

Fulfilling the Promise of My Brother's Keeper

*Testimony & Recommendations for Reducing Violence and
Providing a Second Chance from Communities Grappling
with Violence and Mass Incarceration*





I. Introduction

In the biblical text, the question, “Am I My Brother’s Keeper?” is asked against the backdrop of deadly violence between two brothers and a divine encounter of accountability between God and the perpetrator. It gives us a commentary on how feelings of acceptance or rejection can impact human behavior. It also reminds us how God has an interest in our care and responsibility to one another. God’s response to Cain calls on us to respect and value the unique gifts and talents bestowed upon each person by the Creator when we seek to bring our gifts to the world. It also forces us to ponder the answer to such a question, “Am I My Brother’s Keeper?” with an honest and clear demonstration through words and actions.

These intersections of relationships, actions and values continue to serve as a powerful metaphor calling for our continued work and mutual responsibility. To see the President’s public call to our nation to consider the plight of boys and men of color through his historic My Brother’s Keeper initiative gives every one of us an opportunity to be accountable for our answer to this age-old question. As people of faith, we feel compelled to amplify the voices of those directly impacted and offer policy and programmatic recommendations that are demonstrating — in real time — improved outcomes for African-American and Latino youth.

In this spirit, we offer five primary recommendations:

1. Humanize youth of color through an honest national discussion about racial equity and examine the deleterious ways that American media and culture reinforce negative thoughts and stereotypes: The White House and philanthropic, nonprofit and faith leaders involved in My Brother’s Keeper should commit to a broad and deep public conversation about racial equity that engages large numbers of young people across race, region and class and draws on our best knowledge about implicit bias and uses it to inform our larger culture and society and to humanize the experience of boys and men of color.
2. Accelerate the scaling up of gun violence prevention strategies that are grounded in both policy and programs. Given the destructive and traumatic impact that gun violence has in the lives of boys and men of color, and drawing from the recommendation of U.S. Attorney Ted Heinrich’s “Problem Management: The Role of Federal Government in Reducing Urban Gun Violence,” we propose a Race to the Top Gun Violence Prevention Initiative resourced with \$500M over five years for communities with murder rates significantly higher than the national average. [1] Also, continue existing efforts to pass universal background checks, end weapons trafficking and prosecute straw purchasers that can reduce the number of illegal guns in our cities.

3. Continue to advance criminal justice and education system reforms to reduce the number of African-American and Latino youth who are being incarcerated, in particular, the White House should:

- Host a face-to-face meeting within the next 90 days with formerly incarcerated individuals leading organizations that support the re-integration of formerly incarcerated individuals. The solutions lie not solely in Washington, but in the success and wisdom of those who have successfully taken advantage of the pathway to success when given a second chance. The PICO Network is willing to help convene such a meeting, so that the voices, wisdom and solutions of those most directly impacted by the problem can be brought to bear on criminal justice reform.
- Direct the Attorney General to investigate federal sentencing laws that disproportionately impact African American and Latino boys and men, and to implement sentencing reforms focused on reducing racial disparities within the criminal justice system.
- Halt all deportations of fathers living in homes with their children who are American citizens. Given the research related to the role fathers play in being protectors, caretakers, champions and nurturers of their children, we should not break up families and detain them in private for-profit detention centers. It is unacceptable and immoral.

4. Create ladders of opportunity for returning citizens: As part of a broad effort to end mass incarceration, we must eliminate barriers to employment, education, voting and other life opportunities for young men and women who are returning from prison. We also must lift the bans that formerly incarcerated citizens experience when trying to access public assistance including food stamps and housing.

5. Apply a “ban the box” policy to job applications used by federal contractors and subcontractors. In order to begin to remove unwarranted barriers to employment facing formerly incarcerated returning citizens, the Administration should follow the lead of 10 states and more than 50 American cities and counties that prohibit inquiry into criminal history records on initial job applications.

