategies, hospital-based violence intervention programs, Lethality Assessment Program adoption to reduce domestic violence homicides and injuries, and other evidence-based community violence intervention strategies).
- Reentry and aftercare programs supporting successful return to family, community, and society for individuals involved in the juvenile or criminal justice systems.
- Healing, trauma-informed supports for individuals who have experienced and/or witnessed gun violence, including victims' services, mental and behavioral health services, counseling, etc.
- System transformation and innovations that pilot new strategies or enhance local coordination and improve the efficacy of anti-violence efforts, such as local planning and

needs assessments, establishing violence reduction councils and/or enhancing existing local interagency planning bodies (e.g., criminal justice advisory boards, youth justice advisory boards, reentry coalitions), or local gun violence task forces.

Finally, PCCD has supported comprehensive training and technical assistance resources for VIP grantees and other community-based organizations and local stakeholders working to reduce violence in their communities. First launched in 2022, the VIP Training and Technical Assistance (TTA) Initiative - also known as the PA Peace Alliance - is managed by WestEd's Justice and Prevention Research Center, who has engaged more than 600 organizations through a combination of 1,200 one-on-one sessions and facilitated group-based TTA supports reaching more than 1,600 participants.

Violent Crime Trends & VIP Impacts

The Commonwealth's investments through the VIP grant program came at a critical moment for Pennsylvania. While overall violent crime rates have been on the decline statewide since 2000, homicide rates increased by 44% during that same period.⁴ Like other states across the country, both homicides and nonfatal firearm injuries sharply increased across Pennsylvania during the COVID-19 pandemic. Encouragingly, homicides and firearm-related injuries have both declined in recent years; since 2022, Pennsylvania has seen a 35% reduction in homicides statewide, and gunshot injuries also decreased significantly in 2023 compared to the prior year.⁵

These positive trends overlapped with the timeframe when VIP grants were first launched and subsequently scaled across the Commonwealth. In the time since the VIP grants program's inception through calendar year 2025, analysis of Uniform Crime Report (UCR) data indicates more than half of Pennsylvania counties with VIP-funded projects saw a decline in homicides, as shown in the figure on page 5. Between 2023 and 2024, most funded counties experienced lower numbers of murders (20 out of 35) and reduced aggravated assault incidents involving firearms (22 out of 35), with preliminary data indicating many have sustained these reductions into 2025.⁶

While many may think of large urban centers and big cities when they hear the term "gun violence" or "community violence," data shows that these issues are also impacting our smaller cities and rural areas, too. As noted previously, PCCD's VIP Grants program has supported more than 390 local projects - and counting - across more than half of Pennsylvania's counties.

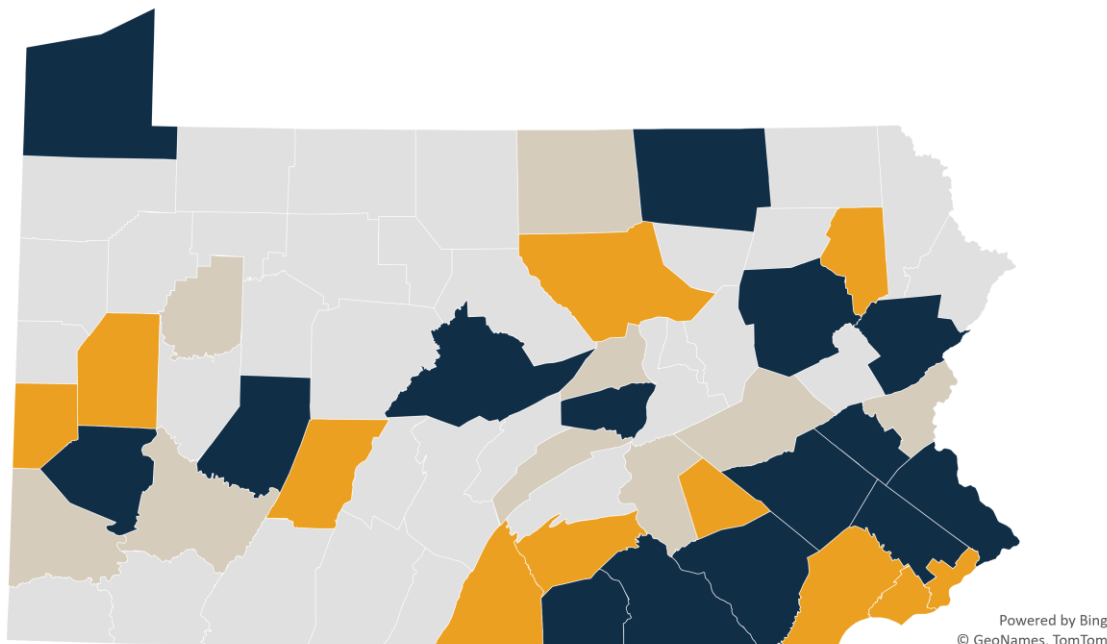
VIP dollars have helped launch new programs in underserved areas, including rural communities, and have also addressed the intersections between gun violence and other public safety and public health crises, including domestic violence and intimate partner violence homicides. Funds have also supported trauma-informed services and resources to help people who have witnessed or experienced violence or loss, building on PCCD's longstanding investments in Pennsylvania's victims' services infrastructure through federal funding streams like the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) grants.

⁴ Data source: Pennsylvania Uniform Crime Report (UCR), cited in [Violent Crime Trends & Clearance Rates in Pennsylvania](#), PCCD, 2026.

⁵ [Violent Crime Trends & Clearance Rates in Pennsylvania](#), PCCD, 2026.

⁶ Data source: Pennsylvania UCR.

Between calendar year (CY) 2021 - when the VIP Grants Program started - and CY 2025, 18 of PA's 35 VIP-funded counties saw a decrease in the number of homicides, 8 did not change, and 9 experienced an increase.⁷



In the latest FY 2025-26 solicitation, PCCD prioritized applications for VIP and BOOST grants proposing to serve areas of highest need (e.g., areas with highest levels of violence/homicides, projects serving highest levels of at-risk youth), as well as proposals from organizations that had not previously received state grant funding or who had successful VIP or BOOST projects ending as of June 30, 2026. The SSSC will take up the latest round of FY 2025-26 VIP and BOOST funding recommendations at its next meeting on Wednesday, April 15.

Lessons Learned and Improvements to the VIP Grants Program

When PCCD launched the VIP grants program in 2021, the agency needed to quickly launch and scale a large initiative during a period of rising community violence and rapid agency growth. The program also marked a significant shift from the agency's historic focus on funding more established agencies and entities toward supporting smaller, more grassroots community-based organizations, many with no or limited experience managing state-funded grants. PCCD's experience during its initial and subsequent cohorts of VIP grants has informed substantial changes to the agency's policies, procedures, and funding strategies, including staffing, communications, onboarding, technical assistance, and monitoring.

