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Trust Talks Episode 16: Working Collaboratively to Address Community Safety in Chicago

Jai Jones: Hello, everyone. I'm Jai Jones, the program specialist for the Partnership for Safe and Peaceful Communities. Welcome to Trust Talks. For nine years, the Partnership for Safe and Peaceful Communities, PSPC for short, has been supporting grassroots organizations and communities disproportionately harmed by gun violence. These organizations are creating social cohesion and providing residents with safe spaces through activities such as music festivals, gardening, and sports activities, among others.

For the 2024 summer season, the Chicago Fund gave close to \$2 million in grants to 249 organizations. This cycle, we saw the largest number of applicants ever. Additionally, we have funded 16 organizations providing year-round programming to residents. In total, PSPC has given \$140 million towards anti-violence programming since 2016. In my role, I have the distinct privilege of meeting these organizations and experiencing these activities up close.

In tandem with these efforts, we recently launched Scaling Community Violence Intervention for a Safer Chicago, SC2 for short, a new fund to identify and enact community violence intervention in Chicago communities severely impacted by gun violence. SC2 partners provide five key services that address immediate community needs and work towards long-term solutions to gun violence. That is street outreach, trauma treatment, and mental health support, life coaching, education and employment, because the reality is that it takes multiple interventions and solutions to make our neighborhoods safer and more vibrant. For today's conversation, I have guests with me who represent different organizations playing a key role in addressing community safety. Please introduce yourself.

Esther Franco-Payne: Hi, Jai. I'm Esther Franco-Payne, executive director with the Partnership for Safe and Peaceful Communities.

America Campos: Hello, everybody. America Campos with U.N.I.O.N. Impact Center in Back of the Yards.

Teny Gross: Hello. Teny Gross, Institute for Nonviolence Chicago.

Bob Boik: Hello. I'm Bob Boik with the Civic Committee.

Jai: Thank you, guys, for joining us on this conversation. The first question is for you, Esther. PSPC provides support for many important violence reduction initiatives across Chicago. Will you provide us a little more detailed overview of PSPC's work, as well as how it has evolved over the years to be more responsive to community needs?

Esther: Thank you, Jai. I'm excited to be here today. Thank you for the invitation. And I'm excited to have community partners with us who do the work every day. PSPC came together in 2016 around the issues of police accountability, following the murder of Laquan McDonald, implementation of the consent decree, and increased gun violence in the city overall.

Starting with five funders and growing to a coalition of now more than 50 plus funders, PSPC has been able to provide catalytic, sustainable funding that allows for innovation, provides flexibility, and creates evidence through research for what really works. We have sought and learned from community practitioners about what's needed to continue, and we have collaborated to build the infrastructure and ecosystem for violence reduction across the city.

We have a multipart, holistic portfolio of strategies to address acute community gun violence. Many people ask us, "We need prevention resources, we need this, we need that," but we want to address the kinds of violence that is happening in communities each and every day. And so we've been very targeted and focused on our mission. Our portfolio includes support for direct services or community violence intervention, as you have already laid out. The goal of that is to address the highest risk individuals, who have either committed violence and/or are at risk of victimization of violence.

Now we are moving from a focus on individual outcomes to improving community outcomes by supporting a customized collaborative approach to creating community safety plans that scale services to reach even more people. This effort is in partnership with my counterpart here, Bob, and the business community through the initiative Scaling CVI for a Safer Chicago, and I'll let Bob discuss a little bit more of that in depth shortly. But our overall goal is to make sure that this work becomes a permanent feature in Chicago's public safety strategy. CVI cannot do it alone. We do need law enforcement. We do need our public sector partners, we need our community partners. And so we established ourselves in that partnership as funders who can provide that support and allow the work to grow.

With the Chicago Fund, that's our second strategy, as you already described, we've been able to invest over \$8 million with over 1,200 projects in support of hyperlocal grassroots organizations. So we've provided funding for those big organizations doing the work of CVI, but we also support those smaller organizations and community, as you stated, those who are working to provide safe spaces, community cohesion, and create conditions for safety, block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood.

