



Co/Motion Program Best Practices

We see it on television, read about it in local newspapers, and hear about it in the communities where we live—young people getting killed during shoot-outs in our neighborhoods, in shopping malls, on the playground, and in school. It's disturbing and frightening, both for our nation's youth and for society as a whole. This brief explores the outcomes achievable for gun control advocacy organizations and youth, and describes some of the variations among the activities designed and implemented by Alliance for Justice (Alliance) to help its grantees facilitate change and raise public awareness of gun violence in American communities.

This document is one of the products of an evaluation of Co/Motion, a national program designed and administered by Alliance for Justice. The evaluation of Co/Motion was a contract with Social Dynamics, LLC, a social research and evaluation firm located in Potomac, MD, as requested by Alliance in May 2005. The full evaluation provides a comprehensive description of the Co/Motion program model including grant making, training, special projects and campaigns; identifies challenges to implementing the model as well as best practices; and outline recommendations for improving gun violence prevention advocacy and youth civic engagement programs.

Through Co/Motion, organizations and schools attempt to build their capacity to support youth civic activism as they participate in conversations about the systemic causes of gun violence, including the skills to support public policy issues, and organize to enact effective public policy solutions to stem the tide of gun violence in American communities. Overall findings from the full evaluation indicate Alliance successfully engaged youth in civic activities around the problem of gun violence and helped the gun violence prevention movement make great strides toward increasing public awareness and influencing the legislative process.

BACKGROUND

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, gun violence effects close to 100,000 people annually and costs the United States tax payers billions of dollars per year in direct and indirect medical expenses. The National Academy of Sciences estimates that 29,573 individuals in the United States are killed and 75,000 people are injured by guns each year (National Academy of Sciences, 2004). The rate of homicide usage in the United States is 19 times higher than that of 35 other industrialized nations combined and the likelihood of being a victim of gun violence is 10 times greater for black males than for white males age 20-24

(10.5 per 100,000). More than \$2 billion per year is spent on medical care for gun shot victims; almost one-half (49%) of which is paid by the public.

Nationally, gun violence statistics have shown only moderate improvements over the past ten years, while urban communities continue to be plagued by easy access to guns; higher rates of household gun ownership and gun-related violence, including homicide, suicide, and unintentional firearm deaths among women and children than urban and suburban communities (Centers for Disease Control 2003). The complexity of the problem of gun violence presents many challenges for those who are working to prevent youth violence.

From 1999-2005, the Alliance for Justice expanded an existing youth civic engagement and advocacy program called Co/Motion, to include grant making. Thirty-four Co/Motion Youth Gun Violence Prevention Matching Challenge Grants were awarded to organizations located in twenty states and Washington, DC. In addition, Alliance, provided guidance in the form of regional organizers, training sessions on collective action and lobbying, technical assistance and resources to help grantees design and implement gun violence prevention strategies. Their efforts paid off; grantees facilitated positive changes in gun control legislation, greater involvement in civic action by youth, increased public awareness of gun violence and new collaborative relationships among community-based agencies and school systems.

The following descriptions of “best practices” designed and implemented by grantees that successfully changed the way entire communities view the problem of gun violence were identified through an extensive review of grantee documentation, interviews with key adult and youth leaders in the gun violence prevention community and site visits to selected grantees. Three distinct strategies for engaging youth and combating the problem of gun violence are described below.

BEST PRACTICES

“Best practices,” for successful youth-led advocacy programs identified in this evaluation focus on three key elements: leadership; youth involvement; and collaboration.

❖ Effective Youth Leadership

One way to influence social change is through effective youth leadership. Niko and Theo Milonopoulos, founders and leaders of Kidz Voice-LA, engage youth and elected officials in gun violence prevention advocacy through their ability to create a sense of collective responsibility for gun violence in their community. Niko and Theo are twin brothers who in 1998, at eleven years old responded to the growing problem of gun violence by creating what is now one of the leading youth-led gun control organizations in the United States. Kidz Voice-LA provides lobbying, youth outreach, resource materials and workshops for youth who attend public schools.

