



CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

CITY COUNCIL

JAMIE R. GAUTHIER
ROOM 586, CITY HALL
Philadelphia, PA 19107
(215) 686-0460 or 0459
Fax 215-686-1929

Mayor Jim Kenney
City Hall, Room 215
1400 John F. Kennedy Blvd.
Philadelphia, PA 19107
james.kenney@phila.gov

Sent via email

August 27, 2020

Dear Mayor Kenney,

I implore you to issue an executive order declaring gun violence a citywide emergency. This would mean directing more city resources toward antiviolence programs at the neighborhood level, greater transparency on those initiatives as we execute them, implementing the Roadmap to Safer Communities with fidelity, and an explicit call for help from Philadelphia's private sector, nonprofit community, academic institutions, and healthcare organizations.

I write to you in a desperate attempt to bring help to my district. Residents in West and Southwest Philadelphia are disproportionately impacted by the gun violence that is devastating our city this year. In just the last few weeks, a seven-year-old was gunned down as he played on his front porch. There was a mass shooting at a rec center in East Parkside, where a pregnant woman was among the injured. Two people were shot at Malcolm X Park, a major crossroads of our neighborhoods and a place where families and children relax and play. The violence has stirred up a climate of fear and trauma in our neighborhoods that is hampering people's ability to go about their daily routine safely – let alone enjoy everyday life.

Let us be very clear: this is a racial justice issue. Our Black and brown communities have become war zones, as a result of decades of disinvestment and neglect. Systematic disinvestment has led to poverty, disconnection from employment opportunities, and lack of capital when it comes to our local institutions and our political structure.

When violence is commonplace in a community, trauma permeates every facet of that community's life. Children are scared, and have a harder time learning at school. Existing businesses leave, and new businesses are disincentivized from setting up shop, which in turn removes local jobs. The cycle of violence is a feedback loop: it perpetuates poverty in our most disadvantaged communities, which in turn leads to more violence. This is why I am asking you to raise this crisis to the highest level of importance in our city. In this time when our city and our country are hyper-focused on ending racial oppression, this should be the moment that we break this cycle of violence, and begin to bring equity to our communities.

I am fully aware that the City already has anti-violence initiatives in motion. The Roadmap to Safer Communities offers a solid blueprint, taking a public health approach to the problem and offering a variety of tactics and strategies. The Group Violence Intervention (GVI) pilot is currently underway in our own community, with the goal of stopping the spread of shootings. These are critical first steps, and I don't want to discount their importance. At the same time, I have major concerns with the implementation of each of these initiatives, and believe we need to go even farther to tackle the problem.

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The Roadmap is simply a set of recommendations, which are rendered meaningless unless they are actualized in policy and practice. I am discouraged by what I have seen so far in this regard. At a recent Council hearing, it was mentioned that the last quarterly report for the Roadmap was released in January. Frankly, for this to be the case in a year that we are seeing alarming rates of gun violence is completely unacceptable. It is not appropriate to point to the Roadmap as an effort that's underway if people aren't aware of what's being done, or whether it's working.

The rollout of GVI is equally concerning to me, for similar reasons. So far, there has been little transparency on its progress from the Office of Violence Prevention, even after repeated requests for information and data. The decisions being made as part of this program impact my constituents on a daily basis, and they deserve to know what steps are being taken and whether progress is being made.

I recognize that this issue cannot be solved by the Mayor's Office alone, but I also believe that our city government could be doing far more than it is currently. In my view, the City must take this as seriously as it's taking COVID-19. All City departments and agencies should be aligned towards combating the problem. There needs to be an explicit call for help from the private sector, academia, and health care institutions – entities with massive amounts of untapped potential to help address this issue – and that call needs to come from the top.

In an emergency, Philadelphians expect their leaders to pull out all the stops and be very clear on whether or not efforts are working. This is exactly what we need to do. As public servants, it is our responsibility to work towards solutions for *all* of our constituents – and to treat this crisis with the urgency that it deserves. I look forward to continuing this conversation, and to the difficult work ahead.

In service,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "J. Gauthier". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

Councilmember Jamie R. Gauthier