Remarks on Education and Public Safety Initiative
Mayor Greg Ballard
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As prepared for delivery

Good morning. Thank you for being here today.

We have a lot of faculty and students from many of our great charter schools with us today. In many ways you are the living proof that a quality education can change the life path of a child. It just requires hard work and support. The steps we are going to announce today will hopefully put many other children on the path to follow in your footsteps.

It is also good to see Chief Hite and his command staff joining us. Chief, I still remember the day last year when you told me how concerned you were with what was happening in many of our neighborhoods. You talked about how crime and violence weren’t just a matter for police. The only way to fundamentally make the situation better is to focus on education, jobs, criminal sentencing and giving young people a sense of hope. You are right.

I, and others, have been to the White House several times on these issues. I want to give the President credit on this topic with his “My Brother’s Keeper” initiative. He is very committed and passionate about changing the life path for many young men, particularly young men of color.

We are here today because the issue of crime and violence in Indy and cities across the United States dates back to about the same time this building became “Old City Hall.” Let me say it more clearly, we have failed many children in our society for at least 40 years. The institutions that support the family have not kept up with changes in the family structure and culture – and the crime that cities across America are experiencing today is a direct result of it.

In order to have a safer society we need to address the root causes of crime. We need to start doing right by our children, especially those living in poverty, our at-risk children.

I view the problem in three distinct areas – or buckets of responsibility. Bucket one – prevention. This should be our biggest area of focus because we are talking about children and the steps that families, schools and our entire community can take to prepare young people for being successful teens and young adults.

The second bucket – protection. That involves our police.

And the last bucket is punishment, our criminal justice system. We are going to do more to prepare people for success in life; but if they cross the line into violence; the prosecutors, courts and prisons need to remove these people from society and then use that time to prepare them to successfully come back.

As you have heard me and many community leaders say over and over again, we need to change our approach instead of relying on the same old tactics that haven’t really produced results. Making Indy a
safer city is not just about the number of people arrested and sent to prison. We must have fewer criminals in the first place.

I am not aware of any mother who dreams her baby will grow up to be a criminal. We must simply get at the issues that lead these children down the wrong path. Our effort starts with access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education.

There is little question the role high-quality early education plays in the life of a child growing up in poverty. These boys and girls do better in school in later grades. They are more likely to graduate high school and enroll in college. They are less likely to depend on welfare and other social assistance programs and they are less likely to be arrested as a juvenile and as an adult. The data is very clear on all of this.

I applaud Governor Pence and Speaker Brian Bosma for moving Indiana forward on early childhood education. But as a state that is widely hailed as a national leader in education reform, we are still years behind the curve on this subject.

The new initiative I am announcing today invests $25 million over five years to make level three and level four pre-school an affordable option for thousands of families in need. In partnership with the United Way, we will provide scholarships to approximately 1,300 students a year and set aside $1 million a year to help attract and replicate high-quality pre-schools across the city, particularly in some of our most impoverished neighborhoods. We will also look to other partners and philanthropic groups to raise additional funds to serve even more Indy children and families. Our goal is to make high-quality preschool learning affordable for every family in the city and make sure there are enough quality teachers to help these young children get a great educational start.

We propose funding this initiative through the elimination of the local homestead tax credit, which was recommended by the Council’s bi-partisan IMPD Staffing Commission. I want people to understand this is not the $45,000 homestead exemption the state provides for your home. This is a local credit that on average is about $22 per year or $1.84 per month.

It is time for Indy to join the state and nearly every other county across Indiana by eliminating this local credit. We can put that money to good use for our children and our city as a whole. Now is the time to make access to affordable, high-quality preschool a promise within reach for all at-risk children and families that make Indianapolis their home.

Pre-school is important but there is another pressing issue involving our schools that believe also directly relates to crime. Last year alone approximately 1,800 students in Indy were expelled from school or dropped out. Think about that – we are talking about hundreds of mostly teenagers who are just cast out into the street. They are lost to any system, wandering the street with no skill sets, no jobs, but they still must eat and survive. And we wonder why we have crime in the neighborhoods? The sad thing is we have been doing this for years and years. These are the people who are causing the problems, not just in our city, but across the nation.

