

# COMMUNITY SAFETY AGENDA

The Honorable Mike Johnson  
Speaker of the House  
H-232, The Capitol  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Charles E. Schumer  
Senate Majority Leader  
322 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries  
House Minority Leader  
2433 Rayburn House Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell  
Senate Minority Leader  
317 Senate Russell Building  
Washington, D.C. 2051

**April 16, 2024**

Dear Speaker Johnson, Minority Leader Jeffries, Majority Leader Schumer, Minority Leader McConnell, and other members of Congress,

On behalf of the Community Safety Working Group and the more than 90 undersigned organizations, we urge you to advance a Community Safety Legislative Agenda that prioritizes genuine safety in our communities.<sup>1</sup> All people should be safe in their homes, workplaces, streets, schools, parks, and other neighborhood spaces. But our current approach to safety is not achieving this goal. Today, Congress dramatically underspends on programs that extensive evidence shows to make us safer, while pouring billions into punitive approaches that leave too many people *less safe*.<sup>2</sup>

It is time to embrace a new paradigm that uses evidence-informed interventions<sup>3</sup> to reverse this trend and build safety that works for all people — a paradigm that creates safety not through additional police, jails, or prisons, but through addressing root causes and preventing harms

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<sup>1</sup> The Community Safety Working Group is a collection of more than 70 civil rights, public health, racial justice, housing, violence prevention, economic justice, and allied organizations nationwide dedicated to building safety that works for all communities. Since releasing our first agenda in 2022, our goal has been to advance a new paradigm that invests in people and communities, not police and prisons, to keep people safe. We pursue this mission through federal appropriations, federal legislation, and support to grassroots organizations that are advancing this work at the state and local levels. For more information, please see [www.communitysafety.us](http://www.communitysafety.us).

<sup>2</sup> See i.e., Thea Sebastian, Hanna Love, Sam Washington, Anthony Barr, Insha Rahman, Blake Paradis, Andre M. Perry, and Sakira Cook, *A new community safety blueprint: How the federal government can address violence and harm through a public health approach*, The Brookings Institute, September 21, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> By “evidence-informed,” we mean shaped and guided by evidence surrounding programs and interventions that demonstrably enhance safety goals, including evidence that is quantitative, qualitative, rooted in lived and community experience, or otherwise building on programs that are achieving tangible impact on the ground.

before they occur. These critical investments in community health, non-carceral crisis response, violence prevention, safe and affordable housing, economic stability, education, youth and families, community infrastructure, and other needs are only a start toward the bold transformation that our communities require. But the following policies — especially the three path-breaking bills uplifted below — represent a critical step toward the safe and equitable future that *all* of our people deserve.

## 2024 LEGISLATIVE SPOTLIGHTS

### [The People's Response Act](#)

This bill creates a new “Division on Community Safety” within the Department of Health and Human Services, then uses this Division to fund evidence-informed interventions that bolster community safety nationwide.

### [The Mental Health Justice Act](#)

This bill supports state governments, local governments, and CBOs to operate programs that train and dispatch mental health professionals — not police officers — to respond during mental health and related crises.

### [The Break the Cycle of Violence Act](#)

This bill creates a new “Office of Community Violence Intervention” within the Department of Health and Human Services, then uses this office to support CVI workforce development and to fund CVI programs nationwide.

## 1. COMMUNITY HEALTH & PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Investing in preventive approaches is easily our most effective, long-lasting way to keep individuals, families, and communities safe. When we invest in violence intervention<sup>4</sup>, non-carceral crisis response<sup>5</sup>, access to voluntary care<sup>6</sup>, peer counseling, and improvements to our public health workforce, we make our communities stronger, healthier, and safer overall<sup>7</sup>. We also save billions in avoided costs, with nearly every study<sup>8</sup> evaluating preventative measures finding that benefits far outweigh costs<sup>9</sup>.

Building on this evidence base, our organizations support bills that directly reinforce community health and preventative safety. Over this coming cycle, specific priorities include:

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<sup>4</sup> See *i.e.* *Advance Peace*. (n.d.). Advance Peace. <https://www.advancepeace.org/>

<sup>5</sup> See *i.e.* STAR Program Evaluation. (2021). Retrieved February 28, 2024, from [https://wp-denverite.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/02/STAR\\_Pilot\\_6\\_Month\\_Evaluation\\_FINAL-REPORT.pdf](https://wp-denverite.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/02/STAR_Pilot_6_Month_Evaluation_FINAL-REPORT.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Simes, J. T., & Jahn, J. L. (2022). The consequences of Medicaid expansion under the Affordable Care Act for police arrests. *PLOS ONE*, 17(1), e0261512. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0261512>

<sup>7</sup> *Violence is a Public Health Issue: Public Health is Essential to Understanding and Treating Violence in the U.S.* (2019, January 28).

