

Testimony - Joint Hearing on Public Safety

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Thank you for having me here today as you hear from a wide array of people about public safety. For the record, my name is Shabnam Nolan. I am the executive director of King Street Center located in downtown Burlington. King Street Center is a youth development organization whose mission is to empower youth to explore their talents and find their voice through learning, play, and opportunity. Today, we serve more than 150 youth - touching the lives of over 400 community members – through our Early Childhood Education, K-5, Teen, and Mentoring programs. Many of the families we serve have experienced great hardship – from growing up in generational poverty here in Vermont, to being forced to leave their home country and arrive to our community as refugees – and all are deeply committed to ensuring their children have more opportunities and success than they were able to have growing up.

If you will indulge me for a moment, I want you to imagine that you're 14 years old, just starting high school, and are already being asked what you want to do when you grow up, or what college you want to go to. The truth is, you have no idea. Right now, you are just trying to navigate everyday life – social pressures, academics, and family expectations. Where would you even start? You have more responsibilities than a lot of the kids in your grade. Your parents work really hard, have non-traditional work hours, and you have to take on an after school job and/or be responsible for your younger siblings. Even if you wanted to figure out what your future might hold, you simply cannot add that to the list of things to juggle. Seeing a future for yourself right now just isn't a reality.

Now layering on top of that, you come from a family where your parents have their own history of trauma, or perhaps they have a substance use disorder, or you have no permanent home and jump from place to place. Maybe they don't speak or read English well and haven't been able to support you in your academics. Or maybe, you live in an apartment building where your neighbors are regularly engaged in criminal activity, keeping you in a constant state of fight or flight.

For many kids in all of our communities, including the kids King Street serves, this is their experience. The reality is that for low-income families, every member is responsible for the overall well-being of the household. Being a trusted partner to many families, it is clear that parents want nothing more than for their child to find a successful path in life. Yet, for these kids, limited financial resources translates to little choice in life. There is only room to think about survival first.

I'm sure you've heard a lot of facts and figures about crime and who is or is not committing them as you explore public safety. You may be hearing calls for increased investments in our criminal justice system and considering tougher laws to hold people accountable.

I want you to know that King Street is in the center of all the acts of crime and violence happening in Burlington, as we are located near city hall park and in significant drug activity areas. Not only is that where our Center is, but over 95% of our kids and families live within a 3-block radius. We have absolutely been impacted by what is going on. We've needed to invest money that we did not plan on in securing the safety of our youth and staff. We have been in lockdowns more than once this past year as police surround the building while running after

someone with a gun in our backyard. We do daily sweeps of the playground, often finding needles and bags where children play. This is alarming and unacceptable.

But I'm here today to warn you of the danger of defining public safety entirely as an enforcement issue. You can add new crimes to the books, you can make tougher sentences, you can add more resources to harm reduction. But none of that will stop the flow of more kids getting involved in street-level violence, especially those who are so close to it like King Street kids are.

The kids we serve have a responsibility to help financially support their families. Right now, there is an immense amount of demand for drugs in our communities. And basic principles of economics tell us that when there is an increase in demand, there is an accompanying increase in supply. We know for a fact that drug suppliers look to poor kids to supply their drugs. It's already happening. And it is these kids who will be the target of the increased enforcement. If kids don't feel that they have a choice because they don't have access to safe, positive spaces to go to during the hours they're out of school, this is their reality.

So I urge you to think about keeping youth safe as a part of your public safety strategy. Right now, 1 in 4 kids in Vermont have no place to go to outside of school hours – when we know that the hours between 3 and 6pm show some of the riskiest behavior. It is a fact that kids need safe, supportive environments that help them have choices, choices that help prevent them from being pulled into supplying drugs. If the state does not increase its investment in out of school, afterschool, and youth development programs as part of its public safety strategy, then all we are going to do is fill the prisons with more kids. And that is not the Vermont way. We are proud of how much we support youth in this state and it would be a mistake to not carry that ethos forward to this important conversation. There is not enough programming like King Street Center and there is very little state funding for the programs that do exist. If ever there was a time to invest in our youth, this is it. Right now. As you have your conversations in committee rooms, I want to keep this question at the forefront: what can we do to prevent more of our children from either being the ones to supply the drugs, which we know often goes hand in hand with violence, or being the ones to demand them? If you can keep this at the forefront as you decide where to make state investments, then I guarantee you that you won't just be looking at responding to this statewide challenge, you'll actually be preventing it and its impact on our youth.

Thank you.