

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 22, 2021

The Honorable JB Pritzker  
Governor of Illinois  
207 State House  
Springfield, IL 62706

Dear Governor Pritzker:

Gun violence is a public health epidemic that has affected communities across Illinois and has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. We commend you for your commitment to protecting the health and wellbeing of Illinois' residents during these challenging times, and we are pleased that the State of Illinois is planning to use approximately \$125 million in federal funds from the *American Rescue Plan*, which Congress enacted in March, for violence prevention and youth employment programs. We urge you to consider a few key principles to help guide the State's use of these federal violence prevention dollars: (1) treating gun violence like the public health crisis that it is; (2) focusing on childhood trauma and other root causes of violence; and (3) supporting targeted and evidence-based community-based prevention and intervention efforts.

The Senate Judiciary Committee, which Senator Durbin chairs, held a hearing on March 23 to examine promising proposals to address gun violence, including public health frameworks that can be applied to reduce the unacceptably high levels of shootings. One of the witnesses, a trauma surgeon at the University of Chicago Medicine, discussed the importance of meaningful investments in our communities, as well as utilizing trusted public health tools of collecting data, researching and analyzing risk factors, and developing evidence-based, targeted prevention and intervention strategies. The hearing also discussed important initiatives underway in Chicago, including trauma-informed programming at schools, street outreach efforts, job training activities, paired mental health and social services for at-risk youth, hospital-based violence interventions to prevent re-injury, and a range of other strategies to improve social determinants of health. One key focus was the Chicago HEAL Initiative, which has brought together 10 leading hospital systems to uplift their neighborhoods through economic and community investments. We urge the state to consider such initiatives as key components of a public health-based approach to gun violence reduction.


A key root cause of the public health crisis of gun violence is trauma. As you know, when children experience serious traumatic events—such as witnessing violence—they can suffer long-term consequences. Trauma can create stress on the developing brain and force children into constant “survival mode,” impacting the way their minds process fear and form healthy relationships. Decades of research, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study, have established the link between a child's exposure to trauma, its effect on neurological and behavioral development, and long-term negative health, academic, and societal outcomes—including involvement in crime and violence. We have worked on federal legislation including the *Trauma-Informed Care for Children and Families* and *RISE from Trauma Act* to help increase resources for community-based efforts to


comprehensively address trauma. We urge the state to support programs that focus on addressing the burden of trauma and ACEs in order to create safer and more stable environments.

There is also a need to support targeted prevention and intervention programs for the small group of individuals most likely to be victims or perpetrators of violence. There are several intensive, hyper-focused and innovative programs with demonstrable evidence in harnessing clinical mental health interventions, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, and wraparound economic and support services to use a trauma-informed lens to disrupt the cycle of violence. Illinois is thankfully home to many qualified, culturally competent organizations that can deliver these services, including community-based non-profit organizations, civic, faith-based, and social service organizations, local education and health care entities, and workforce development organizations with demonstrated evidence of interrupting violence and fostering resilience in the most at-risk individuals who have experienced trauma. Across these myriad program efforts, it is essential to harness trusted community messengers who have credibility and appropriately reflect the neighborhoods and populations served.

We appreciate your commitment to addressing the heartbreaking toll of gun violence in our communities, and we will continue to seek ways to dedicate federal resources to this cause. Thank you for your consideration of these key principles as we work to put these federal dollars to the best use, and we stand ready to assist your efforts.

Sincerely,

  
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Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator

  
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Tammy Duckworth  
United States Senator