For example, PCCD has continually updated its grants making processes in response to applicant feedback about the VIP application and award process. PCCD has adopted new communications protocols across the entire grant lifecycle, from solicitations to award

⁷ Data source: Pennsylvania UCR. 2025 data is preliminary and subject to change.

notifications through project implementation. This includes new applicant informational webinars, providing “next step” email communications, issuing customized reminders for upcoming quarterly reporting deadlines, and more. We have identified and implemented ways to make the application process easier and more user friendly, including developing and updating structured onboarding protocols connecting VIP grantees with assigned PCCD program and fiscal staff to provide connections that can facilitate early and sustained implementation success. We have simplified application instructions, developed resources to help clarify fiscal reporting and documentation requirements, and worked with technical assistance partners to create plain-language guidance and resources to navigate compliance requirements (e.g., PCCD’s Applicant Readiness Checklist). We also offer applicant feedback opportunities following funding decisions to provide transparency and help organizations strengthen future applications.

PCCD also appreciates the VIP grant program’s funding flexibility, as it can address a wide range of root causes and local responses. VIP Grant funds have proven to be adaptable to a continuum of strategies and models - from street outreach teams working to interrupt community violence to upstream prevention programs providing out-of-school time opportunities for at-risk youth. It has also been used to design, launch, implement, and enhance a comprehensive statewide technical assistance initiative (PA Peace Alliance), which has reached more than 240 entities to date with an emphasis on capacity building and grants management support for smaller organizations. PCCD has also been able to invest a portion of VIP funds to support a comprehensive VIP Evaluation Project, designed to assess program impact and outcomes, as well as help inform future improvements to the VIP grants program in the years ahead. Final reports examining a cohort of early VIP and Coordinated Community Violence Intervention (CCVI) Strategies pilot grantees are expected to be published later this year.

Conclusion

The VIP program has significantly strengthened local capacity to prevent and address community violence, and early indicators show promising progress. To sustain this momentum, the Shapiro-Davis Administration has proposed a \$5.2 million increase to the VIP budget for FY 2026-27, bringing total funding to over \$67 million, including \$11.5 million for BOOST grants. These investments will help advance effective, community-driven strategies and build the next generation of violence prevention leaders.

Additional information about PCCD’s VIP Grants program can be found at www.pccd.pa.gov.

Willem C. Kiefer – Speaker Biography



Will Kiefer is the Executive Director and Founder of Bench Mark Program, a fitness-based mentoring program for at-risk youth in Lancaster, PA. Born and raised in Gettysburg, PA, he moved to Lancaster to attend Franklin and Marshall College in 2010. In January, 2014, during his final semester, Will started Bench Mark as a tool to connect with older at-risk youth in Lancaster City who were not successfully engaged in traditional mentoring programs. What began as a simple desire to be of service in the community has developed into an organization that serves over 100 youth each day across seven different initiatives in Lancaster County. Bench Mark employs a team of thirty-one individuals to serve youth in a variety of capacities: within the detention center, within the high school, within the community, and within the local workforce. Six of these team members are youth who have graduated from the program themselves. The focus of Bench Mark is to support youth with

1:1 and group mentoring over the span of years, not months, boasting an average program service time per student of 38 months. Bench Mark's referral partners include the Lancaster County Dept. of Juvenile Probation, Lancaster County Children and Youth Agency, and the School District of Lancaster, among others. The organization's \$2.1M+ annual operating budget is supported by six different funding streams, including donations, contracts, and grants. Will has successfully secured six grants from the PA Commission on Crime and Delinquency to advance Bench Mark Programs work, and in January, 2024 was invited to speak before the US House of Representatives, Ways and Means Committee, Subcommittee on Work and Welfare about the nature of Bench Mark's mentoring model. In October 2024, Bench Mark Program was awarded the Community-Based Provider of the Year Award, a state-wide award from the Juvenile Court Judges Commission. When Will is not at work, he loves spending time with his wife Karla, who is currently studying to get her law degree at Penn State Dickinson Law School, and their adopted son Kenny, who is studying to get his Bachelor's Degree at Washington College.

Will Kiefer - Bench Mark Program - Lancaster, PA

Written Testimony to the PA House Judiciary Committee - PCCD Violence Intervention & Prevention (VIP) Grant Impact

Dear Members of the Judiciary Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to share how PCCD Violence Intervention and Prevention (VIP) funding has strengthened Bench Mark Program and expanded our ability to serve high-risk youth in Lancaster City.

Since 2014, Bench Mark Program has worked with youth ages 13–24 who are at the highest risk of involvement in violence and the juvenile justice system. Many of the young people we serve are already carrying firearms, involved in serious offenses, or on a direct path toward deeper system involvement. VIP funding has allowed us not only to intervene—but to fundamentally change how and when that intervention happens.

Contrary to popular belief: PCCD VIP funding is not a boring topic. And a few years ago, you couldn't have convinced me of that. So before I get into the details of how this funding has enhanced our program, I need you to know something important about small organizations like ours and big organizations like PCCD: For years I thought that PCCD funding was for anyone other than us - the start-up, grass roots organization, with no grant writer and limited experience doing the work of mentorship. I figured only big, old, entrenched, bureaucratic, slow-moving organizations with a staff of grant writers had a shot at securing PCCD grants. But I was wrong.

PCCD, with your support, has proven to me that nimble, effective, cutting-edge organizations who have big bold ideas (and limited resources) DO have a chance to secure these grant dollars, and DO so with encouraging frequency. Bench Mark is an example of such an organization, and we have developed a relationship with PCCD through numerous VIP grants - one that has enabled us to test out ideas, programs, and impact strategies that have changed lives within our City.

PCCD VIP Grant #36608 (2022–2023 - \$143,968): Building a Proven Model

Our first VIP grant supported the development of our Wrap Around Service Model, specifically the Predisposition Program, which works with juvenile gun offenders immediately upon their release from secure detention. This funding primarily supported direct service staff, transportation, and some food costs – ensuring youth could consistently engage with mentors and services during a time when they were most likely to reoffend. Put simply - we invested in one-on-one mentors for the highest risk youth, during the period of time when they are most likely to reoffend. We tested out whether or not high-intensity, individualized mentorship could work for the kids that “most people are afraid to work with.” When you ask the students what they loved most about the program, they'll tell you “they bought me Chick-fil-A all the time,” and that's an acceptable take-away from our work. But the truth is deeper than that - we broke bread together and had important conversations that wouldn't have taken place otherwise. We got to the root cause of criminal behaviors, and addressed (and resolved) those issues. Most kids would rather tell you that we bought them chicken-sandwiches, rather than disclose that what really happened

was that we taught them how to break away from negative peers who kept them stuck in a cycle of violence.

Through this grant, Bench Mark Program served 63 high-risk youth, most of whom came to us directly from the juvenile detention center, more than 20 of whom had firearm-related charges. During program participation, we achieved a 0% recidivism rate. Youth who completed the program transitioned into ongoing mentoring, workforce development, and educational support services at Bench Mark, creating a long-term pathway toward stability. Interestingly, our reoffense rates only increased if/when a youth was referred AWAY from our organization, thereby breaking the connection to their mentor.

The success of this model led to sustained investment from Lancaster County. What began as a grant-funded initiative has since been adopted and supported locally by our County government through an annual contract, demonstrating that VIP funding can create programs that endure well beyond the initial investment. In this case, PCCD didn't help us create a whole new program, but rather, enabled us to test an initiative that turned out to be the missing piece in our larger program wrap around service model.

