

*Remarks given at press conference with Mayor Fischer, Rashaad Abdur-Rahman, director of the Louisville Metro Office of Safe and Healthy Neighborhoods, University of Louisville Hospital executives on the need to fully fund the city's violence prevention efforts. February 25, 2019*

Good afternoon. I'm Dr. Sarah Moyer, your director of Louisville Metro Public Health and Wellness.

It is common knowledge now that violence is a public health problem. As Mayor Fischer said, this is well documented and supported by national organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and the American Public Health Association.

And, as a doctor who trained in north Philadelphia, I have too much firsthand knowledge about violence. I know the desperate, terrified look in the eyes of a teenager as his blood flows from bullet wounds onto my scrubs. I know the sounds of his ribs being harshly cracked open, and of hands being gently wrapped around his failed heart. I know the feeling of those hands helping his heart to pump.

I can never unknow those things. And I can never unknow the anguished wails of the family as they are told that the medicines, the transfusions, the paddles and the sheer will of a dozen doctors and nurses were not enough to save their son.

But also as a doctor and a public health expert, I also know how to prevent this.

Violent crime is just like infectious disease – it can spread from person to person - and we know how to stop it from spreading, just like we know how to stop the spread of hepatitis A and the flu.

Humans engage in a wide array of risky behaviors that can lead to serious health problems: smoking, overeating, lack of sleep. It has long been the accepted wisdom that doctors should encourage patients to change their risky behavior – give up smoking, go on a diet, exercise and sleep more.

You know that quitting smoking is hard, but it's possible, and more cost effective than treating cancer. You know that eating more vegetables is possible, and more cost effective than treating diabetes.

In the same way, preventing violence through behavior and systems change is also possible, and more cost effective than treating gunshot wounds. Research tells us that programs like Cure Violence and Pivot to Peace work—and perhaps even better than encouraging people to go on a diet or quit smoking.

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Yet, the discussion about violence is often underpinned by an assumption that this is a moral failing and that people engaging in it are beyond redemption. The teenagers I treated in the ER were not beyond redemption.

Often, solutions to violence have been sought in the criminal justice system – through tougher sentencing, or increasing stop-and-search, despite substantial evidence that it is ineffective in reducing crime. When that attitude prevails, people may look to violence prevention programs as a place to cut funds.

But the data tells us we must treat violence like a disease and focus on the root causes of it like poverty, affordable housing, employment, and access to food.

Because public safety is not limited to police, fire, and EMS. It requires a multitude of community agencies and organizations working together.

Louisville is building a health-based system of violence prevention that focuses on stopping violence at the neighborhood level, before it starts, and supporting victims of violence in the hospital to ensure that the cycle of violence is broken there.

Violence can be prevented, and its impact reduced, in the same way that public health efforts have prevented and reduced pregnancy-related complications, workplace injuries, infectious diseases, and illness resulting from contaminated food and water.

The factors that contribute to violent responses – whether they are factors of attitude and behavior or related to larger social, economic, political and cultural conditions – can be changed.

Last year this community trusted the health department to contain an outbreak of Hep A, which we did in half the time and 1/20th the money that other cities used to contain an outbreak with the same number of cases.

Despite an incredibly tight budget, the CDC said our response was a model for the nation. Had we not done all that we could to address the epidemic in our vulnerable populations, it would have spread to our entire community.

Because of the collaboration between the health department, the Office of Safe and Healthy Neighborhoods, U of L Hospitals and all our many partners, Louisville has also

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been recognized as a leader in the area of health equity and violence prevention. We are using your tax dollars in the most effective way possible to treat the public health problem of violence.

Without funding to continue this work, violence will continue to spread like an infectious disease to our entire community, and doctors across our city will more often see the desperate, terrified look in the eyes of a teenager as his blood flows from bullet wounds onto their scrubs.