Our third strategy focuses on policy, in which we aim to impact gun control policies and support policy that impacts the CVI infrastructure. We want to ensure that there is enough money on the street from the public sector. We want to ensure, again, that CVI becomes a permanent feature of our public safety infrastructure.

Fourth up is reimagining public safety. And this really came about following the murder of George Floyd, in which our funders and our community partners were seeking strategies to create and promote alternative responses to law enforcement and increase community engagement.

And then lastly, we've employed a new strategy focused on youth interventions, serving those who, like adults, are at increasing risk of violence and need supports targeted towards young people. So that makes up our overall strategy portfolio, and our goal is to continue to promote, create sustainability, ensure that we have our public sector partners at the table, that we provide opportunities for growth in this sector, and that we continue to listen to and work with communities to make this happen.

Jai: Thank you, Esther. What a detailed overview of PSPC and the work that you guys are doing. Going back to the Chicago Fund, one of the strategies of PSPC, I wanted to turn my attention to you, America, and ask you, your organization has been funded through the Chicago Fund for several years. Tell us a little bit about your work in Back of the Yards, including who you serve and what impact have you seen through your work.

America: Hi, everybody. Thank you for the invite again. And I'm with U.N.I.O.N. Impact Center, a grassroots-led nonprofit in Back of the Yards. What do I mean by grassroots? I mean we average less than \$50,000 budget a year. And with that money, we are able to provide year-round programming for

75 youth through our youth soccer program. We're able to do that with our partnerships. We have been working with the Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Park District for over 15 years. We were established in 2007. We have had thousands of youth that our parent leaders, our coaches, our youth leaders, have been able to develop relationships with.

The reason why I actually became involved was because my little brother, when he was in elementary school, he joined the youth soccer program. And so as the good sister that I am and the eldest of the family, of course I was there cheering him on with my parents and my middle brother. And there was my little brother. He was not the best. And at points, we were a little bit embarrassed of his skills to be honest, because we know how the youth sports industry can be, very competitive, very toxic as well. And so nonetheless, we were there because we cared about him, right?

And going to Chavez School, which is our host school for the soccer program, we walked in there. Family members, neighbors were with us. Everybody said hello. We said hi in our language, in Spanish, buenas tardes. It was nice to see neighbors coming together from the neighborhood to be at this space and to cheer our youth on, and having those hard conversations when needed, when a parent was being a little bit too involved and really getting in the way of the game. And I say that because it's supposed to be fun. It's supposed to be play time.

And so that is what we're able to do year-round. We're able to provide a space where our youth feel safe, when at homes we don't always feel safe. And so I know the power of sports. I know the power of play. It brought me to commit to this organization further, because it's necessary. It's healing. There is no other way. I don't want to get lost in the conversation, but it's really important that we continue to invest in our youth in the way that we do. And we've been able to do that successfully with the partnerships and with the neighbors that are committed to this. And so I just want to thank you for the support, because we couldn't do it without you. And I'll leave it at that.

Esther: Wonderful, thank you.

Jai: Thank you, America. It's very evident that you are very passionate about your community and the work that you guys do. So thank you for that. Teny. I met Teny a long time ago as a community organizer in the Austin community. And Teny, I want you to elaborate more about the strategies that you've seen work on the ground and what has been successful. The Institute for Nonviolence is an SC2 partner, and that is major for the Austin community. Can you elaborate a little bit more about what that partnership will look like for you?

Teny: Gladly. I'm really excited to be here, and I'm excited about where Chicago is now. This is not to take for granted what has happened here in the last nine years. It's almost a bit of a miracle. I was invited with some friends and partners to come from the East Coast where we did this work. And Chicago was not kind of catching it on. Since then, '16, I think, the funders got organized. We now have ... Esther said 50 funders and more, the most educated funders on the issue of violence reduction in the country. That's something we need to celebrate. Funders, typically, they said, "We're going to cede the efforts." They stayed the efforts nine years. They're developing goals and ambitions. So it bodes really, really well for the city. We have a reputation around the world, not just in America, for being a violent city, but it's a city of 77 neighborhoods, a city with a lot of strength, a lot of diversity, and I feel now what we are all building together is really exciting.