PCCD VIP Grant #43999 (2024–Present - \$355,483): Expanding Upstream Prevention

Building on that success, our current VIP grant supports the Upstream Gun Violence Prevention Program (GVPP), which shifts intervention earlier—before youth become involved with law enforcement. Think of it this way: at the scene of a crime involving a firearm, many individuals may be detained, but few may be formally processed/charged. What support could we provide to the youth who are detained and released from the scene of a crime, the ones who were adjacent to the crime, perhaps involved, but not charged? Shouldn't we render some services to them to prevent future crime and/or retaliation? Couldn't you argue that THOSE kids are still pretty "high risk?"

Through strong partnerships with the School District of Lancaster and Lancaster City Police, we have created a pipeline that identifies high-risk youth within school and community settings and connects them with 1:1 mentors in the community. Same thing as the aforementioned Predisposition Program, but for kids who have not been charged with a gun crime yet. WE KNOW WHO THESE HIGH RISK KIDS ARE - we just need more programs to serve them before they become system-involved. This proactive model allows us to intervene at critical moments, reducing the likelihood of arrest and system involvement.

To date, this program has served 50 youth, including 35 already impacted by the law enforcement and justice systems. In a single recent quarter, we supported 21 active participants and delivered over 250 one-on-one mentoring sessions. Across the life of the grant, more than 500 mentoring sessions have been conducted. The vast majority of participants have avoided reoffending, with only one known reoffense in the most recent reporting period (and that student landed in another separate program within Bench Mark).

In addition to reducing justice system involvement, youth in the program are achieving measurable progress in education, employment, and behavioral health. Participants are engaging in school, workforce activities, and individualized goal setting, while also receiving consistent

case management and support. I'll be glad to report back with final outcomes once this grant wraps up in a year.

Return on Investment and Community Impact

The impact of these programs extends beyond individual outcomes. The cost of placing a youth in the juvenile justice system can exceed \$100,000 per year. By diverting even a small number of youth from placement, programs like ours generate significant cost savings for the Commonwealth.

Through VIP funding, Bench Mark Program has now served over 100 high-risk youth across both grants. With near-zero recidivism during program participation, the cost savings—and community impact—are substantial.

Just as importantly, this funding has helped build sustainable systems. Our initial VIP-funded program is now supported locally through a County contract, and our current program is being integrated into partnerships with schools and community-based initiatives, with additional support being pursued through city and county funding streams.

Looking Ahead

The demand for these services continues to grow. Schools, community partners, and families are identifying more youth in need of early intervention, and our organization is currently operating at near capacity.

In regard to finances, PCCD VIP grants have allowed us to test interventions for high-risk youth that our County government cannot afford to fund as a pilot. We have used these dollars as a proving ground for programs that may one day be sustained through County support.

In regard to community-based youth services, PCCD VIP funding has allowed us to test out something that seems like common sense: if you know who the highest risk youth are in the community (if your police or school system have identified them) - give them an individualized mentor for a long period of time. Watch how it changes their lives. If they can't get it right - use your program to catch them (and support them) in some other way. Be the place that a youth can "come back to and try again."

In closing, PCCD VIP funding has allowed us to intervene at the most critical moments in a young person's life—before violence escalates, before incarceration, and before opportunities are lost. It has not only funded programming, but has helped build sustainable, community-supported solutions that are improving outcomes and strengthening public safety.

Thank you for your continued investment in violence prevention and for the opportunity to share our experience. You should be proud to know that PCCD is actively seeking out local, innovative programming that changes lives from the ground up. Without this support, we could not be nimble, adaptive, and responsive to the needs of our highest risk youth.

Lashira Council, LPC – Speaker Biography

Lashira Council is a dedicated Executive Director for the Chester Community Coalition. She is a Chester native who lost her oldest brother to gun-related violence and is committed to the work it takes to combat the gun violence epidemic in the City of Chester. She is passionate about her work and invests her time and energy in helping individuals and families affected by this issue to find the support and hope they need.

Ms. Council is also a licensed professional counselor who earned her undergraduate degree in Psychology from Cheyney University of Pennsylvania in 2002 and her Master's in Mental Health Counseling from Springfield College. Her professional experiences include providing leadership and training to clinical professionals at an outpatient recovery center, facilitating group and individual therapy sessions, and evaluating programs for improvement.

Initially, she was looking to volunteer her time as a licensed professional counselor. Lashira began working with Chester Community Coalition as a part-time therapist and excitedly transitioned to the full-time program director role in February 2023. She proudly took on the role as Executive Director in January 2025. Through her leadership, she has inspired many in the community to become involved in this critical effort, making a positive impact. Lashira's dedication and commitment to helping those affected by gun-related violence are truly admirable, showcasing her ability to make a positive difference in her community.

CHESTER COMMUNITY COALITION

Prepared Remarks: PA House Judiciary Committee

Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) Community Impact

Delivered by: Lashira Council, Executive Director

Date: April 13, 2026

I. OPENING STATEMENT

My name is Lashira Council. I am the Executive Director of the Chester Community Coalition, and I come to you today from Chester, Pennsylvania, a city that has been counted out more times than I can remember, as a Chester native. I am here to tell you why that count was wrong.

Chester has 33,000 people. It is also one of the most economically distressed cities in this Commonwealth. It has known concentrated poverty, decades of disinvestment, and levels of violence that have stolen too many futures. But Chester is also resilient, and when given the right support, Chester thrives, not just survives. PCCD funding has been part of that healing. I want to show you exactly how.

But before I speak about this work, I need to tell you why it is personal to me.

In 2002, three days before my college graduation, I lost my brother, Stephen Kennard, to gun violence. Three days. I crossed that graduation stage carrying grief that no one should have to carry, and certainly not at the moment that was supposed to mark the beginning of everything. That loss never left me. It shaped the lens through which I see every young person we serve, every family sitting with the weight of something no one prepared them for.

Years later, I became aware of the Chester Community Coalition and its mission to address gun violence through a trauma-informed, therapeutic, and healing lens. That mission spoke directly to the part of me that had been searching for a way to turn my pain into purpose. So I offered my time as a volunteer, as a licensed clinician. That volunteer role became a part-time therapist position. That part-time role grew into a full-time Program Director. And today, I stand before you as Executive Director.

This is not a career path. This is a calling. Every family we serve, every young person we reach, every survivor who finally finds their way to healing, we show up for them the way we wish someone had shown up for my family. This journey is my purpose, and it is the foundation from which everything I share with you today is spoken.

II. ABOUT CHESTER COMMUNITY COALITION

Founded in 2019, Chester Community Coalition, a project of Urban Affairs Coalition, started when volunteers from Heeding God's Call to End Gun Violence noticed the heavy burden of grief carried by Chester residents impacted by gun violence at the t-shirt demonstrations they organized. CCC's founder, Sr. Jean Rupertus of The Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia, learned about a funding opportunity and was awarded funds to start the work.

Chester Community Coalition now works at the intersection of public safety, trauma support, and community trust. We partner with residents, schools, law enforcement, our (safer schools, safer neighborhoods) 3SN coalition partners, and local government, not because it is easy, but because no single institution can do this work alone.

We are a small but mighty non-profit, and PCCD funding has helped us move from intention to impact across two areas: youth violence prevention and trauma-informed community support.

III. YOUTH VIOLENCE PREVENTION

The Challenge

Before this funding, we were always one step behind. We were sitting with grieving mothers, fathers, children, friends, and family members. We were showing up after the shooting, not before it. Chester's young people were telling us they felt unsafe in their own neighborhoods. They believed the adults had given up on them. We refused to accept that.