As nationally recognized youth leaders, the Milonopoulos brothers and hundreds of Kidz Voice LA youth volunteers collected over 7,000 signatures for a successful petition calling for a citywide ban on ammunition in LA. They have spoken at schools, conferences, and peace marches, and organized citywide events including gun meltdown rallies and the March of the Angels, a children's march against gun violence, which was attended by the Los Angeles Chief of Police and District Attorney. In conjunction with hundreds of youth volunteers, Kidz Voice-LA influenced the passage of legislation that recommends including

gun violence prevention in the public school health curriculum, and was instrumental in creating a resolution stating that the city of Los Angeles support the reinstatement of the federal assault weapons ban. Niko and Theo have been honored with national community service awards, articles in national magazines and local newspapers and are seen as a powerful force by organizations that support the proliferation of guns, such as the National Rifle Association.

How do they do it?

Kidz Voice-LA is an organization that has developed an approach to *social-cause lobbying* that is effective for numerous reasons. They focus on practical, year-round, grassroots approaches to building their volunteer base, meeting with students and school faculty and maintaining regular contact with elected officials to continue to educate them on the challenges they face as gun control lobbyists and the problems associated with existing gun control policies. When they are not lobbying elected officials, they are strengthening their volunteer base through public awareness campaigns and leadership training. They maintain information on local elected officials, including those that have supported safe gun legislation, and relevant information or concerns expressed by each legislator. Most importantly, Niko and Theo are excellent youth leaders.

Niko and Theo's transformational approach to leadership uses a vision that excites and engages youth to participate in advocacy activities. Transformational leaders are inspirational and have vision and passion to achieve great things. Niko and Theo engage youth by being involved in the gun violence prevention movement and demonstrating that youth can be catalysts of social change. In the words of one Kidz Voice-LA volunteer: *Niko and Theo are so dedicated to this cause that they inspire us to get involved. They have given over much of their lives to this cause and as a result have made an impact on our lives and community.*

How does Co/Motion support teen leaders?

Through an extensive needs assessment process, Alliance staff identified the kinds of technical assistance needed to facilitate the gun violence prevention activities of Kidz-Voice LA. Recognizing the excellent leadership skills of the organization's founders, Alliance's West Coast Organizer, Will Butkus, met with Niko and Theo to discuss their plans for the grant.

Mr. Butkus helped the boys develop a strategic plan and budget, fact sheets that covered both national and local issues related to gun violence and gun violence prevention, and provided a training session for dozens of youth volunteers on advocacy and organizing. One representative of Kidz-Voice LA commented on the support they received through the Alliance which *"helped us develop strengthen our voice in the gun violence prevention movement. The Alliance gave us the technical assistance and resources we needed to make positive changes in our community. They provided training to our youth volunteers and helped us build our pool of youth committed to this cause. Their technical assistance and resources were indispensable and made it possible for us to achieve our goals."*

❖ An Effective School-Based Advocacy Program

New Yorkers Against Gun Violence (NYAGV) was established in 1993 by Brooklyn mothers galvanized by the senseless shooting death of a teacher in Prospect Park. Through the diligent work of a small group of individuals, New Yorkers Against Gun Violence and

the NYAGV Education Fund have grown to include members in 27 counties throughout New York State with chapters currently in New York City, the Capital District, and Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester counties.

As a Alliance grantee, NYAGV conducted a successful campaign that resulted in the state legislature passing the landmark “*Gun Industry Responsibility Act*” in New York City, which gives shooting victims the ability to sue the gun industry. They also facilitated the passing of a stronger state assault weapons ban and a ban on the .50 caliber sniper rifle in the New York State Assembly. NYAGV also coordinated a national grassroots effort to enlist the support of 2,000 law enforcement leaders across the country to renew and strengthen the federal assault weapons ban and introduced legislation in 2003 to expand ballistic imaging for all new guns sold in New York State, which passed the New York State Assembly in March.

These important accomplishments resulted in positive changes in state and local gun control policies. But according to Executive Director, Andy Pelosi, “*We wanted to go beyond our advocacy efforts to reach the next generation of gun control supporters by reaching out to youth in local public schools. Co/Motion gave us the resources and impetus to do that.*” In 1997, Mr. Pelosi initiated the NYAGV youth outreach program that the organization used to recruit youth to participate in workshop and advocacy activities.

As youth became involved in NYAGV activities, one of the more precocious youth leaders was Mike Rivera. Mike grew up in one of New York City’s most violent communities and recognized the need for youth involvement in gun violence prevention advocacy. According to Mr. Rivera, “*I had to do something about what was happening in my neighborhood and school. Kids were getting killed and guns were available on the street.*” Mr. Rivera attended a workshop presented by Andy Pelosi and became inspired by Mr. Pelosi’s effectiveness as a gun control lobbyist and organizer. Mr. Rivera got more involved with NYAGV and helped recruit youth to volunteer in the school-based workshops being presented by NYAGV. By the time Mike was a high school junior, he was a proficient lobbyist and met frequently with state legislators to ask for their support of safer gun laws.