So the first step was we organized seven nonprofits together. We built Communities Partnering 4 Peace, and the funders were really behind that and helped that. We brought an academy from our friends in Los Angeles, MPI. We are educating, we're professionalizing a field. And now with the scaling, we're

taking the partnership that is citywide and going more specific to a neighborhood. So we're now able to bring 10 partners in Austin. We also work in West Garfield, which is going to be the next level of scaling, as well as Back of the Yards and Brighton Park.

But in Austin now, you have partners that ... Usually we were siloed. We're all busy. We all respond to shootings. We're all doing things. We don't get to really coordinate. So it elevates the effort in the neighborhood and the nonprofits. We have three small churches. Their budgets, some of them are like \$50,000. Well, they want to grow, but you don't have an accountant, you don't have a grant writer, HR. How do you do professionalizing that? So there's a benefit now, us working together, different levels of sizes to tackle it.

And to what Esther said, we're zooming in. Austin, it's over a thousand people who are at a really high risk of being shot. One neighborhood, less than 100,000 people, their traumas exceed those of Marine soldiers in Iraq during the surge, right? If you dropped out of school in Austin, you have five times more chances getting shot than a soldier in Iraq. So this is no longer the interruption work of the '90s. This is like ... We're going to interrupt the violence, but then we're going to invite you in, case management workforce.

We have three clinicians in a team of nine just dealing with the trauma of the staff. Some of us are looking back at our careers. Were we insane to try and just heal people just with love, with no tools of trauma, et cetera, and supporting? This is the first nine years in Chicago's history where CVI was not laid off in the summers. Before every summer, workers that did the most vital work while the state was deliberating its budgets were laid off. That was cruel.

So we are so excited. We ourselves couldn't do it by ourselves. Having 50 funders, having now the business community. When I talk around the country, I brag about Chicago so bad, because we see a lot of negativity in the media. Often we are very critical. But this coming together and sticking together and pushing through tough time ... We had two teenagers killed in the Back of the Yard this weekend. This is tough. Our team is out at the hospital. The hospital doctors are totally overwhelmed. The board member of ours runs a trauma center. Everyone is affected, yet we keep pushing forward together. And that gives me a lot of optimism.

Jai: That's great. Teny, thank you for that incredible work that the Institute for Nonviolence is doing on the ground in Austin. And I love the parallel between grassroots organizations and helping them to achieve some of their own personal organizational goals to address violence. It was recently announced that the Civic Committee was making community safety its top priority. Why is the Civic Committee investing in this issue at this time?

Bob: Well, thank you very much for the question. I think it's a fairly profound answer. The Civic Committee really is the oldest business membership organization in the city. We have been around for well over 100 years. And we have played a leading role in various policy topics throughout that 100 plus year history. We have not, though, necessarily been involved in public safety.

And about two years ago, public safety reached a crescendo. Shootings and murders were at an all-time high in 2021, or at least at a high point relative to the 1990s. And it became a topic that was impacting every Chicagoan, not just individuals who live in communities that are dealing with the violence every day, but really everybody, including our business leaders. The violence and the perceptions around violence impact the perceptions of the city of Chicago. They impact our employers' ability to attract and retain talent. They impact our ability to attract new business to the city. And so it really became an impediment to economic vitality of the city of Chicago.

And so we set out on a fact-finding mission to try to figure out what it is we can do in the public safety space. Obviously, we are working with CEOs of companies, business leaders from around the city of Chicago. We're not necessarily going to do the work that Teny is doing or that America is doing. We have to come at it from a different perspective. And we also have to recognize that there are others who have been in this space for a very long time.

So our overarching objective has really been around building, maintaining, and facilitating a one-table conversation. And that means working with the individuals and the organizations that have been a part of the nine-year history that Teny spoke about, organizations like PSPC, who has been at this now for over five years and has been invested in CVI for almost as long. We had to figure out how to attach ourselves and be a part of the broader efforts that are going on.