What PCCD Funding Made Possible

PCCD's Violence Prevention grants gave us the resources to get ahead of the violence, not just respond to it. Our youth prevention initiative is built on one core belief: the right person, with the right relationship, at the right moment, changes everything. That initiative includes:

- **Case Management Support:** Each enrolled participant receives individualized support, including workforce development, housing navigation, mental health referrals, and educational re-engagement.
- **Wellness. Accountability. Respect (WAR) Ready Boxing Program:** A trauma-informed boxing initiative, piloted in 2025, that pairs athletic skill-building with structured trauma-informed discussion. Participants develop discipline, confidence, and physical strength through facilitated conversations about their experiences, emotions, and paths forward.
- **Trauma-Informed Basketball Prevention Programming:** Sport-based programming, also piloted in 2025, that integrates skill development with a trauma-informed discussion component, creating an accessible, familiar entry point for young community members who may not initially seek traditional therapeutic support.

Outcomes & Impact

The numbers tell part of the story:

- 65 high-risk youth enrolled in trauma-informed prevention programming
- 288 participants connected to employment, victim services, housing support, etc., through case management services
- 75% reduction in repeat violent incidents among program participants

A Story Worth Telling

Behind every statistic is someone's child, someone's brother, someone's future.

I want to tell you about a young man I'll call Marcus. Marcus was 17 when we first encountered him. He wasn't just grieving the loss of his closest friend; he was a survivor of the same shooting that took his friend's life. He had lived through something that should have taken him too. And he was left to carry both the wound of his own survival and the weight of a loss that no 17-year-old should ever know.

Our intervention specialist reached out to Marcus. Marcus didn't want to hear it. He came back anyway. Because our intervention specialist was a man who had survived what Marcus was surviving. He had lost people the way Marcus lost people. He had stood at that same crossroads and chosen a different road, and he carried that story with him every time he knocked on Marcus's hospital door.

He spoke Marcus's language, not because he studied it, but because he lived it.

Eighteen months later, Marcus has a job. He is a graduating high school senior. And he still checks in

That is not luck. That is not a program. That is what happens when you put the right person, with the right lived experience, in front of the right young man at the right moment, and you fund them well enough to show up seven times.

IV. TRAUMA SUPPORT & COMMUNITY HEALING

The Challenge

The traumatic impact of gun violence does not end when the shooting stops. It follows us home. It sits with us at 3 in the morning. It shows up in the classroom, in the workplace, in every relationship we try to hold together while carrying something no one should have to carry alone.

In Chester, that burden is concentrated. Low-income families. Communities of color. People who have already been failed by the systems that were supposed to protect them. For too long, healing has been a luxury Chester could not afford. PCCD funding is changing that.

What PCCD Funding Made Possible

PCCD funding has allowed us to bring trauma-informed support directly into the community in a space people already trust. What that looks like on the ground:

- **Individual and Group Therapeutic Support:** A licensed therapist provides both one-on-one and group therapeutic support to community members affected by

violence, meeting people where they are in their healing journey in a trusted, community-based setting.

- **Participant Transportation:** Funding supports transportation for participants to and from scheduled appointments and programming at CCC and throughout Delaware County, removing one of the most persistent barriers to consistent engagement for residents without reliable access to a vehicle.
- **Staff Wellness Support:** Staff who walk alongside community members affected by violence carry their own secondary trauma. PCCD funding supports intentional staff wellness, ensuring our team is sustained and equipped to show up fully for those they serve.
- **Professional Development:** Ongoing training keeps our team current on best practices in trauma-informed care and community-based intervention, strengthening the quality and effectiveness of every interaction we have with community members.

Outcomes & Impact

Here is what that investment has produced:

- 86 community members affected by violence engaged in therapeutic support
- 1,271 transportation trips provided to support participant access to programming
- 25 staff supported through wellness and professional development activities

V. THE CROZER HEALTH CLOSURE: A CRISIS THAT DEMANDS OUR ATTENTION

I cannot stand before this Committee and speak of Chester without speaking of Crozer. Because you cannot separate the two.

The Direct Impact on Chester's Most Vulnerable Residents

A City of 33,000 people is now 20 to 60 minutes from a trauma center. Think about what that means the next time a traumatic emergency occurs. Think about what that clock sounds like.

The people we serve every day are the people most hurt by this closure. The young people in our violence prevention program who have survived shootings. The community members in our trauma-informed programming now have nowhere nearby to immediately access mental health crisis care. The families who built their lives around the jobs Crozer provided. They are the same people. And they are counting on us to say something about it in rooms like this one.

Violence and healthcare access are not separate conversations. In Chester, they are the same conversation. You cannot ask a community to heal from trauma when it has no hospital. You cannot prevent violence when the systems that catch people's employment, mental health, and emergency care have all collapsed at once.

The Connection to Our Work and Our Ask

For the Chester Community Coalition, the closure of Crozer is not only a community crisis but also a direct blow to the foundation of the way we serve survivors and their families. Our Hospital Violence Intervention Program (HVIP) was built on a partnership with Crozer-Chester Medical Center. That partnership was not incidental. It was the infrastructure through which we reached people at their most critical moment.

In violence intervention, we talk about the “golden hour,” that window immediately following a traumatic injury when a survivor is most open to intervention, most reachable, most willing to consider a different path. Research and experience both confirm it: the hospital bedside in those first hours is one of the most powerful entry points we have. Our HVIP model depended on our ability to walk through Crozer’s doors, sit beside a survivor, and make a connection. When Crozer closed, we lost that access. We lost the golden hour.

Survivors from Chester are now being transported 20 to 60 minutes away to trauma facilities in other counties. By the time they are stable, discharged, and back in Chester, that window has often closed. The families we once met in a waiting room down the street are now navigating a system far from home, without familiar support, and without us at their side during those critical first moments.

This has forced us to reimagine our entire HVIP model. Without a trauma hospital as our anchor, we are building a community-based violence intervention framework that meets survivors where they are, at home, in the neighborhood, in the aftermath, rather than in a clinical setting. It is harder. It requires more resources. And it demands that we build relationships before a crisis, not only during one. We are doing that work. But this Committee should understand clearly: the Crozer closure did not just displace patients. It dismantled a proven intervention pathway that we are now working to rebuild from the ground up.

PCCD funding is not just important right now. It is urgent. The Crozer closure did not create Chester’s challenges, but it made every one of them harder. We are asking this Committee to factor that reality into every conversation about where investment is needed most.

VI. THE CASE FOR CONTINUED AND EXPANDED INVESTMENT

The work described in these remarks is working. Not perfectly. Not fast. But it is working, and it works precisely because it is community-based, trauma-informed, and relationship-driven. The moment that funding disappears, so does the infrastructure of trust we have spent years building. You cannot rebuild that overnight.

Here is what we are asking this Committee to carry forward:

1. **The government cannot do this alone.** The trust our staff has earned on the streets of Chester took years to build. It cannot be replicated. It lives in connection and relationships. Fund the relationships.
2. **Healing and safety are the same investment.** You cannot have a safe community that has not been allowed to heal. Trauma-informed programming is not a soft add-on. It is foundational public safety infrastructure, especially now.