<https://apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2019/01/28/violence-is-a-public-health-issue>

<sup>8</sup> Branas, C. C., South, E. C., Kondo, M. C., Hohl, B. C., Bourgois, P., Wiebe, D. J., & MacDonald, J. M. (2018). Citywide cluster randomized trial to restore blighted vacant land and its effects on violence, crime, and fear. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 115(12), 2946–2951.

<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1718503115>

<sup>9</sup> Vogler, J. (2017). Access to Health Care and Criminal Behavior: Short-Run Evidence from the ACA Medicaid Expansions. *Social Science Research Network*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3042267>

- **Creating a safety infrastructure rooted in public health & prevention.** We support legislation — such as [The People’s Response Act](#) — which would create a new “Division on Community Safety” within the Department of Health and Human Services, then use this Division to fund evidence-informed interventions that advance safety outside of policing structures, bolster preventative, non-carceral safety programming, and otherwise treat safety as a public health issue.
- **Making paradigm-shifting investments in violence intervention.** We support bills — such as the [Break the Cycle of Violence Act](#) — which would create a new Office of Community Violence Intervention (CVI) within the Department of Health and Human Services, then use this office to support CVI workforce development and to fund CVI programs.
- **Providing robust support for non-carceral crisis response.** We back proposals — such as the [Mental Health Justice Act](#) — which would support state governments, local governments, and community-based organizations to operate fully non-carceral programs that train and dispatch mental health professionals, not police officers, to respond during mental health and related crises.
- **Facilitating deep investments into community health workers & local care.** We champion measures like the [Community Health Worker Access Act](#) that would increase access to community health worker services for Medicare and Medicaid enrollees to improve whole-person, coordinated care. The bill would improve reimbursement for the CHW workforce in Medicare and support their integration and promote their sustainability in Medicaid. Covering CHW services in Medicare and Medicaid can control costs while improving care coordination, culturally responsive care, connections to services, and other outcomes to promote health.

## 2. **ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY & HOUSING SECURITY**

Financial and housing security are similarly critical for safety — not only because these investments significantly reduce violent crime, but also because they address a major risk to both personal safety and flourishing<sup>10</sup>. These benefits accrue to the entire community, but especially to our most vulnerable community members, including those who are homeless, houseless, facing situations of domestic violence or abuse, or otherwise struggling to survive or make ends meet.

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<sup>10</sup> See Freedman, M., & Owens, E. (2011). Low-Income Housing Development and Crime. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 70(2–3), 115–131. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jue.2011.04.001>  
 See Bell, B., Bindler, A., & Machin, S. (2018). Crime Scars: Recessions and the making of career criminals. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 100(3), 392–404. [https://doi.org/10.1162/rest\\_a\\_00698](https://doi.org/10.1162/rest_a_00698)  
 See Raphael, S., & Winter-Ebmer, R. (2001). Identifying the effect of unemployment on crime. *The Journal of Law and Economics*, 44(1), 259–283. <https://doi.org/10.1086/320275>  
 See Fischer, S. N., Shinn, M., Shrout, P. E., & Tsemberis, S. (2008). Homelessness, Mental Illness, and Criminal Activity: Examining patterns over time. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 42(3–4), 251–265. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-008-9210-z>

To begin addressing these basic needs, we strongly champion bills that address youth employment, create pathways to high-quality jobs, expand affordable housing, allocate more capital and operating support for public housing, fund homelessness prevention, and provide supportive housing to our most marginalized communities. Over this coming cycle, specific priorities include:

