

**TESTIMONY OF
JODINA HICKS
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
URBANPROMISE
27 NORTH 36TH STREET
CAMDEN, NJ 08105**

**BEFORE
THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, JUSTICE, SCIENCE AND RELATED
AGENCIES**

MARCH 22, 2012

H-309 U.S. CAPITOL

Good day, Mr. Chairman. I am pleased to have the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee in support of Fiscal Year 2013 funding for Department of Justice programs that support organizations making significant progress against the inter-generational cycles of street violence and poverty.

My name is Jodina Hicks and I serve as the Executive Director of UrbanPromise. UrbanPromise is a nonprofit child and youth development organization based in Camden, New Jersey. The Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Bureau of Justice Statistics and the U.S. Census Bureau consistently list Camden as one of the poorest and most violent cities in the United States. The median household income in Camden is just \$27,000, 36.1% of the population lives below the poverty line, only 62% have graduated high school, and less than 7% hold a post-secondary degree. Poverty and lack of access to quality education are pervasive and systemic problems in Camden.

UrbanPromise (UP) is a locally grown organization, born out of our community's need to address the intractable problems of intergenerational poverty and the cyclical incarceration of our youth. The mission of UrbanPromise is to equip children and young adults with the skills necessary for academic achievement, life management, and personal growth and success. Founded in 1988 in the basement of an unused Baptist church, UrbanPromise began with just one adult staff, twelve college-aged volunteers, and an annual budget of only \$12,000. Today, UP has grown to offer a myriad of youth educational and developmental programming, including an alternative high school, elementary/middle school, afterschool programs, summer camps, teen job training, and a host of other enrichment activities. UrbanPromise challenges Camden youth to develop their academic, social, creative and leadership potential. From our humble beginnings, we now boast a budget of over \$3 million, employ more than 50 full-time staff, and serve 600 local youth and families annually. UrbanPromise is also privileged to enjoy the efforts of 500 annual volunteers, including 50 college interns, 350 individuals in work groups, and 100 local residents.

I am one of the original 12 college-aged volunteers from our founding in 1988. While I was not born or raised in Camden, I grew up in Camden. Even though I left for a time to work on evidence-based social strategies and policies with Public/Private Ventures and the Safer Foundation – UrbanPromise and Camden remained my home. For almost 25 years I have witnessed the community's economic and social struggles firsthand. Without hesitation I returned two years ago – as Executive Director and with a commitment to strengthen the focus on our youth programming, one grounded in evidence, outcomes, and data.

UrbanPromise offers the children, youth and families of Camden a wide variety of services – all geared towards stemming the intergenerational cycles of poverty and street violence that permeate communities such as ours. The majority of children in Camden qualify as “at-risk”, which—as defined by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention—means they are exposed to high levels of risk in their families, homes, communities, and social environments to such a degree that it could lead to educational failure, school dropout, or involvement in juvenile delinquency. Our alternative schools—especially our UrbanPromise Academy high school—serve some of the highest risk youth in the city; students with present or past involvement with the juvenile justice system. Many come to us after they have already dropped

out of the public school system. Nevertheless, last year our elementary and middle school boasted a 98% attendance rate, and 100% percent of our high school seniors graduated on time. Of UrbanPromise's 2011 graduating class, 93% have gone on to pursue post secondary education. Historically, UrbanPromise graduates have had an 85% college completion rate.

Perhaps our most innovative prevention/diversion model is our StreetLeader Program - a combination of youth mentoring and teen job-training. Since 1994, UrbanPromise has employed more than 1,300 young teenagers as StreetLeaders. The program is the natural outgrowth of the AfterSchool and Summer Camp programs we began back in 1988. Camden-area teens are hired as counselors, tutors, mentors, disciplinarians, and role models for the children in our AfterSchool and Summer Camps. Many are graduates of the programs and are passionate about the opportunity to help raise the next generation of youth and give back to the community.

One of the best examples of this generational aspect of UrbanPromise relates to one of our first StreetLeaders, Arlene, who decided she would attend and graduate from Howard University. This was no small feat for a young woman of a single-parent who had limited financial resources from which to draw. After a year at Howard, Arlene was unable to pay tuition costs and left school. She reached out to UrbanPromise for help. Through fundraisers and generous donations from our supporters, Arlene was able to return to Howard and graduated soon after.