- **Increase the CVI line item in the state budget to \$80 million.** The work described in these remarks is not theoretical. It is happening on the ground, right now, in one of Pennsylvania's most vulnerable communities. But doing this work and sustaining this work are two different things. An increase in the Community Violence Intervention line item to \$80 million is not an ask for more; it is an ask for enough. Enough to not just continue, but to sustain the infrastructure, the relationships, and the trust that make this work possible. Chester cannot afford for us to start over. Neither can Pennsylvania.

VII. CLOSING REMARKS

Chester has been written off before. I have watched it happen from the inside as a daughter of this city, as a sister who lost her brother Stephen to gun violence three days before she walked across a graduation stage, and as the Executive Director of an organization that has chosen, every single day, to refuse that narrative.

Budgets get cut. Hospitals get closed. Programs end. And the people who remain are left to absorb what the rest of the world decided it could no longer afford. Chester has absorbed that weight for decades. Our residents did not choose that. They deserve better than that. And they are counting on this Committee to say so.

We are not here asking for sympathy. We are here because the data is clear, the outcomes are real, and the need is urgent. PCCD funding has produced measurable results in one of Pennsylvania's most vulnerable cities.

I carry my brother Stephen with me into every room I walk into. I carry him into this one. And I carry every family in Chester who is still waiting for someone in a room like this to decide that their lives are worth protecting.

Chester is still here. We are still fighting. And we are asking Pennsylvania to fight with us.

Respectfully submitted,

Lashira Council, LPC

Executive Director, Chester Community Coalition

215-494-8169 | Lashira@chestercommunitycoalition.org |
www.chestercommunitycoalition.org

Cyrise L. Dixon – Professional Biography

Cyrise L. Dixon is a lifelong resident of Chester, Pennsylvania, and a retired 47-year veteran of law enforcement and public administration who has dedicated her career to public safety, youth development, and community empowerment.

Ms. Dixon currently serves as the Community Violence Intervention Coordinator, leading a collaborative initiative to reduce community and gun violence in the City of Chester. Through a 32-month PCCD grant-funded program, Safer Schools Stronger Neighborhoods (3SN), she coordinates collaborative efforts among these community partners— the Chester Boys and Girls Club, Chester Community Coalition, Chester Education Foundation, Making a Change Group, and CASA Youth Advocates Inc.—to create a continuum of care, resources, and opportunities for youth ages 11–24 who are at risk of violence.

Before retirement, Ms. Dixon served as the first female Patrol Officer in the history of the Chester Police Department. She served as Interim Chief Operating Officer for the City of Chester and previously as Chief of Staff for the Chester Police Department, where she worked to strengthen community-police relations and expand youth engagement initiatives. She founded the Cops and Community program, which provided mentoring, programming, and career exposure for young people interested in law enforcement.

Her earlier career included service as a Special Agent with the Pennsylvania Office of Attorney General, a Special Investigator with the Pennsylvania Office of Inspector General, and a Detective and charter member of the Delaware County Homicide Unit. Ms. Dixon has also held numerous civic leadership roles throughout Delaware County. She previously served as Chair of the Board of Directors for The Foundation for Delaware County, which has awarded more than \$16.6 million in grants, scholarships, and charitable care since 2016 and served more than 8,000 individuals through community health initiatives in 2025 alone.

Her community service includes serving as Board President of the Chester Community Improvement Project, supporting pathways to homeownership and neighborhood revitalization for Chester residents. She also serves as Vice President of the Board of Directors for Senior Community Services and as Secretary of the Delaware County Law Enforcement Memorial Foundation Board, which honors officers who died in the line of duty.

A committed volunteer, Ms. Dixon serves at The Christian Church of Chester, where she participates in outreach addressing food insecurity, housing needs, and other community concerns. She also volunteers with the ACCESS Center and the Chester Senior Center, helping provide meals, social services, and support for vulnerable residents.

Through decades of leadership in law enforcement, nonprofit service, and community collaboration, Ms. Dixon continues to dedicate her experience and passion to empowering youth, creating safe environments by reducing gun and community violence, and improving the quality of life for all residents.

TESTIMONY OUTLINE PA HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

Cyrise L. Dixon

**Community Violence Intervention Coordinator
3SN -Safer Schools Stronger Neighborhoods**

PROJECT OVERVIEW & MISSION/VISION OF 3SN:

Vision: Chester is safe, resilient, and thriving.

Mission: To build collaborative prevention, intervention, and transformational support services focused on youth and young adults to reduce gun and community violence.

PROJECT AWARD:

- **Funding & Support:** The project is funded through a grant from the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD). The funded amount is \$3.2 million for 32 months. and is supported by Delaware County Council and the District Attorney's Office.
- **Partnership Structure:** 3SN brings together several non-profit organizations, including the Boys & Girls Club of Chester, Chester Community Coalition, Chester Education Foundation, Making a Change Group, Crozer Keystone Health Systems, and Widener University. The partnership has expanded to include Safe Corridors, Inc., the Delaware County Office of Social Services for the Public Defender's Office, and the Delaware County District Attorney's Office.

HOW PCCD FUNDING HAS SUPPORTED 3SN'S GROWTH & SUCCESS:

- WestEd technical support (availability, critical thinking, training, relationship building).
- Reinforcing the power of collaboration for non-profits in the city of Chester.
- Building capacity through training and relationship building.
- Identifying gaps in establishing the continuum of care that will help reduce gun and community violence.
- Gathering meaningful data to create a greater impact collectively.
- Identifying what works and what doesn't.

PROJECT ACCOMPLISHMENTS/SUCCESSSES:

- Boys & Girls Club of Chester (accomplishments and 1 testimonial story)
- Chester Community Coalition (accomplishments and 1 testimonial story)
- Chester Education Foundation (accomplishments and 1 testimonial story)
- Making A Change Group (accomplishments and 1 testimonial story)
- CASA Youth Advocates, Inc.'s ability to expand services available for the Chester Youth they serve

Shaun Ali – Speaker Biography

Shaun Ali is a Senior Justice Technical Assistance Specialist with WestEd's Justice and Prevention Research Center, where he supports a variety of violence prevention and intervention initiatives. Primarily, Shaun supports the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and PCCD through training and technical assistance, working directly with community-based organizations and local government agencies across the state that are implementing various violence prevention and intervention initiatives and strategies through VIP funding.

Beyond Pennsylvania, Shaun has supported dozens of cities and counties with youth and adult violence and prevention initiatives through the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Additionally, Shaun has supported many states through the U.S. Department of Education's Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety, most notably by helping Ohio develop its Comprehensive School Safety Framework.

House Judiciary Committee Informational Meeting on the Success of the PCCD VIP Grant Program

April 13, 2026

Shaun Ali, WestEd Justice & Prevention Research Center - Testimony

A sincere thank you to the House Judiciary Committee for the invitation to testify about the PCCD VIP Grant Program. A special thank you to PCCD, OGVP, LG's Office, and other state leaders and agencies for the partnership since 2022 that has allowed us to support the work funded by VIP as well as supporting the administration of the VIP funding from the state.

Introduction to myself, my team, and WestEd JPRC, and our role.

I want to share with you all today two concepts from my personal tradition, Islam, for me to best explain how Pennsylvania has been doing truly exemplary work in the prevention and intervention of gun violence. The first concept is 'amana', or, a sacred entrustment, and the second is 'ihsan', or, excellence, specifically excellence in serving others.