II. Our Task

In response to the President’s announcement of My Brother’s Keeper in February, PICO National Network launched LIVE FREE: 90 Days of Action to Preach, Pray and Act to Become My Brother’s Keeper. Through PICO’s network of 1,200 congregations and 55 faith-based organizations across the country, and our denominational and religious partners, including the Church of God in Christ, the Churches of our Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith, Pentecostal Assemblies of the World, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, we have engaged tens





of thousands of people of faith and trained more than 3,000 community leaders in multi-day LIVE FREE boot camps in 15 cities to counter the dominant narrative through sharing their stories, change policies and programs through creating political will at the city and state levels that will stop gun violence and dismantle mass incarceration. These events have created a space for people closest to the pain to share their personal testimony and inform the development of policy and programmatic recommendations. Ultimately, our task as people of faith is to extend and sustain a serious, frank and humane conversation about the experience of boys and men of color, and to institutionalize that conversation in effective policies, structures and programs that bring the blessing of security and opportunity to all of our precious children.

The faith community has long provided moral leadership in the struggle to create strong families, vibrant communities and racial equity in our society. The fundamental belief that each of us is created in God's image is essential to building the broad public will needed to change policies and practices to expand opportunities for young people of color. The spiritual and ministerial work of religious leaders and institutions is essential to the success of My Brother's Keeper.

This report summarizes what PICO has learned from 90 days of listening to those most impacted by racial injustice, including African-American and Latino youth, formerly incarcerated returning citizens, clergy and community leaders. The report is divided into three sections. The first, titled Proclamation, discusses the stories and testimony that we heard from people. The second focuses on policy recommendations. The third section presents a program for continuing grassroots engagement and action through faith institutions.

III. Proclamation

Over the past 90 days we have heard story after story of clergy and lay members of congregations, youth and law enforcement officials, community members and those returning from incarceration taking bold steps to reclaim their communities from the impact of policies and practices that limit the life chances of young people and tear apart neighborhoods and families. They are striving to create communities and families that above all, have the ability to LIVE FREE – to live free of gun violence, to live free of mass criminalization by policing systems that treat young men of color as potential suspects, to live free of incarceration, to live free in jobs that are accessible and pay enough to support a family.

In communities of color there is a dual reality that exists; tight knit communities, where hardworking parents send their children to school before going off to work, little ones dream of college and are excited to share what they are learning in class and where neighbors watch out for each other.

There is also the reality of torment and separation, at some point many of these little one's dreams are diminished by a system that has created mistrust between communities of color and law enforcement officials and public agencies and torn apart families by disproportionately incarcerating African-American and Latino men.

Since January 15, 2014, across the country more than 3,000 clergy, community members, lay leaders, law enforcement officials and returning citizens have stepped into the void that exists between these two realities to prepare themselves to counter the dominant narrative that some people are worth more than others.

We have proclaimed this truth through trainings on racial equity and community change and direct outreach to clergy, community leaders and impacted individuals. On the weekend of March 14-16, 2014, more than 1,000 congregations reaching tens of thousands of people of faith, participated in LIVE FREE Sabbath events, calling for an end to mass incarceration and gun violence. The Sabbath events included a commitment to Preach, Pray and Act in response to these crises.

Pastor Kevin Adams of Olivet Baptist Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee, held a LIVE FREE Sabbath. After hearing the testimony of a woman who was wounded by gun violence 23 years ago, and who then in 2011 lost her son when he was shot and killed, the Rev. Adams closed his prayer by pleading, "Not another funeral, not another death, in the name of Jesus. Too much bloodshed. Stop the gangbanging. Stop it, Lord." [2] Adams and leaders in his congregation are adding action to their prayers. They have begun meeting with city officials to adopt new and effective strategies to focus police resources on sources of violence. They are joining with others in communities across the country to conduct regular street walks in the hardest hit neighborhoods of their city.

