



Dear Members of the General Assembly,

Community violence is an ongoing epidemic in Virginia, and additional public investments are urgently needed to address the severe increase in homicides and shootings associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers from the National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice found that across the country, “homicide rates increased 30% in 2020, a large and troubling increase that has no modern precedent.”<sup>i</sup> **This is true in Virginia, where the pandemic has had a profoundly destabilizing impact on community violence, contributing to a dramatic rise of homicides in a number of Virginia cities over the past year.** Portsmouth suffered a 50% increase in killings in 2020; Norfolk a 30% increase; Hampton murders increased by 33%,<sup>ii</sup> and in Richmond, gun homicides were up 17% and the VCU Trauma Center saw a 52% increase of intentional violent injuries.<sup>iii</sup>

Our organizations are part of the newly-formed Virginia Community Violence Coalition, representing more than twenty local, state, and national community violence prevention and intervention organizations, activists, healthcare providers, and practitioners serving Virginia communities most impacted by violence. We are writing to urge you to leverage federal funds from the American Rescue Plan (ARP) to address community violence. **Specifically, as you determine how you will spend the \$3.7 billion of recovery funds from the ARP, we urge you to dedicate at least \$37 million to support community-based violence intervention and prevention programs through the end of 2024, when the funds expire.** This investment will save lives and taxpayer dollars, and is just a *fraction* of the more than \$340 million in direct costs that gun violence imposes on Virginia each year due to healthcare, law enforcement, and other public expenses.<sup>iv</sup>

As the authorizing language of the ARP makes clear, these funds are broadly “to respond to the public health emergency with respect to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19),” and “its negative economic impacts,” including on “nonprofits.”<sup>v</sup> Legislative analysts have described this as “flexible funding,”<sup>vi</sup> “supportive of local discretion,” and lawmakers nationwide are unveiling proposals to use these relief funds for purposes ranging from violence prevention,<sup>vii</sup> to housing services,<sup>viii</sup> and youth behavioral health programs.<sup>ix</sup> The Biden administration has signaled that ARP funds should be directed broadly<sup>x</sup> and that funding community violence intervention to respond to record spikes in homicide is a critical national priority.<sup>xi</sup> Finally, the Treasury Department recently released guidance *specifically stating* that ARP funds can be used to support, “evidence-based community violence intervention programs to prevent violence and mitigate the increase in violence during the pandemic.”<sup>xii</sup>

The community-based violence intervention and prevention strategies that we implement and support have demonstrated success at interrupting entrenched cycles of violence, victimization, and retaliation, using a public health approach.<sup>xiii</sup> In states like Massachusetts, which has one of the lowest gun homicides rates in the nation, large investments in such strategies are saving lives

and taxpayer dollars, with one study showing \$7.35 in savings for each dollar invested because of reductions in violence and recidivism rates.<sup>xiv</sup> **Virginia is far behind other states on this issue, and ARP funding presents an opportunity to help bridge that gap.**

The ARP is also clear that funds may be used “to respond to workers performing essential work during the COVID–19 public health emergency.”<sup>xv</sup> In normal times, many of the organizations in our coalition are on the frontlines of addressing violence. During the pandemic, front line violence intervention and prevention workers have risked their own health and safety to mediate conflicts, prevent violence, and respond to crisis mental health needs, as well as delivering food, PPE, and other essential services to people who lack access to vital resources. Even as demand for community violence prevention and intervention services remains at records highs, overall support for this work has been limited by the economic impacts of the pandemic.<sup>xvi</sup> As the nation grapples with the killing of George Floyd and the ongoing conversation about how to end mass incarceration and other forms of systemic racism, now is the time to support effective, community-based approaches to reducing violence.

**That’s why the Virginia Community Violence Coalition is urging you to make targeted investments with ARP fiscal relief funds to address community violence in cities that have suffered from increases in homicides associated with the pandemic.** By investing in proven solutions that provide targeted prevention, trauma-informed healing and recovery to communities, Virginia can reduce violence and promote the safety and well-being of all its residents.