Across our team, we have decades of experience in direct service and technical assistance that spans prevention, intervention, reentry, and transformation/healing, both through governmental and community-based efforts. We have worked extensively with the federal government, Department of Justice specifically, throughout the duration of their investments in gun violence prevention and intervention. We have also worked at state and local levels both leading violence prevention and intervention efforts directly, supporting system-involved youth and adults, mediating conflicts, as well as supporting the work in a TA capacity. It is through these experiences learning from many incredible people from communities and governments across the country that we have learned the importance of properly balanced roles and responsibilities across interest holders, as well as the importance of sincere and consistent effort.

For my part in this, and that of my colleagues at WestEd as well, our singular focus is trying to ensure that communities are being served justly and adequately. In our roles as TA providers that starts first and foremost with

honoring the people that we're serving. Often as outsiders at least to some degree, it is not appropriate, fair, nor effective to judge communities, the people in them, or the people serving them. Nor is it to even assume anything. Instead, when we work with grantees who are the front lines of efforts to prevent and intervene, we listen, we learn, and then we offer various individualized, targeted small group, and universal supports. This starts with understanding and connecting with the people involved *as people* so that we can truly understand what they need and what they want to be successful.

Our amana is that we have been blessed with opportunities to learn and serve in similar capacities in other places, so we in turn have an obligation to share that knowledge to serve the people of PA. Our striving for excellence in our role requires us to not take shortcuts by assuming communities across PA will have the same copy/paste solutions others elsewhere have had— being sincere requires thorough relationship building and learning *before* being able to serve. It requires us to meet each interest holder where they are— each grantee, PCCD staff member, state personnel— anyone. If we don't lead with openness, if we don't check our egos, our sincerity suffers, our service suffers, and in turn, public dollars can be wasted, and, most tragically and unacceptable, people will not be served as they need to be.

Above the supporting role that TA providers play is the role of the governmental leaders and agencies as policymakers and funders. The drivers of violence are so broad and the specific issues often so pervasive that not only is significant funding required to address a singular vulnerability, but funding must also be broad across sectors in order to meet the varying needs of communities. Historically, governmental investment has been primarily done through the federal government, though their role in that regard has changed drastically in the last year. By nature, being the most macro government entity, federal funding can only be so intentional; can only be so personal; and can only be so broad within a community or locality. By extension, the TA provided to support federal funding could often only be surface level at best. Rather than being a support mechanism to ensure impact, it was often reduced to being a monitor of progress on grant milestones.

On the other end of the spectrum of levels of government are local government-led and funded initiatives. While that can be much more personal due to

proximity as the most micro level of government, the level of funding required in communities faced with significant challenges around violence is often impossible given the breadth and depth of programs and services that need funding across sectors.

For these reasons, the state can often be the most suitable level of government to make impactful investments, but traditionally, most states beyond CA, NY, IL and few others had not administered large scale funding for gun violence prevention and intervention. With historic investments from the federal government in recent years, lots of which went to states to be used at their discretion, innovative and wise states, PA in particular, seized the opportunity, understanding that the need to save the lives of their people is perhaps their most sacred entrustment.

PA has also demonstrated excellence in service of others in this regard through VIP funding. Specifically, this has been demonstrated by:

1. providing the adequate breadth and depth of funding across sectors to comprehensively address drivers of violence at their root
2. allowing for proper balancing of responsibilities across all interest holders across local and state levels, and between governmental and community-based entities, and
3. enabling us as TA providers to be nimble enough to truly meet the needs of all grantees to maximize our impact in our role.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, transcending funding and policy, it is also incumbent upon governmental leaders at all levels to show up in their roles sincerely simply as fellow human beings. Gun violence prevention and intervention work is deeply human and is deeply noble when done properly. Regardless of role, status, title, or anything else— if sincerity is missing, then excellence is missing, and if excellence is missing, then the sacred entrustment cannot be fulfilled. People will not be served, and investments of public funds will not be realized. But in this regard as well, I can testify that PCCD as administrators of these funds makes a genuine effort to serve sincerely; to serve excellently. For example, there is my dear colleague and friend, Sam Koch, Policy and Legislative Director at PCCD. Sam is a kind, sharp, and dedicated public servant that fully extends herself every single day trying to serve people across the state in her role at PCCD, specifically with her leadership on VIP over

the years. There is also Crystal Lauver from the fiscal department of PCCD, who supports grantees with commitment, graciousness, levity, and real expertise in what is often the most difficult and stressful aspect of grants for the grantees. And there are countless others as well that quietly play their role often out of sight, contribute to a greater good, and do so with real nobility and excellence. I applaud you all and am honored to work alongside you.

This leads me to the heart and soul of gun violence prevention and intervention: the grantees who have received VIP funding. Without the people doing the actual hands-on work on the ground, there is no prevention, no intervention, and thus, no solution to the pervasive and often deadly issue of gun violence that harms the very people with whom we are all entrusted to serve. While grantees have the obvious sacred entrustment of stewarding public funds justly and appropriately, it is we— TA providers, funders, and state leaders alike— that are entrusted with supporting them, honoring them, and ensuring they have everything they need to be successful. They are the frontlines; they are the superheroes. We are their help.

There is truly not enough time in the entire day to share the amazing work that all the grantees have done with VIP grants. Entire cities— Lancaster, Chester, and York being perfect examples— have seen real transformation from thoughtful and strategic VIP-funded initiatives, which is a testament to the diligence of both the grantees and of PCCD. Similarly, many counties have also benefitted from the proper balancing across levels VIP funding has enabled. An example at the county level, Allegheny County, both with VIP funding and through their own sizable investments, has undertaken novel approaches to centralize their violence prevention and intervention efforts to ensure alignment and collaboration across a very large and diverse county. At the community level, there are hundreds of community-based organizations using VIP funds to save lives every day. Again, too many to name, but we are joined by some of these wonderful people today, and my team and I have been very fortunate and honored to support some of their work.

1. Cyrise, after a full, noble, pioneering career in law enforcement in Chester, has chosen to dedicate her time and expertise to lead a citywide prevention and intervention effort funded by VIP.
2. A key part of the collaborative effort in Chester is Lashira's organization, the Chester Community Coalition, that provides invaluable

- hospital and community-based violence intervention work. Lashira and CCC have recently had to navigate what can only be explained as a breach of a sacred entrustment by the powers that be— the closing of the primary hospital serving Chester. Such are the challenges grantees face every day, yet organizations like CCC are still committed to serving, and still manage to do so with excellence.
3. There is Will, of the Bench Mark program in Lancaster. Bench Mark has been able to provide safe, productive, and relevant opportunities for young people, but simultaneously, more broadly, Will as a leader, though he would never admit it out of genuine humility, is also a galvanizing force for the entire City and has been one of the main catalysts for their current citywide, collaborative effort to prevent youth violence— also funded by VIP.
 4. We have also seen how Pamela and Expressive Path leverage their expertise in and passion for art to serve and beautify their community in Norristown, and
 5. How York's GVI program and another VIP-funded, countywide youth violence prevention project have complemented one another as prevention and intervention initiatives and created a very strong foundation of resilience for the city and the county.

My colleagues here, their teams, partners, and their fellow grantees alike, are the embodiment of excellence in service of others.