Thousands of stories have emerged from boot camps and trainings around the country. In Florida, a returning citizen named Chris shared about her former use of drugs and alcohol, which led to her incarceration. Now her two sons are also in prison. Prior to the training, her past had demoralized her, and she did not consider her potential to become an agent of change. During the training of more than 75 returning citizens, the participants marched in silence to a clemency hearing, where their presence in the room changed the atmosphere of the proceedings on whether to accelerate the process to restore voting rights for former felons in the state. As a result of this training and taking action with others, Chris now sees how her presence has the potential to help many people to have their rights restored. With tears in her eyes, Chris made a public declaration of her self-worth, and how being able to participate in the boot camp had transformed her into a dedicated soldier for justice.

In Cincinnati, Ohio, returning citizen Terry Jones helped lead the boot camp. In the fall of 2013, Terry was shot in the stomach as someone stole his cell phone and \$20. As a result of the shootings, he had to relearn how to walk and how to eat. Shortly after Terry was shot, his youngest son also witnessed a White police officer tazing an older Black man in the face. Now four years old, his son remains traumatized by these events. Terry's felony record hinders his ability to get a good job and live in a better community. He wants his family to live in a safe community, free from fear and violence. This desire drives him to organize with his neighbors and other returning citizens, to make the criminal justice system work for all people and to promote redemption over incarceration. He believes that



the only path towards peace is through investing in people, not through ripping families apart through the incarceration system.

In Louisiana, 109 clergy and directly impacted individuals came together for a two-day training that included a public event at the Louisiana State Capitol, where PICO Louisiana engaged with state elected officials to move sentencing reform forward and remove barriers to employment for our formerly incarcerated brothers and sisters. In the words of Jamond Bourgeois, a 36-year-old formerly incarcerated leader who joined these events, “If you keep using prison as an antidote for problems that have never been fixed -- you have to ask yourself is prison working. We see that locking people up only creates more problems. We have to look at the bigger picture, and see how families are being destroyed, and dreams are crippled.” He has called on fellow formerly incarcerated leaders and clergy “to put an end to mass incarceration because prison don’t change nor heal anyone, it takes people to do that.”



IV. Policies

With the stories of those most impacted at the center, we can create policies and programs that will change outcomes for our boys and men of color. We can stop the gun violence that plagues our urban centers and dismantle the incarceration system that robs young children of their parents. Directly impacted leaders can play an integral role in solutions to the barriers that stand in their way. Through our boot camps, one-on-one conversations, congregation meetings and Sabbaths, we have put together a comprehensive list of policy recommendations that we are pushing forward at the local and state level through both legislation and the ballot box.

1. Criminal Justice-Sentencing Reform

In many ways the American criminal justice system is like a bike with only one gear – inefficient and ineffective. We need to fix the broken system to ensure we’re not stuck in “prison gear,” using the same solution to address different problems. In the same way that you wouldn’t use the same gear to bike up a hill as you would to go over a flat surface, incarceration cannot serve as a single solution for safer and stronger communities.

Our counter narrative starts to address the myth that there are more black and brown people in jail because they commit crimes more frequently. The reality is that there is no difference in the use or sale of drugs between people of different races. But if you were to visit our nation’s prisons and jails, that is not what you would see, because in some states, black men have been admitted to prison on drug charges at rates twenty to fifty times greater than those of white men who commit the same crimes. In fact, in our nation’s capitol, it is estimated that three out of four young black men (and nearly all those in the poorest neighborhoods) can expect to serve time in prison.[3]

The Lifelines to Healing campaigns are creating political will and moving policy change at the local and state levels to end racial disparities in sentencing and make incarceration a last resort.



In **Louisiana** and **California**, local clergy and community members have worked to transform county-level bail systems, putting pre-trial services into place for those unable to afford bail, allowing them to return to their families prior to trial and reducing the number of people in county jails. These reforms need to be expanded across the country's criminal justice system.