And so we approached it from what can we do in this space? And in answering that question, we really walked away with four key strategies, the first of which is scaling community violence intervention. When we talk about scaling, we have community violence intervention throughout the city of Chicago. CVI is throughout the South and West Sides. But when we say scaling, we actually mean doing the work a little bit differently, which Teny referred to. We really mean how can all the organizations collectively work together in a neighborhood around a common focus. Organizations in a neighborhood like Austin are doing that. Organizations in Humboldt Park are doing that, and we continue to work hard to get that same level of coordination in Back of the Yards, in Pilsen, Little Village, in Englewood, in greater Garfield Park. So that's a key component.

The other piece is the professionalization of other services beyond just outreach and intervention. It is the workforce development piece, the job training piece, the education piece, behavioral and mental health and trauma support, and the case management piece. And so in looking at that scaling effort, one role that we can play along with our philanthropic partners is helping to fundraise around that initiative.

And so we set out to raise a hundred million dollars to bring CVI to scale across seven communities, the seven communities that are dealing with the highest rates of violence, that have the highest numbers of at-risk individuals. And so we set out to raise the hundred million dollars. We announced that goal roughly a little more than a year ago. And fortunately, through our partnership together working with PSPC, working with leaders in the business community, we were able to meet that goal. Now that doesn't mean our work is done. We still have a lot more work to do. Raising the money is just the beginning, and now we're onto implementation.

But the other thing that the business community can do is once individuals are served by CVI programming, the question is what's next? And we have to have an answer for that. One thing that we do really well is we hire. That is what our businesses do. We hire for various jobs to obviously advance our business interests. And so we can play a role in hiring graduates of CVI programming as well as more broadly throughout target communities on the South and West Side. And we have ambitious goals throughout the course of this year to do just that and to really engage in a campaign with our business member organizations so that we can really systematically go through a hiring initiative that involves communities that have typically been left out.

The third piece we want to do is we want to elevate law enforcement, and that means working on police reform issues alongside the Chicago Police Department, working on better communication and coordination between the State's Attorney's Office and CPD. And there too, we can play a role in raising money and investing in some really key initiatives that unlock the gates of reform for CPD. These are initiatives where if we wait around for city funding, we might continue to wait five, 10 years. And we're not willing to do that anymore. We really want to get the ball rolling right now.

And then finally, we can play a role in community and economic development. In doing that work, we are looking across 20 communities across the South and West Side. We're obviously not going to be able

to be in every community at once. So we are looking to narrow that focus, and to start with two communities. And the question really is how can the business community pool our resources to make strategic investments in key corridors, in areas where disinvestment has really been prominent for decades. But how can we change that narrative and change that game and come in together in a concentrated way to provide for more economic vitality in our neighborhoods?

Jai: Thank you, Bob. It's really affirming to hear the business community have such a profound interest and commitment to reducing gun violence here in Chicago. When it comes to the topic of violence in Chicago, a lot of the media coverage focuses on the South and West Sides, casting these communities in a negative light. How can we all, community organizations, government, donors, and philanthropy work together to push against those negative narratives?

Esther: I think from my vantage point, this certainly requires a true narrative shift that includes telling more success stories, highlighting community solutions, and demonstrating the true success of individuals who have changed their lives. We recognize on a daily basis that there are plenty of stories to tell about shootings and how crime is impacting individuals, families, and communities.

What we don't talk about is that the data demonstrates that violence is down. Chicago is not the most violent city in the country, which we continue to be promoted as the worst city in the country when it comes to gun violence. We are actually a leader in the field, and continue to strive to be one of the safest cities to live, work, and play. We know that innovative work is happening on the ground. And for every tragic story that we share and that is in the media, there are five plus more positive stories that we can also share.

So I just feel that we have to continue to do the work of highlighting what's happening on the ground so that people actually feel safe. Perception is reality. And if people don't feel safe, then we actually are not creating safe conditions. So we have to just continue to plug away at this multipart strategy that includes many types of stakeholders coming together to do the work and telling those stories.

Jai: Great. America, what do you think?

America: Thank you for that question. I'm over here processing your answer, Esther. Thank you for sharing that. For me, obviously, living and working in the Back of the Yards, what I have seen is the need to also cultivate our own narrative. And so how do we have those conversations in community with our neighbors, with our youth?