What I would like to leave us all with today is that taking our sacred entrustments seriously and striving for excellence in our respective roles is not a singular action— it is ongoing, intentional practice. And this is a reminder to myself and my colleagues first and foremost as well as you all. For me, for Muslims, this is what our five daily prayers are for. To practice gratitude and humility, to struggle against our egos, to grant us patience, and to energize and ground us throughout the day so that we can serve others effectively, efficiently, and excellently. All of us as people playing important roles in trying to assist with these serious challenges must find our own personal ways, each and every day, to ensure we are fulfilling our obligations with sincerity, with excellence. While we have made great strides, enabled by you all and by PCCD, there is always more work to be done. I encourage you all to not only keep going, but to challenge yourselves to do even more.

May we all be guided, may we all be patient, and may we all be successful in serving the wonderful people of PA, with whom we have been entrusted. Thank you very much for your time, thank you very much for your efforts, and thank you very much for allowing myself and my team to be a part of it.

Tiff Lowe – Speaker Biography

Tiff Lowe is a York-born community leader, author, nonprofit founder, motivational speaker, and Project Manager whose work is rooted in faith, resilience, and an unwavering commitment to people. After overcoming school expulsion, early involvement in the justice system, and profound personal loss, Tiff made the intentional decision to never give up, trusting that God was shaping her life for something greater.

Since 2013, she has served the York City School District as a hall monitor, mentor, coach, and advocate. In 2021, she became York City's first Credible Messenger, working directly in the streets to interrupt violence and restore hope. She is the founder of **Tiff Lowe Inc.**, home of **More Graduations Less Funerals (MGLF)**, and the author of *More Than the Worst Thing*, a powerful reflection on accountability, healing, and transformation.

As a Project Manager, Tiff's leadership has contributed to meaningful decreases in gun and gang violence in York City, and she has supported other cities in launching and strengthening their own Group Violence Intervention (GVI) efforts. She currently serves as a member of the **Office of Gun Violence Prevention Executive Committee through the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD)**, a role she has held since September 9, 2025., helping to guide strategy, collaboration, and community-informed violence prevention efforts at a state level.

Tiff is also a sought-after motivational speaker who has spoken at events across multiple states, inspiring people to choose life, take chances on themselves, and understand that they are more than the worst thing they have ever done. She holds a **Bachelor of Science in Early Education and Special Education** and has received multiple community and leadership awards. Beyond her professional work, Tiff is a proud mother, grandmother, sister and daughter. Outside of saving lives, she enjoys reading, fishing, traveling, and spending time with her grandson, grounding herself in the same love and connection she works every day to protect. Tiff remains devoted to ensuring more graduations and **less funerals**, meeting people where they are, leading with love, and choosing perseverance every step of the way.



PCCD VIP Grant Program Impact

Tiff Lowe – York City GVI

PCCD Saves Lives — Here's How:

- Invests in credible messengers
- Supports collaboration across systems
- Funds strategies that produce real results

York City Gun Violence Data:

2021: 12
2022: 20 (+67%)
2023: 5 (-75%)
2024: 3 (-40%)
2025: 6 (+100%)
2026: 2 (-67%)

Total: 48 lives lost

Overall reduction from peak (2022 to 2026): 90% decrease

Proven Impact:

York City experienced 104 consecutive days without a shooting.

What the Work Looks Like:

Pen & Pad | Prison Preparation | Equine Therapy | Street Outreach | Experience & Exposure Trips | Leading with love

Real- Life Impact:

PCCD funding creates real second chances.

One example is a young man named Vidal:

City of York GVI/ MGLF™

- Employed full-time
- Supporting his family
- Has not returned to jail in nearly two years

He now runs a barbershop inside our office, where he provides free haircuts to young people, not just as a service, but as an opportunity to connect, mentor, and guide them toward better decisions.

Experience & Exposure Impact:

Many of our young people lose their lives on the same streets they were raised on. These trips allow them to leave those environments, see new opportunities, and experience life beyond survival.

Key Takeaway:

With continued investment, 365 days without a shooting can become the norm.

More Graduations Less Funerals, Not just a slogan, a lifestyle.

Pamela Martin, LPC – Speaker Biography

Pamela Martin is a native of Norristown, Pennsylvania, who discovered her passion for art at an early age. She found joy in problem-solving and creative expression, which ultimately led her to pursue a Bachelor's degree from the Tyler School of Art. Following her graduation, Pamela returned to Norristown Borough, where she began raising her son. During this time, she furthered her education by earning a Master's degree in Counseling Psychology from Arcadia University and became a Licensed Professional Counselor.

Pamela built a distinguished 20-year career as a social worker with Montgomery County. Throughout her tenure, she provided critical support to teens facing abuse, neglect, and limited access to crucial resources. She also served as a Protective Services Worker with the Office of Aging, advocating for the safety and well-being of vulnerable older adults. Encouraged by family and friends, Pamela combined her passion for the arts with her commitment to community service by founding Expressive Path in 2014. Through this nonprofit, she works to make a meaningful impact in underserved communities by offering creative and supportive outlets for disadvantaged adolescents.

In addition to her professional work, Pamela is an active community leader. She serves on the Norristown Area School District CARES Committee and has participated in the Communities That Care Coalition, where she has contributed to efforts aimed at preventing violence and substance abuse among local youth. Pamela and her team at Expressive Path are dedicated to inspiring, educating, and strengthening communities through collaboration, character development, and creating safe, supportive spaces.



857 Cherry Street, Norristown, PA • 610-331-3516 • ExpressivePath.org

- Expressive Path Mission
 - Summary

- Expressive Path History

- Organization Goals

- Pennsylvania Commission on Crime & Delinquency-VIP Support
 - Expressive Path Peace Project
 - Purpose

- Activities
 - Scavenger Hunt
 - Park Restoration
 - Anti Violence Art Exhibitions
 - Billboards/Postcards

- Results

- Pennsylvania Commission on Crime & Delinquency- Support Provided
 - Staff
 - West Ed

- Peace Project Part 2
 - Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED)

Dr. John A. Toleno – Speaker Biography

Dr. John A. Toleno is a seasoned educational leader with more than four decades of experience serving public school systems across Pennsylvania and New Jersey. He most recently served as Interim Superintendent of the East Stroudsburg Area School District, following nine years as Superintendent of the Upper Merion Area School District and eight years leading the Stroudsburg Area School District. Throughout his tenure, Dr. Toleno has demonstrated a strong commitment to student achievement, fiscal responsibility, and innovative district leadership. His accomplishments include leading large-scale construction and renovation projects, implementing full-day kindergarten and one-to-one technology initiatives, and successfully negotiating contracts that support both staff and district goals.

Dr. Toleno began his career as an Industrial Arts/Technology Education teacher before advancing through roles as an Education Program Specialist with the New Jersey Department of Education, Assistant Principal, Principal, and ultimately Superintendent. He holds a Bachelor of Science in Industrial Arts Education from Montclair State College, a Master of Education in Educational Administration from East Stroudsburg University, and a Doctorate in Educational Leadership from Indiana University/East Stroudsburg University. Known for his collaborative leadership style and focus on continuous improvement, Dr. Toleno has consistently fostered positive educational environments, strengthened community engagement, and guided districts through periods of growth and change.