- **Channeling major investments into supportive and emergency housing.** We back legislation — such as the [Housing Crisis Response Act](#) — which would invest more than \$150 million into fair and affordable housing, provide significant funding to preserve public housing, use the National Housing Trust Fund to create new homes that are affordable to people who have the lowest incomes, and offer rental assistance that helps families afford the roof over their heads.
- **Expanding targeted investments to prevent homelessness.** We support preventative programs — such as the [Eviction Protection Act](#) — which would establish a permanent program that provides emergency rental assistance to help families facing a financial shock avoid eviction and homelessness.
- **Building a new contract for providing rental assistance and affordable housing.** We support ambitious measures — such as the [Ending Homelessness Act](#) — which would establish a universal voucher program, ban “source of income” housing discrimination, and invest in building more homes that are affordable to those households possessing the greatest needs.
- **Providing robust support for summer jobs, apprenticeship programs, and other forms of youth employment.** Following the robust link between youth employment and violence reduction, we also support proposals — such as the [Opening Doors for Youth Act](#) and the [National Apprenticeship Act](#) — which would help states, local governments, Indian tribes, and community organizations provide apprenticeship programs, subsidized programs of summer jobs, and other employment opportunities to at-risk youth.
- **Invest deeply in financial stability.** Given the strong links between workforce development, cash assistance, early childhood education, and community safety, we support bills — like the [Federal Jobs Guarantee Development Act](#) — that provide employment opportunities to all people, including those in our most marginalized communities. We also back policies that would make permanent a bold expansion of the Child Tax Credit or a child benefit, thereby guaranteeing all young people and families the resources to have a safe, healthy, and equitable start, and bills like the [Child Care for Working Families Act](#) that would make high-quality child care accessible to all families.

### 3. YOUTH, FAMILIES & COMMUNITY SPACES

Investing in youth and families — including programs like early childhood education, mentorship<sup>11</sup>, school-based violence intervention<sup>12</sup>, youth employment<sup>13</sup>, and wraparound education services<sup>14</sup> — is another evidence-informed tool for making communities safer, more equitable, and more stable, while helping to end a school-to-prison pipeline that has destroyed the futures of far too many young people. Meanwhile, research has long shown that basic investments in community spaces, third spaces, and the built design of our surroundings — in streetlights, parks, road design, public transportation, and addressing vacant lots — has significant implications for community safety.<sup>15</sup>

Based on this evidence, our organizations support policies that invest in high-quality early childhood and K-12 education, Title I and other educational investments in low-income schools, wraparound school-based supports, youth enrichment programs, neighborhood improvement projects, family supports, park redevelopment, streetlights, environmental-clean up, and other community-led solutions. Over this coming cycle, specific priorities include:

- **Investments in school resources that support youth physical, mental, and emotional health.** We support legislation — such as the [Counseling Not Criminalization in Schools Act](#) and the [Ending PUSHOUT Act](#) — which would invest in school districts that wish to ban discriminatory discipline and other practices, as well as hire personnel like counselors, social workers, nurses, and other trauma-informed personnel as an alternative to school police.
- **Invest deeply in youth mental health & school-based violence prevention.** Based on the robust evidence linking mentorship, afterschool programming, and school-based violence prevention to safety outcomes, we support policies — like the [Mentoring to Succeed Act](#), the [Supporting All Students Act](#), and the [School Violence Prevention Act](#) — that would unlock new resources for these critical programs.
- **Enhanced support for enrichment programming & full-service community schools.** We support bills — such as the [Full-Service Community School Expansion Act](#) — which would expand much-needed resources for wraparound services that holistically meet student needs. We would also support policies that invest more deeply in enrichment

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<sup>11</sup> “Becoming a Man” - *Improving Decisions, Reducing crime* - B-HUB. (2020, November 11). B-HUB.

<https://www.bhub.org/project/becoming-a-man-improving-decisions-reducing-crime/>

<sup>12</sup> Hjalmarsson, R., Holmlund, H., & Lindquist, M. J. (2015). The Effect of Education on Criminal Convictions and Incarceration: Causal Evidence from Micro-data. *The Economic Journal*, 125(587), 1290–1326.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/eoj.12204>

<sup>13</sup> Heller, S. (2014b). Summer jobs reduce violence among disadvantaged youth. *Science*, 346(6214), 1219–1223.

<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1257809>

<sup>14</sup> Freedom to Thrive: Reimagining safety & security in our communities. (2020, June 17). The Center for Popular Democracy.

<https://www.populardemocracy.org/news/publications/freedom-thrive-reimagining-safety-security-our-communities>

<sup>15</sup> Culyba, A. J., Jacoby, S. F., Richmond, T. S., Fein, J. A., Hohl, B. C., & Branas, C. C. (2016). Modifiable neighborhood features associated with adolescent homicide. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 170(5), 473.