As a high school senior, Mike accepted the position of youth program coordinator and began presenting the school-based workshop. The workshop expanded to include six sessions covering analyses of issues related to gun violence such as poverty, limited economic opportunities, access to firearms and lack of peer support and lobbying. The six week workshop concludes with Lobbying Day, during which youth travel to Albany, NY, to meet with state legislators. Since 1998, more than 1,000 youth have participated in the NYAGV workshop. In 2005, Mr. Pelosi was asked by Long Island school administrators to expand the workshop to suburban schools. According to Mr. Pelosi, “*I want to expand what we’re doing to suburban school systems but we need the resources to do that. I can see this workshop going state wide because we have had an impact on many of our students, who to this day, still participate in our lobbying and information dissemination activities.*”

How do they do it?

According to Mike Rivera, NYAGV’s school-based program “*teaches more than advocacy around gun violence. It teaches leadership, support for your community and it creates bonds and a peer network. I think that’s what is really behind our success and the possibility of expanding this program to other school systems.*” Mr. Pelosi’s explanation for

the success of the program is the involvement of youth as presenters and workshop coordinators. “I am an older guy. I’m not cool. The classroom was always filled when I ran the workshops. But when Mike took over, the increase in the level of enthusiasm around the workshop was exponential. Mike’s leadership made it more than acceptable to be involved in gun violence prevention advocacy. Now that Mike has moved on, we’ve replaced him with another charismatic and committed youth leader. I think she’ll continue the work that Mike and I started.

How does Co/Motion support school-based advocacy programs?

Alliance’s innovative targeted training program and strategic planning expertise helped NYAGV make practical changes in their organization that optimized existing resources and staff. Alliance staff conducted Co/Motion training sessions on advocacy and highlighted the role of youth in training others to be gun violence prevention leaders. The Alliance recognized the accomplishments NYAGV leading up to their Co/Motion grant award as well as the stellar leadership of the organization’s executive director, Andy Pelosi.

Through strategic planning support and engaging NYAGV youth in a successful Washington, DC-based protest against H&R Block’s incentive program for NRA members, the Alliance showed NYAGV youth that they can be catalysts of social change. In the words of Andy Pelosi, Executive Director of NYAGV, “*the Alliance’s support and involvement in our early grant activities was crucial. Kellye McIntosh attended events and spoke to our youth and really motivated them to get involved. The Washington, DC based protest made believers out of all of us. It’s so important to have a national organization behind you when you’re fighting an up-hill battle.*”

❖ Successful Peer Groups

TEENS ON TARGET (TNT) started in 1989 in response to the large number of children dying from violence throughout the country, and specifically because of the increasing number of shootings in and around schools in Oakland, California. Deane Calhoun, a public health activist, “couldn’t take it anymore” when she discovered that homicides, with guns, were the leading cause of death for children in California. She felt that policies needed to be created to reduce access to guns that youth needed to be given positive alternatives to violence, and that youth themselves needed a leadership role in this effort. Armed with public health facts and a vision, she worked with Oakland School District staff and 10 high school students to start *TEENS ON TARGET* and two years later, Youth ALIVE!

The goal of Teens on Target is to train urban youth who are at risk as victims or perpetrators of violent crimes, injuries, and deaths to become peer educators and violence prevention advocates. The program gives youth from diverse backgrounds the skills and opportunities to speak out about the impact of violence in their lives. By educating their peers and advocating for solutions, TNT members help stop the cycle of violence. TNT focuses attention on the *causes* of youth violence, to stop it before it starts and holds the philosophy that no one knows better than young people themselves what is behind the violence in their communities, so youth must be at the center of developing and implementing any solutions. TNT Program Coordinator, Teresa Shartel explained that “TNT is a youth development peer group program. It is designed to give youth a forum to meet and discuss issues that they’re concerned about and then to take action.”