There is a lot of data that suggests these kids are disproportionally poor and African-American. Like President Obama, we want to help young men of color achieve their potential. So, I am asking the “Your Life Matters” Task Force, chaired by Tanya Bell of Indiana Black Expo and Jamal Smith of the Indiana Civil Rights Commission, to study the expulsion and dropout issue more closely. It is my hope that their work
– and that of many others – will give us a better understanding of the problem, so we can make specific suggestions to the General Assembly when they return to work next year.

Many children who have been expelled or drop out are being sentenced to a life of crime and poverty on the street. They just fall off society’s radar only to re-emerge wearing handcuffs. This cycle must stop.

Indianapolis is on the leading edge of cities around the nation when it comes to educational initiatives for dropouts and students who have been arrested. Our Office of Education Innovation authorizes six schools that help dropouts get their diploma, with three more planned in the next few years. We are also getting ready to open a highly anticipated new type of school in the juvenile justice center. The Francis Marion Academy will help young people keep learning while they are being detained and a second school will open on the outside so students can keep learning after their release. This school will also serve those who have been expelled or are on the verge of it.

I believe people who break the law and the rules should face the consequences of their actions. This innovative school holds the promise of making sure our punishments don’t cost these children the education they need to be successful later in life.

Indy is a compassionate city. We believe in strong families and protecting our children. That is why another element of my plan involves changing the city’s curfew ordinance.

Gone are the days when kids were told to be home when the streetlights came on. Unless a teen is going to or from work, or a school or church function, I can think of no good reason 15, 16, and 17 year olds should be out past 11 o’clock on a weekend night, without their parents or a guardian. Chief Hite can point to hundreds of incidents where teens were the suspect or the victim of a crime when they should have been in bed. He will also be the first to say, having an earlier curfew will help police engage young people and their parents before it is too late.

This is not a difficult concept. When a parent has to come in to pick up their child for violating curfew, an officer can talk to that parent and let them know what that child was up to. This is our chance to intervene with that child and his or her family before it is too late. It is time for Indy to make the curfew for 15 to 17 year olds 11:00pm on the weekends. They have no business being out unsupervised later than that.

Changing the curfew should be an easy step. So is helping children and young people better handle routine disagreements. Over one-third of the expulsions in Marion County Schools last year happened because of fights and similar disagreements. One-third of the homicides in the city were the result of fights and revenge. Clearly, people aren’t learning how to play well with others at home or school – and that’s something else we must address.

For the past 15-years, the Peace Learning Center has been working with Indy Parks to help teach people how to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence. Peace Learning currently works out of Eagle Creek Park, but that will soon change. We are working with this group to expand their reach to more parks around the City. They are also developing a program that helps families’ workout routine problems that happen on a daily basis. The Peace Learning Center believes everyone can be a peacemaker. It is a message that many of our young people need to hear. Three-quarters of the city’s homicide victims this
year knew their killer. It is not a stretch to think that both the victim and the suspect probably wish today they could have peacefully worked their differences out.

It shouldn’t surprise anyone that much of the violence in our city centers on drugs, specifically heroin. Four of our SWAT team officers were shot earlier this year when they stormed a drug house on State Street. Our Southwest District commander believes almost every robbery in that area is tied to opiate addiction, including heroin.

IMPD is stepping up its efforts. We have seen a 60% increase in the use of heroin anti-overdose medication this year. The Metro Drug Task Force is on pace to seize three times the amount of heroin this year compared to last year. Those stats are alarming, but heroin is not just a “big city” problem. Heroin is impacting communities of all sizes across Central Indiana. I created the Central Indiana Regional Council of Elected Officials in 2009 to bring together Mayors and town leaders to discuss issues that confront the entire area. Each of us believes that heroin is one of the biggest threats we face in terms of public safety. I support the work of this council to launch a regional heroin awareness initiative. People across Central Indiana need to know about the dangers of heroin, how to spot the warning signs in their loved-ones, and where to go for help.

To the second bucket – protection and our police. Right now, I believe, the police are as tactically sound as ever. They are using data and technology in order to look ahead. They are on it, but they need more help. For three years now I have been asking the Council to provide long-term funding to hire more police officers.

Earlier this year the Council’s bi-partisan IMPD Staffing Commission recommended raising the Public Safety Income Tax in order to hire more officers. Let me say this in very clear terms. If the Council passes this recommendation to specifically hire more officers, we will hire more officers. These officers will be in addition to this year’s 80 new recruits and in the next four years we will have the largest number of IMPD officers in department history. The men and women of IMPD are doing great work out there and this is the year we need to get them more help.

