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Grantmaking for a Healthier California

Violence Prevention Programs Save Lives

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By Gary L. Yates

With the escalating casualty rate of American military personnel dominating newspaper headlines, it may be tempting to ignore the problems facing American civilians at home. But consider the statistics: While more than 2,000 Americans have lost their lives since the war in Iraq began in March 2003, approximately 2,800 youth were victims of gun violence in California between 2000 and 2002, according to the latest available statistics from the California Department of Health Services.

The life-or-death situation that many of California's youth face on a daily basis can be compared to the grim realities confronted by our young soldiers stationed overseas. This statement is not meant to diminish the tragic loss of life in our armed forces. But we must use every means in our power to stop the senseless loss of young lives in our communities.

During the past decade, the state of California passed some of the toughest gun control laws in the country and dramatically increased spending for violence prevention and youth safety programs — including after-school opportunities and job training. These efforts have paid off. The number of young people killed by gun violence in California decreased by 43 percent from 1991 to 2003, according to the state health department's own statistical data.

The causes of violence, like those of many health and social problems that face cities across the nation, are complex. It stands to reason, therefore, that several factors may have contributed to this sharp and unexpected decline in violent crimes.

Some observers credit the "Three Strikes" law, which put more repeat offenders behind bars. Other commentators point to the presence of more police on the streets, a reduction in the number of guns in circulation, gang truces and more effective after-school and prevention programs.

The California Wellness Foundation believes that a strong contributing factor was the collective achievements of committed individuals working on the front lines to prevent violence in cities all across California.

Here in California, three visionary community leaders — recipients of The California Wellness Foundation's 2005

California Peace Prize — have created violence prevention programs that produce positive results.

Otilio “O.T.” Quintero, a former migrant farm worker, helps direct Barrios Unidos, a Santa Cruz-based national organization that guides young people away from drugs and gangs by providing educational, leadership development and community economic development programs. He has also advocated for youth violence prevention beyond Santa Cruz. Quintero helped secure the passage of AB 963, which established the California Gang, Crime and Violence Prevention Partnership Program. It has directed more than \$10 million to community-based organizations in California committed to preventing violence and gang activity.

For 17 years, Maria Velasquez has worked to reduce domestic violence in California’s rural communities. Based in Shingletown, Calif., she is a violence prevention trainer and outreach worker for Second Step: A Violence Prevention Curriculum, a classroom-based social skills program that addresses the connection between bullying behavior in childhood and battering behavior in adulthood. Velasquez is an outspoken advocate for breaking the generational cycle of violence by teaching children alternative ways of coping and negotiating.

Sayre Weaver, an attorney in Brea, has worked tirelessly over the past decade to reduce gun violence through legislation and litigation. She is now one of California’s foremost legal authorities on firearms regulation by local agencies. In 1996, Weaver helped the City of West Hollywood draft and defend its ordinance prohibiting “junk gun” sales. Weaver defended the power of California’s cities and counties to regulate firearms in two lawsuits, *California Rifle & Pistol Ass’n v. City of West Hollywood* (1998) and *Nordyke v. King* (2002), in which Weaver protected Alameda County’s ordinance banning gun possession on county property against a gun show owner’s challenge.

The honorees also reflect the diversity of California and the sad truth that no community is immune from the effects of violence.

To adequately address this issue, the role of law enforcement must continue to be augmented by a comprehensive public health focus on the environmental factors that contribute to violence — from the lack of after-school activities to easy access to firearms and alcohol. While grassroots organizations have established effective community programs, translating these local successes into effective statewide policy requires strong support by advocates and policymakers.

Those of us who have witnessed first-hand the thousands of lives saved by violence prevention programs over the past decade — and the millions of dollars saved in hospital care and police and fire response — must do all we can to insure that these programs continue to reduce the gun violence toll on our youth. Just as violence has many causes, there is no single means of preventing it.

Gary L. Yates is the president and chief executive officer of The California Wellness Foundation, which has funded violence prevention programs since 1992.

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