TNT has trained over 750 youth to be Peer Educators. Some of the TNT Peer Educators are in wheelchairs from being shot, and all have experienced or are at great risk for experiencing violence first hand. Prospective Peer Educators undergo an extensive six-week after-school training program on how to educate their peers and speak about the impact of violence in their lives. Facilitated by staff, they continue to meet twice a week after school throughout the school year to support one another and continue their training. TNT Peer Educators have presented workshops to thousands of students in Oakland that enable students to participate in making their lives, their neighborhoods and their communities safer and healthier.

As TNT members move from the roles of *victims* to *advocates*, they send a powerful message that those who are at risk for violence can take a leadership role in saving their own lives. TNT has had a tremendous impact on the communities it serves. Over the years that TNT has been in East Oakland, for example, the number of youth homicide victims has dropped by 73% and youth homicide suspects has dropped by 63%. In addition to helping prevent violence, most TNT members have recommitted themselves to attending school and improving their grades. Almost 100% of TNT members graduate from high schools where graduation rates average only 40%. An evaluation of the program during the 1999-2000 school year showed that TNT members had higher GPA's, lower truancy rates, and no expulsions when compared to their peers.

How do they do it?

According to Teresa Shartel, factors that are the most critical in establishing and sustaining a successful peer support and activity such as TNT are the identification of a core group of committed youth willing to take an active role over the long-term; providing information and training to youth group members to provide a framework for educating members and planning for engagement in civic action; creating some form of structure to provide cohesion and oversight of activities through adult mentors and facilitators.

Ms. Shartel reports having access to resources, support from existing programs, and training workshops are also important factors in building youth led advocacy communities. In addition, interest and involvement of multiple sectors of the community from other local advocacy groups, school faculty and elected officials "makes a big difference. Without our relationships with the school system in particular, it would be difficult to get youth to be involved." Finally, an ongoing structure to facilitate organization and collaboration is an important feature of the program. "We try to meet with the youth regularly. We're always open to their ideas and frequently ask them to guide the group after we provide a framework for their ideas."

How does Co/Motion support peer groups?

Alliance's expertise in developing innovative approaches to recruiting youth, strategic planning and grass-roots organizing facilitated the design and implementation of effective strategies for engaging youth in civic activities and making positive changes in gun control laws in Oakland, CA. The Alliance's West Coast Regional Organizer, Will Butkus, worked closely with Youth Alive!'s Teens on Target Program Coordinator, Teresa Shartel to "*help get us involved in larger community issues that serve to strengthen what we do with*

Teens on Target.

As a seasoned organizer, Mr. Butkus recognizes the importance of focusing on short-term projects that strengthen the volunteer base and solidarity among key community advocates so that the community is in better position to support long-term initiatives that target systemic change. Mr. Butkus worked closely with local community leaders, elected officials and advocates to promote gun violence prevention and to raise awareness of the Teens on Target program, while bringing together youth groups and advocates in order to strengthen the local gun violence prevention movement.

Partly as a result of the Alliance's work in Oakland, CA, Teens on Target and gun violence received both local and statewide media attention, raising public awareness and strengthening one community's voice, which led to California State Senator Vasconcellos inviting two Teens on Target youth to facilitate a violence prevention workshop at the state capital, present Youth and Race: Issues and Solution's at a Conference hosted by California State Assembly Member Dion Aroner and obtain funding for a new after school recreational program, which was implemented in September 2005.

CONCLUSION

“Change is possible and youth can facilitate change, if they have guidance and resources to implement advocacy initiatives.”

Each of the grantees highlighted received intensive on-site support and guidance from the Alliance. Alliance employs an extensive needs assessment process, which takes place immediately after the award of a Co/Motion challenge grant. Needs assessments include site visits by Alliance staff members with expertise related to the goals and objectives delineated in the grant proposal as well as historical reviews of organizational accomplishments and mission statements.

The Co/Motion needs assessment includes identification of the overall resource needs for advocacy and collective organizing, and determining what additional resources, materials, equipment, staffing, logistics, and communications will be required to be successful. Expertise in developing innovative approaches to recruiting youth, strategic planning and grass-roots organizing facilitated design and implementation for all three grantees.

All of the “best practices” presented in this document highlight the importance of three elements of successful youth-led advocacy programs:

1. Leadership;
2. Youth Involvement; and
3. Collaboration.

Although the leadership characteristics of Niko and Theo Milonopoulos, NYAG's effort to involve youth in the design and presentation of school-based gun violence prevention workshops, and the emphasis on collaboration, structure and guidance associated with Youth Alive's TNT program are highlighted, all three of these “best practices” have in varying degrees, each of these important elements.