I think that we all want to share success stories, right? We do. But I also think that we, the residents, the neighbors, need to have the conversations of how we see ourselves. I am a resident of Back of the Yards. I am a neighbor of Back of the Yards. How do we see ourselves as well, beyond the eye? I think that that is important to cultivate.

And so to me, while I know and I hear the stories in the media, to me, the way that I see our work as grassroots organization is cultivating that voice, that narrative, creating it for ourselves first and foremost. And that takes time and trust. And so I heard this somewhere, you can only go at the pace of trust. And I think that we need to be really mindful about that while we want to get to the goal line, whatever that is.

Jai: Great. Teny, curious to hear your thoughts on that question.

Teny: One thing, for the first time, we're allowed ... And Bob alluded to that and Esther, to actually what is scale and actually the right dosage? Any profession, whether it's the amount of teachers you need or in medicine, the amount of doctors, et cetera. In our field, people only wanted to hear about models. Hey, you have four outreach workers. Why isn't violence down? For the first time, we're afforded ... What is the amount of treatment required? How many people need help? So actually, we have no experience in the country really on violence reduction. For the first time, we're not just allowed to do violence reduction. We're allowed to try and start healing and educating. And that has never been allowed to Black and Brown communities. And we need to own it.

I've been doing it for 35 years. The people I work with are miraculous. I still am in awe. After being shot, spending time in cell for 20 years, they often come out blaming themselves. Bad choices. Bad choices? You survived an environment that is insane. Where is us as a society looking at it, right? They didn't create those environments. They didn't create an insane amount of guns in the neighborhood. The amount of loss, when we tell those stories ... My staff have lost 10. We just lost this year at the institute, we lost four staff just to what I call neighborhood poverty health issues. So all those things we're starting to tackle and are moving from individual blame to actually systemic change.

And to me, I've been with my teams now in three different cities. And I'm in awe that they show up. And when young people come to workforce program, I thank them. I was like, "Don't have your heads down. We're not here to fix you. You don't owe us anything. We're grateful, with all the trauma and the conflicts you survive, that you walk in through our doors." And people said young people will not want to pick up the jobs. They'd rather sell drugs. Well, we've proven in Chicago in the last nine years, they want to. They enrolled in colleges, they're doing workforce. They're excited about opportunity with Bob and the business committee to work downtown.

And finally, there's a Chicago area writer who wrote Untapped Talent. It's a book, Untapped Talent. The growth of the economy happens if your population growth. Well, in the West and in Japan, it doesn't. The other growth that happened is when women entered the market. We have tens of millions of Americans with criminal background who are either not employed or underemployed. This is a growth strategy for Chicago. And that's part of it, why the business community is excited. And we are in it. That's how we change the narrative. This is a bad form of capitalism, when you exclude too many people.

Jai: Great. Bob, you touched on it a little bit in your last answer, but just curious, how would you round us out in this round of questions?

Bob: I think part of changing the narrative requires us to do the work. We have to get out of our own way. We have to put our organizational interests aside and figure out how we come together and work together as one. We have tremendous resources in the city of Chicago. We always have. We find ourselves competing for the same resources or competing for territory or influence or human capital or whatever the case may be. We have to put that aside, and we have to do the work.

And I think that's what's so exciting about what we have been up to on the Scaling Community Violence Intervention piece. The business community is new to that table, but that table has nine years of history of figuring out how to break down those barriers, figuring out how to work across organizations for the common collective good. And this is a model I think that can be replicated. And obviously, we're not at replication yet. We still have a lot of very difficult work ahead of us over the next few years. But what I can tell you is that the business community is not in this for one year or two years. We made a five-year commitment, and we know that's just step one. And so from our perspective, let's continue to build that one table. Let's continue to break down the barriers.

But also, it can't be a one-dimensional strategy either. So from my perspective, we have to figure out how to hire from communities that have historically been left behind. We have to work to reform the police department, which if you look at our comparative cities in New York and L.A., policing reform and policing changes were the centerpiece of what happened in those neighborhoods. And these other pieces like community violence intervention or economic development, these were complementary to that change. So let's make the investments now in police reform so that we can build the trust that America was talking about. I agree with the notion that you can only go as quickly as the trust that you've developed. And so let's make those investments, some of which are structural, in policing today, to allow that trust to be developed, to allow the department to shift to problem solving. And then let's bring our resources together to focus on economic development.