<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2015.4697>

programming, including access to art, music, drama, sports, civic engagement, and other enrichment activities.

- **Safety-focused investments into the built environment.** Finally, we would support policies that help neighborhoods bolster community infrastructure to further safety goals, such as through grants that would fund participatory processes for building parks, sidewalks, streetlights, and other infrastructure for community safety.

This agenda is only a downpayment on the safety investments that our communities urgently need. Moreover, not every signatory listed has formally endorsed every bill here. However, this agenda shows the type of policies that could move us toward our ultimate safety goals. It also represents an acknowledgment that, where safety is concerned, the stakes are too high *not* to follow what research, evidence, and our frontline communities say is required. It is time for a safety agenda that finally puts people and communities first; these policies are a critical step toward making this broadly shared vision a reality.

Thank you, in advance, for your consideration. We would appreciate the opportunity to meet with the appropriate staff to discuss these issues at your earliest convenience. If you have any questions, or would like to schedule a meeting, please contact Thea Sebastian, Executive Director, The Futures Institute ([thea@futures-institute.org](mailto:thea@futures-institute.org)); Zeenat Yahya, Policy Director, March for Our Lives ([zeenat.yahya@marchforourlives.com](mailto:zeenat.yahya@marchforourlives.com)); Celeste Faison, Co-Executive Director, Movement for Black Lives ([celeste@m4bl.org](mailto:celeste@m4bl.org)); or Michael Huggins, Deputy Senior Director of Policy & Gov. Affairs, Color Of Change ([michael.huggins@colorofchange.org](mailto:michael.huggins@colorofchange.org)).



A Bella LaFemme Society  
Advancement Project  
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU)  
American Friends Service Committee  
Arch City Defenders

Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE)  
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action  
Black Leadership Action Coalition of Kentucky (BLACK)  
Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation  
California Pan-Ethnic Health Network  
Center for American Progress  
Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)  
Center for Policing Equity  
Civil Rights Corps  
Color Of Change  
Committee for Children  
Community Defense of East Tennessee  
Death Penalty Alternatives for Arizona  
Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund (DREDF)  
Drug Policy Alliance  
EJUSA Evangelical Network  
Equal Justice USA  
EqualHealth's Campaign Against Racism  
Essie Justice Group  
Faith and Works  
Florida Rising  
FREE Arizona  
Freedom to Thrive  
Frey Evaluation, LLC  
The Futures Institute  
Grammy's Place  
Grassroots Global Justice Alliance  
Hudson/Catskill Housing Coalition  
Human Rights Watch  
IamNegrx  
Illinois Alliance for Reentry and Justice  
Imagine Black  
In Defense of Black Lives  
InnovateEDU  
Institute for Civic Education in Vietnam (ICEVN)  
Japanese American Citizens League  
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights  
Local Progress  
Louisiana Center for Health Equity  
Maui Economic Opportunity, Inc.  
Malcolm X Grassroots Movement  
March For Our Lives  
Metcalf Park Community Bridges, Inc  
MomsRising

Movement for Black Lives  
Movement for Family Power  
Muslims for Just Futures  
National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers  
National Black Women's Justice Institute  
National Center for Law and Economic Justice  
National Council of Churches  
National Immigration Project  
National Network for Arab American Communities  
National Urban League  
National Youth Justice Network  
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice  
Nonviolent Peaceforce  
Parable of the Sower Intentional Community Cooperative  
Partners In Health  
People's Advocacy Institute  
People's Justice Council  
Pittsburgh Black Worker Center  
Policing Alternatives & Diversion Initiative  
Pretrial Justice Institute  
Prevention Institute  
Prison Policy Initiative  
Protest Organize Participate (POP)  
Public Advocacy for Kids (PAK)  
Public Justice Center  
Rebuild, Overcome, and Rise (ROAR) at the University of MD, Baltimore  
Safer Together  
Saratoga Black Lives Matter  
Showing Up for Racial Justice  
Southern Center for Human Rights  
Southern Poverty Law Center  
Take Action Advocacy Group (TAAG)  
TheForum for Youth Investment  
Tribe of Eli Mentors  
Union for Reform Judaism  
United Church of Christ  
United Women of Color  
University of Illinois at Chicago  
Washington Defender Association  
WAVE Educational Fund  
We Are Revolutionary  
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