This November, voters in **California** will consider the Safe Neighborhoods and Safe Schools Act, an initiative that would turn seven low-level, non-violent felonies into misdemeanors. In partnership with Californians for Safety and Justice and other allies, PICO is organizing clergy, lay leaders, returning citizens and other directly-impacted individuals to build support for this initiative, which would use the budget savings from reduced incarceration to fund mental health and substance abuse programs for returning citizens, trauma centers for victims of violence and grant programs for public schools.

We support smarter sentencing measures at the federal and state level to stop the widespread incarceration of non-violent drug offenders, along with a shift in public spending from the construction and maintenance of prisons to drug prevention, job training and job creation.



2. Gun Violence Reduction Strategy/Ceasefire

The pain felt in Newtown is the same pain felt in Chicago. The tears shed in Oak Creek are the same tears shed in Oakland. The lives lost in Tucson are the same lives lost in Camden. The children being buried in Aurora are the same children being buried in Detroit. Regardless of where we live, we have a shared responsibility to protect **all** children from the scourge of violence that rips communities apart.

While nothing will bring back the thousands of lives that have been lost each year to gun violence, the implementation of proven programs at the national and local levels can reduce violence and rebuild communities. Our aim is to prevent the future loss of lives.

While the dominant narrative portrays all black and brown men as dangerous, evidence-based practices to reduce gun violence, such as Ceasefire, prove that it is less than 1% of young men in communities that drive gun violence. The Ceasefire strategy is a unique partnership between clergy and community members, law enforcement agencies and service providers focused on sending a clear message to a strategic set of young men who have been identified through a data driven process as the drivers of violence in specific communities. This message is shared with young men in group meetings referred to as "call-ins," and through coordinated efforts by clergy and lay leaders, who lead night walks in hot spot neighborhoods, and street outreach workers, who are charged with reaching out and connecting the young men most at risk of either being a victim or perpetrator of gun violence with the services they need to put their guns down. The use of data and community partnership generally leads to an increase in



police legitimacy and a change in policing practices that no longer rely on stop-and-frisk style tactics but instead on surgical interventions with the small group of young men who are actually driving the violence in communities.



In **California**, PICO clergy and directly impacted individuals are leading a coalition effort to increase funding for the California Gang Reduction and Intervention Program, which provides funding for Ceasefire programs in several cities across the state. In recent months, Stockton, Richmond and Oakland have had double-digit reductions in gun homicides due to the implementation of Ceasefire.



In **Michigan**, Michigan Prophetic Voices, a member of the PICO network, is negotiating with state leadership to create a funding source for implementing Ceasefire in seven cities that are dealing with the worst gun violence problems in the state.

The premise of this strategy has continually been reinforced, in that less than 1% of the population of any given city is responsible for as much as 70% of shootings and gun-related deaths. In fact, this particular strategy of focusing on group violence and requiring collaboration is the United States Department of Justice's highest-rated gun violence prevention strategy. The well-coordinated and collaborative strategy that brings together law enforcement, community and social services to focus on the 1% of people who drive gun violence, cities have been able to reduce shootings and gun-related deaths by as high as 60 percent within 24 months. According to the DOJ, Ceasefire creates the best collaboration across multi-sectors in cities regardless of size, effectively reducing gun violence (<http://www.crimesolutions.gov/ProgramDetails.aspx?ID=207>).

Despite its tested success in saving lives, Ceasefire is vastly underfunded and without proper technical assistance capacity that allows for scale. As a result this strategy cannot meet the demand of law enforcement leaders, clergy leaders, community leaders and families who are standing in line to fully implement this strategy with fidelity.

We propose a Race to the Top Gun Violence Prevention initiative, resourced with a \$500 million dollar commitment over 5 years that would allow communities with murder rates well above the national average the opportunity to compete for resources to support the reduction of gun-related homicides through collaboration, quality implementation, structural reform and services. United States Attorney Ted Heinrich wrote in his policy brief "Problem Management: The Federal Role in Reducing Urban Violence" that the problem is really targeted in neighborhoods and communities and thus our response should be that focused. Evidence suggests that, by using the very American impulse of competition to spur widespread adoption of proven practices, we could cut urban gun violence by 35%-50% in the most violent urban communities, without sending more and more young men and women of color to their death or jail.

