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The California Wellness Foundation  
*Grantmaking for a Healthier California*

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October 20, 2011

The Honorable Gayle McLaughlin, Mayor of Richmond  
and Members of the Richmond City Council  
City of Richmond  
450 Civic Center Plaza  
Richmond, CA 94804

Dear Mayor McLaughlin and Members of the City Council:

The Richmond Office of Neighborhood Safety's (ONS) Operation Peacemaker Fellowship program has been getting a lot of press since the fight incident of October 14, which has caused many observers to ask whether it's really worth investing in programs that hire former gang members to help youth turn away from gangs, finish high school and find decent jobs.

The answer is Yes. ONS is a program that our foundation helps support through its participation with the California Cities Gang Prevention Network. Its diverse program — some led by former gang members able to gain the trust of hard-core gang youth — serve more than 40 youth and young adults each year.

The fight has thrown a shadow of doubt over public and private efforts to deter gang and gun violence.

But setbacks are not sufficient reason to stop trying. The California Wellness Foundation strongly embraces the belief that the people directly affected by an issue are often able to devise the most effective solutions for their communities.

We need to stay focused on violence prevention and intervention strategies that are working to protect our citizens and communities. The following are key points to keep in mind.

It goes without saying that gang violence is overwhelmingly gun violence. Gun violence was first seen as a public health crisis in the early 1990s, when violent crime and homicides reached epidemic proportions. Incarceration obviously wasn't working as the sole deterrent to gun violence. It was time to focus on intervention and prevention — giving at-risk youth real alternatives to a life of crime.

Who are our at-risk youth? A Harvard Medical School study of 1,500 young people, published in *Science* magazine, found that witnessing violence more than doubled the likelihood that a youth would become violent. Factors believed to influence the decision to join a gang include family members who belong to a gang or are incarcerated, gang-affiliated friends, poor grades in school, alcohol and drug abuse, and lack of parental supervision.

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[www.CalWellness.org](http://www.CalWellness.org)

Since the early '90s, committed individuals, like ONS Director Devone Boggan, have founded hundreds of grassroots violence prevention programs throughout California. Programs range from hard-core gang intervention to individual counseling and mentoring, structured after-school tutoring and recreation programs for at-risk middle-school students, and life and job skills training for gang-involved teenagers.

Yet with all the progress made, gun violence is still one of the leading killers of youth under 24. On any given day, newspapers across California provide a grim list of young people gunned down on the streets. But in the years since intervention programs have taken root, the number of youth killed each year by gun violence in California has dramatically decreased — by 42 percent when you look at averages for a five-year period, 1991-1995, and compare them to averages for the years 2005-2009, the most recent data available from the California Department of Public Health.

The precise role of intervention programs in achieving the decline is, of course, impossible to measure because of the interplay of many variables, including new policies, revised law enforcement strategies, and the community initiatives of the type launched by ONS.

To be sure, the intervention effort lacks major, long-term statistical studies of the effects of specific programs on gang and gun violence. The primary obstacle is money. But dozens of personal testimonies from former gang members who turned their lives around cannot be ignored. Nor should we ignore the results achieved by individuals like Devone Boggan, who created the ONS Fellowship Program to work with Richmond residents most likely to be shot or shoot someone else within six months.

But what makes the ONS Fellowship Program different?

The answer is service. Every thing ONS does is to be of service to the neighborhoods they serve. The truth of ONS' work is that young people are more important than they are. That I believe is an important understanding in this work. That the young people served by ONS are the living message that will be carried forward to a time when many of us will not see. That is an extraordinary challenge. ONS is trying to ensure a better future for them, for their families and for the city of Richmond.

So service is fundamental. And when we understand service fully, it means to us that no one deserves our support, comfort, soothing, affection, more than some young person who many say doesn't deserve it. That's the definition of service according to the ONS way.

This is different than simply having a strategy or a curricula to follow. This is about framing your work and having a lens. This is what ONS offers. A way to look at things which I believe may be unorthodox.

This is what orthodoxy has given us:

Every three hours out of every day, one adolescent dies as a result of firearms in this country. Every hour, every day of every school year, 1,000 young people drop out.

Clearly we need to change.

But again I come back to ONS.

From day one, Devone and the rest of the ONS staff have provided The California Wellness Foundation with valuable insights from the front lines. They have told us what works, what doesn't, and what we must do to create safe, peaceful communities. And, as they have created new programs and field-tested new strategies, they have shown that, despite budget and infrastructure challenges, solutions are possible.

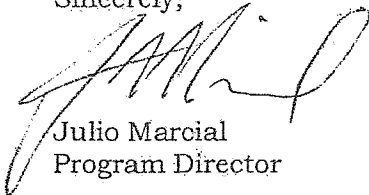
Over the past 19 years, the Foundation has provided more than \$120 million in funding to gang and gun violence prevention efforts across California, two issues ONS is working hard to reduce.

These social problems can't be answered easily or quickly. But we can – and we must – begin to answer them by coming together, by sharing what we've learned, and by being clear about what's working and where we need to improve.

This problem affects each one of us. And effectively addressing it must become our shared concern and cause.

Together, I believe we can write a bold new chapter for young people and families living in Richmond.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julio Marcial', written in a cursive style.

Julio Marcial  
Program Director