Since then, Arlene has married and started a successful business here in DC. She remains dedicated to helping Camden youth attend college. Nearly two years ago, Arlene began the Ambassadors of Hope scholarship fund aimed at raising money for college-bound UrbanPromise alumni. And, last September, she joined UrbanPromise's Board of Directors where she gives voice to the importance of outreach in the Camden community.

StreetLeaders like Arlene are encouraged to stay in school, attain job skills, and avoid negative life choices such as early parenthood, drugs, and the penal system. The heart of the StreetLeader program is challenging teens to use their influence to make positive changes in their lives and neighborhoods through job training and education. For most, this is their first job, and they receive extensive training and on-the-job mentoring to facilitate their success. Once in the program, teens have the opportunity to take on additional responsibilities and develop leadership skills as peer leaders. This positive part-time job has proven to be a lifesaver for many youth.

UrbanPromise's programming is specifically geared toward the hours of the highest violence—between 3:00 and 9:00 p.m.—bringing children and youth off the streets to a safe place, and refocusing their energies when they are most at risk. We were reminded of the danger that arises at this time a couple weeks ago. Two days in a row, shootings occurred directly outside of one of our AfterSchool sites. Thankfully, none of our youth were harmed. UrbanPromise has an impressive record – in almost 25 years, no active UrbanPromise youth have been lost to street violence. Our StreetLeaders are encouraged to avoid negative influences and focus on school through mentoring; community service; life skills classes; tutoring; SAT prep courses; classes in reading, writing, and math; a youth group focused on social development; and performing arts activities.

The key to UrbanPromise's success is the true community-based nature of our organization. The most effective method of engaging communities is through multiple partnerships or collaborations. Because of personal connections and institutional knowledge, nonprofit organizations such as UrbanPromise are often best positioned to directly help and mobilize local populations. Unfortunately, these organizations are often also the most cash-strapped, and their limited capacity does not allow them to provide the wraparound services that boost overall program outcomes. Organizations such as UrbanPromise overcome these substantial hurdles by cultivating strong local partnerships. For example, we have seen better academic outcomes since partnering with the local Center for Family Services, which provides therapeutic counseling for our families and teens in crisis. As such, we are grateful for Congress' recognition of the need for local partnerships, and hope the Subcommittee will continue to fund OJJDP to help support community based gang prevention and diversion efforts. Together we can guide and educate children and young people to become successful community leaders – not FBI statistics.

Based on our 25 years of programming in one of the nation's most violent and dangerous cities, UrbanPromise would urge the Subcommittee to continue to invest in two critical competitive grant programs: Youth Mentoring Grants and the Second Chance Act Juvenile Mentoring. Both provide significant resources for organizations like ours whose goal is to change the life trajectory of at-risk youth. Such home-grown organizations bring an intense level of personal connection and guidance that is often the pivot point in a struggling young person's life.

This past year, one of our young people—a student at our alternative high school and a StreetLeader—demonstrated the power of relational programming in the lives of youth considered high-risk. Before beginning at UrbanPromise's high school, Luis had been incarcerated for several years. He was released in 2009 when he entered 10th grade and signed up to be a StreetLeader. Luis had not been in school for four years, both his parents were incarcerated, and the only family member living nearby was his aging, ill grandmother. Despite these odds, Luis quickly became one of UrbanPromise's most promising StreetLeaders and became a mentor for the younger children at our AfterSchool programs.

One of UrbanPromise's volunteers, named Doug Sell, noticed Luis needed additional mentoring, so he dedicated himself to ensuring the young man did not return to incarceration. He became an influential male role model for Luis, and through their time together, the two developed a father-son-like relationship. When Luis was suspected of drug dealing a year and a half ago, Mr. Sell and his wife attended numerous court dates in defense of his character and behavioral development. Luis faced the possibility of an additional three years in prison; but because of the commitment of the Sell family and UrbanPromise staff, the judge reduced his sentence to an alternative to incarceration—one that allowed Luis to continue in school and at UrbanPromise.

Last year, the Sells became his legal guardians. They treat Luis as one of the family and have become invested in his success in high school and after graduation. Congress cannot legislate such strong families; but it can support organizations, such as UrbanPromise, which are attempting to fill the gaps in communities where the family unit is often fractured or, in some cases, nonexistent.

In closing, I would like to thank the Subcommittee again for the invitation to testify today, and also thank the Chairman and Ranking Member for their efforts on behalf of disadvantaged youth who are born—through no fault of their own—into communities plagued with poverty and generations of incarceration.