One of the first steps has already been taken with the recent solicitation for proposals to inform a National Center for Building Community Trust and Justice. We propose that a uniquely designed initiative within the Department of Justice commit \$500M as described toward accelerating the scaling up of these initiatives.

We believe any community that is not safe cannot create the conditions for boys and men of color to thrive. Public health officials are continuing to assert that children's brain function diminishes when they hear or experience shootings in their communities. The Center for Disease Control just coined the phrase "Hood Disease" to describe the cumulative impact of trauma in urban neighborhoods where violence is prevalent. We must prioritize the stopping of the shootings. These strategies, such as Ceasefire, prove that we know how to do it. Every city in need should have access to the tools and experts these proven strategies require for quality public safety implementation and results.

We also continue to assert that common sense gun laws cannot be absent from a comprehensive violence reduction strategy. Since 40% of all gun purchases are made without background checks, ***we support universal background checks for EVERY gun purchase.*** With 300 million guns in circulation, we must focus not only on who is not only purchasing guns, but who is selling them. ***We believe stronger penalties for weapons trafficking is a critical policy solution*** that must be taken up with vigor and urgency. ***Weapons of war, including assault weapons and high capacity ammunition, have no place in an urban context.*** There is large consensus for these policy changes, even among NRA members. It is critical that the Federal Assault Weapon Ban be real and free from loopholes and exclusions that allow gun manufacturers to skirt the law.

We recommend that our elected representatives continued to push for these reforms. We believe these common sense gun laws have wide agreement and help to restrict the flow of illegal weapons into communities.

3. Ladders to Opportunity

Barriers to reentry: There is a parable in the Christian tradition told by Jesus about a prodigal son, who after leaving his father's home in pursuit of rebellious and riotous living, returns home in search of restoration and redemption. In the same way that the father greets the prodigal son with grace, welcoming him with open arms, so too must we as Americans ensure that formerly incarcerated individuals are welcomed back into society and restored as full citizens, granting them their voting rights and affording them equal economic opportunity regardless of their past mistakes.

Currently, our brothers and sisters returning from incarceration are blocked from basic rights such as voting, working and receiving government aid, hindering their ability to care for their families. Changing policies can reduce recidivism and reunite families. Among other priorities, policymakers should require that employers remove the felony question from initial job applications, address policies that prevent the formerly incarcerated from accessing housing and other supportive services and restore the right to vote.





In **Florida**, returning citizens and clergy are leading the way towards rights restoration. They are working to amend state clemency policies that block more than 1.5 million formerly incarcerated citizens from voting.



In **Ohio** and **Louisiana**, policymakers are considering legislation that would remove the felony question from initial job applications for all state job positions. Several municipalities have gone further, requiring that all of their vendors also remove the felony question from initial job applications.

Minimum Wage: While removing barriers to employment such as removing the felony question from initial job applications is critical, we must also create meaningful employment and career opportunities for young men of color and their families.



In **Pennsylvania**, local clergy and community leaders led a successful campaign to nearly double the wages of primarily African-American and Latino service workers at the Philadelphia airport and other companies with city contracts.



In **Massachusetts**, faith-based organizations are leading the effort to raise the state's minimum wage to the highest in the nation and to provide paid sick days. Both are changes that will improve the lives of nearly one million workers in the state.

In order to truly create ladders of opportunity for young men of color who have been disproportionately caught up in the maze of the criminal justice system, we recommend:

- Enacting a Federal Ban the Box policy, similar to the recent policy decision to raise the minimum wage for workers on federal contracts. In order to begin to remove unwarranted barriers to employment facing formerly incarcerated returning citizens, the administration should follow the lead of 10 states and more than 50 cities and counties that prohibit inquiry into criminal history records on initial job applications. Ban the box should be applied to job applications used by federal contractors and subcontractors.
- Supporting Fair Hiring campaigns to persuade public and private sector employers to stop discrimination in hiring against people with criminal records.
- End the practice by Federal, state and local governments of contracting with private prison companies, such as CCA and GEO Corp, as this creates an insidious monetary incentive to increase the number of people behind bars.
- Support efforts to eliminate collateral sanctions against returning citizens, including the ability to obtain professional licenses, receive public benefits and exercise the right to vote.