Sincerely,

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<sup>i</sup> Richard Rosenfeld, Thomas Abt, Ernesto Lopez, “Pandemic, Social Unrest, and Crime in U.S. Cities: 2020 Year-End Update (National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice, 2021) at 17. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2PeIbAQ>.

<sup>ii</sup> Ali Weatherton, “Hampton Roads saw high homicide numbers in 2020,” *13News Now*, January 5, 2021 <https://www.13newsnow.com/article/news/crime/hampton-roads-sees-high-homicide-numbers-in-2020/291-a1afa303-4222-4113-99ba-6d3cbf1fbfa>

<sup>iii</sup> Richmond Police Department data, available at [http://www.richmondgov.com/police/documents/crimestats/CityWide\\_123120YTD.pdf](http://www.richmondgov.com/police/documents/crimestats/CityWide_123120YTD.pdf). Intentional violent injury data provided by VCU Health Trauma Center staff.

<sup>iv</sup> Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, The Economic Cost of Gun Violence in Virginia, [https://giffords.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Giffords-Law-Center-Cost-of-Gun-Violence-in-Virginia\\_8.3.18.pdf](https://giffords.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Giffords-Law-Center-Cost-of-Gun-Violence-in-Virginia_8.3.18.pdf).

<sup>v</sup> H.R.1319 — 117th Congress (2021-2022), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1319/text>.

<sup>vi</sup> Legislative Analyst’s Office, Flexible Funding to California in the American Rescue Plan, <https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/4407>.

<sup>vii</sup> Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms Delivers 2021 State of the City Address, <https://www.atlantaga.gov/Home/Components/News/News/13655/1338>.

<sup>viii</sup> Mayor Gloria Outlines City’s Priorities for \$300 Million in Federal Rescue Plan Funds <https://timesofsandiego.com/politics/2021/03/09/mayor-todd-gloria-reveals-priorities-for-federal-rescue-plan/>.

<sup>ix</sup> CT to focus on mental health help for youths with funds from American Rescue Plan, Gov. Lamont says <https://www.wtnh.com/news/health/gov-lamont-officials-focusing-on-mental-health-help-for-young-people-with-the-rescue-act>.

<sup>x</sup> U.S. Department of Education Releases "COVID-19 Handbook, Volume 2: Roadmap to Reopening Safely and Meeting All Students' Needs," <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education-releases-covid-19-handbook-volume-2-roadmap-reopening-safely-and-meeting-all-students-needs>.

<sup>xi</sup> FACT SHEET: More Details on the Biden-Harris Administration’s Investments in Community Violence Interventions, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/07/fact-sheet-more-details-on-the-biden-harris-administrations-investments-in-community-violence-interventions/>.

<sup>xii</sup> Treasury Launches Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds to Deliver \$350 Billion, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0169#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20%E2%80%94%20Today%2C%20the%20U.S.%20Department,%2C%20territorial%2C%20and%20Tribal%20governments>.

<sup>xiii</sup> These programs employ violence intervention specialists and other credible messengers who are trained to engage people at highest risk of violence and provide culturally competent intervention services that promote their

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safety, wellbeing, and peace building. Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, “Healing Communities in Crisis: Lifesaving Solutions to the Urban Gun Violence Epidemic,” March 10, 2016, <http://lawcenter.giffords.org/healing-communities>.

<sup>xiv</sup> Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, “Investing in Intervention: The Critical Role of State-Level Support in Breaking the Cycle of Urban Gun Violence,” December 18, 2017, <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/report/investing-intervention-critical-role-state-level-support-breaking-cycle-urban-gun-violence>.

<sup>xv</sup> H.R.1319 — 117th Congress (2021-2022), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1319/text>.

<sup>xvi</sup> Lena Eisenstein, How Nonprofits Are Providing Support During COVID-19, BoardEffect, April 3, 2020, <https://www.boardeffect.com/blog/nonprofits-providing-support-during-covid-19>.