Our police, however, cannot do their work alone. Case in point: IMPD has already taken nearly 1,100 guns off the street this year, but they need your help if they are going to get even more. I know there are many mothers, grandmothers, siblings and friends out there who know someone who has a gun – and shouldn’t. I understand you are scared your relative or friend may end up in the hospital, in prison or dead because they are packing heat. Many of you are afraid to speak up, but we need you to muster your courage and help us out.

CrimeStoppers usually is the place people call with tips about major crimes, but you can also call anonymously to tell us about someone illegally possessing a gun. The number is 262-TIPS. If you call, we will check it out. If someone is in illegal possession of a gun, we will get it out of their hands before it is too late. No one will know it was you who called. Your call to CrimeStoppers could very easily save someone’s life.

As I said a minute ago, IMPD officers are adjusting tactics, getting out of their car, confronting danger and making our neighborhoods safe. IMPD recently created a full-time SWAT team so they can respond to dangerous situations more quickly.
We are one of only a few cities our size with a full-time SWAT team that sometimes operates undercover and sometimes goes out in full force. A few weeks ago, a suspect who was under surveillance in an area of repeated gun fire was shot by undercover SWAT officers when he opened fire on people in a parked vehicle. IMPD was in the right place at the right time. Now that neighborhood is safer because that gunman is locked up and no longer roaming the streets.

Great police work is taking many dangerous criminals off the streets, then it falls to bucket number three – our criminal justice system - to keep them there and prepare them for the day when they are released.

As you have heard me say time and time again something needs to change. The men and women of the IMPD are doing great work but they are arresting the same people over and over and over again. 92% of Indy’s murder suspects this year had previously been arrested for a felony. Nearly 40% had prior weapons arrests and 71% had previously committed a crime against another person. 83% of the murder victims also had prior felony arrests. Police estimate one-quarter of the murders this year would not have happened if we had just a ten year minimum sentence for gun criminals, because those murder suspects would still be locked up from previous arrests.

We need local and federal prosecutors, judges and the state to do a better job identifying the worst of the worst. They need to use the tools they have to keep violent offenders locked up longer, like not dropping gun charges. Next year I plan to go back to the State to seek a mandatory minimum sentence of 20-years for anyone who uses a gun offensively in the commission of a crime.

Criminals use guns to scare their victims. It is high time our laws put some fear in them. This will be a 20-year sentence a criminal cannot plea bargain away. It is as simple as that.

As I said IMPD can’t keep arresting the same people over and over again. It is a simple fact there would be fewer repeat criminals for police to arrest if violent offenders stayed locked up longer – and those being released were better prepared to re-enter society.

People talk about a first day out program. The State needs to have a “First Day In” program. They have a captive audience. These individuals aren’t going anywhere for months or years. They should use every minute of that time to help those people prepare for the first day out.

We can also do more. The plan I am outlining would actually result in more money going to the Sheriff, prosecutor and the courts to help with these issues. If the Council passes the recommendations from its bi-partisan IMPD Staffing Commission, by law, up to $10 million could be used to hire more prosecutors, provide funding for the courts, and help the Sheriff offer more programs in the jail to get inmates ready for life on the outside.

It is simply not enough to slam the cell door on some of these individuals. Just like we are doing with early education, we must give people, including offenders, the tools they need to succeed. Education, social and conflict resolution skills, job training, substance abuse and mental health; these are some of the areas where our offenders need help. It is my experience that most ex-offenders want to lead successful lives. We should help them do that because they certainly didn’t get the help they needed while growing up.
In closing, I want to remind you there is no magic, overnight solution. There will be difficult times ahead. As I said in the beginning, we are trying to address issues that are decades in the making and it will take time for some of these programs to bear fruit.

These also aren’t the only steps we will take. We are currently meeting with health officials to discuss the critical role they play in helping touch families in need. Our “Your Life Matters” Task Force is working on mentoring programs and many groups are focusing on summer job opportunities for young people. Each of these initiatives plays a critical role in helping to reverse the trend that is playing out in Indy and many other cities across the United States.

I am very optimistic about our city and its future. We have a long history of coming together to tackle big issues – and I have no doubt we will succeed again in this endeavor. We are a city that cares about neighbors we’ve never met and about places we’ve never been. Together we will make Indy a safer city and an even better city to live, work and raise your family.

Thank you.

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