Jai: So you guys talked a lot about what it means to make this a reality. I want to end this conversation with a blue-sky question. Considering where you sit and the work that you hold, if we continue to work together to address community safety across our neighborhoods, what does a thriving and safe Chicago look like to you? Esther, we'll start with you.

Esther: Violence reduction certainly has to be a shared priority. It can't be that this is their problem or this is that side of town type of thing. It affects our entire city. So we must work together to strengthen our ecosystem and create equity across communities. It's not the responsibility of one person, one sector, one group, et cetera. So our big audacious goal, which we did not say, is to reduce violence by 50% in the next five years and 75% over the next 20 years. So we need everyone involved to make that a reality. A safe community to me looks like the next generation not living in fear of their lives. And so I feel like us coming together to do this work is, as Bob stated earlier, step one in that process. And I'm excited for what's to come.

Jai: Thank you. America.

America: For me, a safe and thriving Chicago is in continuing to invest in our youth and our communities, being careful to address the displacement that comes along once you invest in communities. There has been so much inequity that there's a lot of us that have a lot, and most of us that don't have much, when it comes to money and resources and opportunities. And I think it's really important to name that. I am skeptical of those that come into our neighborhood. What do they say? The road to hell was led by good intentions. Let's be critical of the work that we do. We're only here for a little bit, but I hope that we can build for the generations to come, and that Chicago can be a vibrant city for all of those that have lived here. We have survived so much trauma, and we get to enjoy it too in the future, all of us that come. So Chicago for everybody is what I want.

Jai: Beautiful. Teny.

Teny: I agree. To me, when I'm in District 11, I think, which is max, and in Cook County, looking at 50 young men who are the ages of my 20 and 24-year-old sons, they all look like my sons. They're looking lost and terrified, and yet they have records now they have accumulated in surviving in their neighborhood. And I want for them what I have for my two sons. One of my sons is just visiting this week from Italy. The other one is going to be a junior in college. To me, we shouldn't stop until everyone has the same opportunities. And I often look how many Tony Morrisons we have in the graveyards or locked up, right? How many physicists, et cetera. So in our self-interest to keep doing it, that we have a city for everyone.

And to your point, America, on gentrification, there is a fear that when we are successful with violence reduction, we create gentrification. And we got to commit to living together. It cannot be that we are reducing violence and we're displacing people. It's got to be going all the way. The blue-sky vision is we don't need violence intervention, that we all teach art history and chess and theater, that our careers get converted to teachers and our young people. That should be, for us, the goal.

Jai: Beautiful. Bob, round us out. What does a thriving and safe Chicago look like to you?

Bob: I think it's hard to follow that. I agree with what all of my colleagues have said here today. I mean, certainly the goals that Esther mentioned are goals that we share at the Civic Committee and part of what our investments are designed to achieve. But I think looking ahead, we have found a way ... Just to tie it to my last answer, we found a way to break down those historic barriers of us working together to achieve a collective objective. So we've done that. And in doing so, we've reduced shootings and homicides substantially. We are the safest big city in America. And that means that every neighborhood in the city of Chicago has the same opportunities afforded to it. So no matter what zip code you're born into, you have the ability to get a good education, you have the ability to get a good job, and you're doing the things that Teny's sons have done, and you have the opportunity to go to college.

Look, there's no magic answer here, but what I can say, and what I'm optimistic about, is how [inaudible 00:38:53] here around scaling community violence intervention in a collective way. And if we continue down this course, if we continue to work together and break down those barriers, I have all the confidence in the world that we will be able to achieve these ambitious goals that we've set for ourselves.

Jai: Thank you. I must say, this was a fantastic conversation. Even as a part of the PSPC team, I've learned a lot, gleaning from your wisdom and your expertise. So thank you guys for the work that you're doing individually and collectively to move the needle on such an important topic. I really appreciate your thoughtfulness and your different perspectives. Thank you to my guests, Esther, Bob, Teny, and America for joining me today.