



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 29, 2014

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Commission Submits Recommendations to Executive on Preventing Violence and Promoting Community Mental Health in Allegheny County

PITTSBURGH – The Public Health Commission on Preventing Violence and Promoting Community Mental Health recently completed the work it was charged with in May of 2013, presenting a full report including recommendations and action steps to the County Executive for his consideration. The Commission recommended the creation of a Public Health Collaborative and also outlined action steps related to preventing violence and improving mental health in the community.

“I am very proud to have served on this Commission. I have always believed that we must sit down collectively, with every community, to address problems of violence, and we were able to do that with this Commission,” said Rev. Earlene Coleman, Co-Chair of the Commission. “McKeesport is just one community that has been touched by violence, but is a community that is also ripe for improvements that can be made with the implementation of many of the Commission’s recommendations.”

The 24-member Commission was charged with a mission of reducing violence and promoting positive mental health and community well-being in Allegheny County. Asked to provide recommendations and an implementation plan of what the County could do to help address these issues, the Commission went through a year and a half process during which the members reviewed existing research, looked at best practices, interfaced with professionals engaged in research, and surveyed programs related to the issues of violence and community mental health.

“Community violence is truly a public health issue. It is a major cause of premature mortality, particularly among young black men, and it is preventable. The impact that violence has on children, families and communities is devastating, including the mental health issues resulting from experiences of trauma. By looking at the problem holistically, we can identify and address the root causes and build safe and secure communities. Multiple sectors need to be involved to solve these issues at all levels,” said Dr. Karen Hacker, Co-Chair of the Commission. “The recommendations that we have proposed won’t solve all problems, but they provide a framework for all of us to work together to reduce violence.”

In addition to the creation of a Public Health Collaborative, the Commission also recommended the implementation of evidence-based programs to deter involvement in the criminal justice system, the training and support of community leaders working to reduce youth violence, a redesign of police strategies that reduce the likelihood of further acts of violence, the development of a template that can connect youth with appropriate social services, and the establishment of a protocol for school administrators when violence occurs.

“When I first approached the County Executive with this recommendation, my thought was simply that we had to do something to address the violence in our community. We could no longer sit by and allow our communities to be ripped apart without proactively working to find some solutions and putting together a

plan that will allow to address root issues,” said Rep. Ed Gainey. “While none of us believes that this report is a magic wand that will stop the violence in our communities, we do believe that working collaboratively and having resources to support these efforts can go a long way towards making things better.”

With respect to mental health, the Commission recommended the expansion of programming in Family Support Centers, the implementation of a Trauma Informed Care Model throughout the county, the promotion of programs that reduce stigma and cultural barriers for those seeking mental health services, advocating for hospitals to coordinate discharge plans with school personnel and parents/guardians, and to charge a short-term interdisciplinary group to develop an assessment tool for the behavioral health needs of students.

The 24-member Commission included elected officials, health professionals, community advocates, members of law enforcement and foundation representatives:

Pastor Earlene Coleman, Co-Chair	Dr. Karen A. Hacker, Co-Chair
Dr. Ralph L. Bangs	T. Rashad Byrdsong
Chief Ophelia Coleman	Valerie Dixon
The Honorable Wayne D. Fontana	The Honorable Ed Gainey
Richard Garland	Dr. Mary Ellen Smith Glasgow
Rev. Glenn Grayson	Mark P. Holtzman, Jr.
Kevin Jenkins	Magdeline Jensen
Marcia A. Martin	Beth Monteverde
Wilford Payne	Dr. Loren H. Roth
Joni Siff Schwager	Dr. Edith Shapira
Patricia L. Valentine	The Honorable Jake Wheatley
The Honorable Joseph K. Williams, III	Dr. Karl E. Williams

The full report, as well as many of documents and reports referenced therein, can be found online at: <http://www.allegHENYcounty.us/executive/PHCommission/index.aspx>.

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