

“Violence and Health: A National and Regional Challenge”

Moderator: Ms. Patricia Giggans, Executive Director, Peace Over Violence

Panelists: Hon. Steve Cooley, Los Angeles County District Attorney

Ms. Connie Rice, Co-Director, The Advancement Project

Dr. Robert Ross, President and CEO, The California Endowment

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While policy efforts to halt gang violence are increasingly prioritized at the regional and national scales, discussions on the origins of violence are connected to the very local; the health of neighborhoods, families, and children. This panel, moderated by Ms. Patricia Giggans, Executive Director of Peace Over Violence, set out to explore the interconnectedness between the local causes of violence and the regional approach needed to solve it. Connie Rice, Co-Director of The Advancement Project, posed one of the toughest and most candid questions early on, “why is the city of Los Angeles stuck on stupid in ending la Vida Loca?”

According to Ms. Rice, “domestic violence is the Petri dish for gang violence” which she argued develops out of specific circumstances (educational failures, negative peer networks, etc.), not happenstance. In order to address these complex circumstances that create violent communities, said Ms. Rice, a 24 hour, seven day a week, wraparound strategy that encompasses employment assistance, educational training, safe recreation and housing options, healthcare access, and other services is paramount. This massive reorganization of city and state resources is proven to be the only effective strategy to reduce violence in gang-run communities. The only barrier to its implementation in violent “hot spots”, stated Ms. Rice, is political will.

As Los Angeles County District Attorney, Hon. Steve Cooley added a broader perspective to the intersection of violence and health. With the crime rate for Los Angeles County at an all time low compared with the last 50 years, Mr. Cooley expressed reason for optimism. He cited the more sensitive and sophisticated methods of crime fighting as contributing factors to the reduction of crime in the county. This paradigm shift, said Mr. Cooley, away from simply suppression to a focus on prevention has meant that new strategies are increasingly employed. For example, using a health model to understand that crime is analogous to cancer has helped to prevent and reduce the harm—physical, psychological, and emotional—incurred from violence. Mr. Cooley emphasized that these new thought processes, and the reduction in crime, indicate that we are in a new—and better—era of crime fighting.

In regards to the science of violence, from a public health perspective, President and CEO of The California Endowment, Dr. Robert Ross identified some of the critical physiological implications of violence in an effort to underscore the necessity of a 24-7 wraparound strategy. For example, children repeatedly exposed to violence, said Dr. Ross, have a neurological imprint in their brains that is detectable by CAT scan in children as young as four years old. For adults, continued Dr. Ross, studies have shown that African American males exposed to violence have developed post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms on par with those of soldiers who have undergone battle. This combination of domestic, community, and media violence on a daily basis in specific communities, said Dr. Ross, causes physiological damage that can only be treated by intensive, holistic, “24-7” care sustained over a period of 5 to 10 years.

Ms. Giggans concluded by asked the panelists what real leadership on the issue of violence would look like in Los Angeles. There was general consensus on the panel that the proposed appointing of a “gang czar” is a tremendous step in the right direction because the violence crisis that exists in many communities can only be addressed when someone is charged with and given the authority to unite the disparate community-based and city organizations already providing services. They also emphasized that this potential leader can only be successful if she or he is given the necessary authority over other agencies and their budgets to coordinate the range of support and services necessary for a sustained, 24-7 wraparound approach in violent “hot spot” communities.