Keeping those closest to the pain at the center of the Initiative:

While the above recommendations represent the policy and programmatic solutions clergy and community leaders will be organizing around over the next several years, we also believe that it is critical to keep those most directly impacted engaged in future policy conversations. In order to do this we propose that the administration convene a roundtable of formerly incarcerated individuals to discuss the impacts of incarceration as well as the solutions and policies needed to reduce incarceration rates among boys and men of color and to support those who are returning from incarceration. Many of our PICO leaders and allies who are formerly incarcerated have been unable to speak with administration officials given the hurdles of security clearance. In order for the administration to keep the promise of the initiative, those most directly impacted must be in the room.

V. Program

Through Lifelines to Healing, PICO is committed to (1) training tens of thousands of people on implicit bias and racial equity; (2) building teams led by people most directly impacted by violence and incarceration to work together to change local, state and federal policy; and (3) engaging a non-partisan constituency of voters who support fundamental changes to our criminal justice system.

Since January, PICO organizations have been holding large training sessions across the country that bring together African-American, Latino, Asian and Anglo community leaders for honest conversations about race and racism through workshops designed to build relationships and reduce bias. This work is helping local communities build support for policies to reduce racial disparities in education, gun violence and job opportunities.

This summer in Louisiana, Florida, Ohio, California, Pennsylvania and other states, we will launch Let My People Vote, a civic engagement campaign focused on reaching more than 1 million voters of color, single mothers and young voters, and engaging more than 500 congregations through the process. This will result in just over 200,000 Lifelines voters showing up at the polls on Election Day who have committed to supporting:

- common sense gun laws including universal background checks for all gun sales,
- public policies that reduce incarceration and incentivize the implementation of proven practices to reduce urban gun violence without incarcerating more young men of color,
- changes in immigration policy to stop unnecessary detentions and deportations,
- sentencing reform that stops the disproportionate incarceration of men of color
- implementation of policies including restorative justice and positive behavioral intervention and supports to dismantle the school to prison pipeline.





In preparation to launch one of the largest volunteer voter engagement programs in the country, we have planned to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Freedom Summer through 12 more trainings in key states, and the investment in raising the next generation of community organizers through identifying and training democracy fellows who will be charged with creating and training over 300 congregational teams based in congregations in Florida, Louisiana, California, Ohio, Colorado, New Jersey, and New York.

VI. Conclusion

Because these recommendations grow out of a series of listening sessions with people in communities torn by violence and mass incarceration, and reflect real testimonies and stories, we believe there is value in giving them serious consideration in the emerging field and continued work related to boys and men of color. Our listening continuously exposed a sense of urgency to create communities that are peaceful and filled with opportunities.

Along with this sense of urgency, we have consistently heard a powerful commitment to take responsibility for personal, communal and social transformation. We believe the large number of those individuals in our communities who seek to play by the rules and work hard vastly outnumbers the numbers of individuals who don't have that impulse. Asking our young men and boys of color to live within a structural system that tilts the playing field against them – in so many profound ways – is a moral contradiction in need of being named persistently in the spirit of righting and repairing that wrong.

The prophet Isaiah calls us all to “Learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, and plead for the widows!” May we all live up to the divine and moral call to be My Brother’s Keeper.

[1] “Problem Management: The Federal Role in Reducing Urban Violence” (2012) Ted Heinrich

[2] “‘Live Free Sabbath’ Focuses on Stopping Gun Violence,” by David Cobb, Chattanooga Times Free Press, March 17, 2014.

[3] The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness (2012) by Michelle Alexander