Dr. John A. Toleno – Written Material

Good morning, my name is Dr. John Toleno, I am the co-coordinator for the Community Partnership for Gun Safety in Monroe County. I would like to also introduce the other co-coordinator who is here today, Mr. Jake Jakobsen who is a Gulf War Veteran and also is a retired Police Officer from the Stroud Area Regional Police Department.

I am honored and humbled to speak before the House Judiciary Committee regarding the purpose and function of the Community Partnership for Gun Safety.

This grant was established in order to deal with several very important pieces of information that became the focal point of the grant document. One of which is the fact that 75% of every household in Monroe County contains at least one (1) registered handgun and Monroe County leads the State and National average for suicide amongst adult males.

My presentation today may be vastly different than presentations you have had in the past as today in order to best explain the purpose and function of the CPGS, I am going to tell some “stories”. The “stories” I am going to tell are shared at each of our CPGS gun safety classes by the Monroe County District Attorney, Mr. Mike Mancuso. These “stories” will provide clarity as to the importance of safely storing guns within your household.

There will be a total of four (4) stories and then I will provide specific details about what our CPGS program does and I will provide what Mr. Jakobsen and I (along with many others) believe is the missing link when it comes to gun ownership.

Story one (1): The little boy and the football helmet.

Story two (2): The nurse who was late to work.

Story three (3): The couple who were forever in love.

Story four (4): The un-expected visit and the surprise ending.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you can clearly tell by the stories’ I just shared with you and each of them is real and each of them took place in Monroe County! Our program is designed around the safe handling and storage of guns and we also have a component that allows for the CPGS to get involved when an individual lives alone or with his/her family and is struggling with a mental health issue.

If you call us and inform us of what is going on in the household, and if there are guns in the house, we will provide you with a 3rd party company that will store your weapons for you and the CPGS will pay any costs associated with the storage of said guns. In the meantime, we (the CPGS) will also put the family members in touch with the County Crisis Intervention Team who will then help to provide mental health services to the family member(s).

In the pro

Our CPGS program has also held two (2) gun safety classes and we will continue these classes on a monthly basis. During these classes we explain the purpose of this program and then we have presentation on Suicide that seems to captivate our audiences. The next presentation is the safe handling and storage of a handgun which is done by our Sheriff's Deputies who are all specifically trained in the proper handling and various techniques associated with gun safety! At the conclusion of that presentation, the County District Attorney relays specific factual information regarding unsafe weapons practices that have either led to death or serious injury and many times resulting in charges being brought against someone who left a weapon stored improperly and left it exposed to others!

At each of our classes each participant receives a cable gun lock and is entered into a raffle to win a bio-metric gun safe at the end of the class. So far at the two (2) classes that we have held we have educated over 60 people and the feedback has been very favorable. We will be offering our next class in early May and we look forward to a good turnout.

The missing link: In my mind and in the mind of Mr. Jakobsen I would be remiss if I did not tell you all how important it is to advocate for a mandatory gun safety class for everyone that purchases a gun in the Commonwealth. As I have described the importance of this program to my 89 year old mother: "Mom, I can take you to a gun shop and since you have a clear record, within approximately 20 to 30 minutes you can walk out of the store with said gun. At that point you can apply for a Concealed Carry Permit and could have that within several days or several weeks depending upon what method you use to apply.... However, during those two (2) milestones, you will never have been taught to load, safely handle, store, or shoot that newly purchased weapon". Ladies and Gentlemen, it has been an honor to stand before you today and it is our hope that you will think deeply about this information and perhaps we can all continue to move forward in our quest to save a life or many lives just through promoting safe gun practices!

I thank you all for your time and consideration regarding this very important topic, be well and thanks for all you do for our great State!

April 13, 2026

Members of the Pennsylvania House Judiciary Committee
Pennsylvania House of Representatives
Harrisburg, PA

Dear Chairperson and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

On behalf of the Pennsylvania Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs, representing fifteen local Boys & Girls Clubs serving communities across the Commonwealth, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. We write in strong support of the **Violence Intervention and Prevention (VIP)** line item in the Commonwealth's budget and to underscore the importance of continued investment in the **Building Opportunities Through Out-of-School Time (BOOST) program**.

Boys & Girls Clubs play a critical role in Pennsylvania's violence prevention ecosystem. Our Clubs operate in communities experiencing elevated levels of gun violence, economic hardship, and limited access to affordable youth resources. Each year, Clubs provide safe, structured, and supervised environments for over 55,000 young people during the after-school hours, weekends, and summers, times when youth are most vulnerable to victimization or involvement in violence.

The Commonwealth's investment in VIP funding reflects a growing recognition that violence prevention requires both targeted intervention and strong upstream prevention. Out-of-school-time programming, mentorship, and access to trusted adults are proven strategies for reducing risky behavior and promoting long-term positive outcomes for young people.

The Building Opportunities Through Out-of-School Time (BOOST) program, administered by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD), is a cornerstone of the Commonwealth's prevention strategy. BOOST supports high-quality after-school and summer programming for at-risk, school-age youth by expanding access to services in under-resourced communities.

In the 2024–25 state budget, the General Assembly made a historic investment of approximately \$11.5 million in BOOST funding statewide. Through this program, the Pennsylvania Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs received \$1.5 million in statewide BOOST funding, which is being distributed among local Clubs operating out-of-school-time programs across the Commonwealth. These funds are allowing Clubs to:

- Reduce or eliminate participation costs for families with financial need
- Expand after-school and summer program capacity
- Provide transportation so youth can safely access services
- Strengthen staffing, mentoring, and trauma-informed supports.

BOOST funding works in tandem with VIP investments that support mental health services, mentoring, workforce development, and targeted interventions for teens at highest risk of gun violence. Together, these programs create a continuum of prevention and intervention that meets youth where they are and addresses root causes before crisis occurs.

While progress has been made, the need for sustained investment remains significant. According to the Afterschool Alliance, there are 792,275 Pennsylvania children whose parents want them in afterschool yet lack access. Unmet demand for middle schoolers has reached a new high, with nearly 50% of parents of teenagers seeking, but not finding, care.

Communities across Pennsylvania continue to face challenges related to gun violence, youth trauma, and unmet behavioral-health needs. Programs funded through VIP and BOOST are already demonstrating strong returns, keeping young people safe, connected, and engaged while strengthening families and neighborhoods. Through grants provided to the PA Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs, BOOST directly reduced barriers to participation for **9,728 youth** through transportation services, camp scholarships, and culturally responsive outreach. Clubs have held **39 events** with families and other community stakeholders.

Importantly, BOOST grants are competitive, accountable, and focused on communities with the greatest needs. They represent a fiscally responsible approach to public safety that emphasizes prevention, partnerships, and measurable outcomes.

The Pennsylvania Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs respectfully urges the House Judiciary Committee to support full and continued funding of the Violence Intervention and Prevention line item, including dedicated BOOST funding. These investments save lives, reduce long-term public costs, and ensure that young people across the Commonwealth have access to safe places, caring adults, and meaningful opportunities. A recent study by Ecotone found that for every \$1 invested in a Boys & Girls Club returned \$10.32 in economic benefits to Club members, their families and society.

Thank you for your leadership and for the opportunity to share our perspective. We look forward to continuing to work with you to advance effective violence prevention strategies in Pennsylvania.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "JR Kenny". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "K".

JR Kenny
Director, Government Relations
Boys & Girls Clubs of America
Pennsylvania Alliance of Boys & Girls Clubs