

VIRTUAL FORUM

Novel Approaches to Gun Violence in St. Louis

September 9, 2020 | 3:30 p.m. Central

FOCUS
St. Louis



Violence, and particularly gun violence, has become a tragic hallmark of St. Louis summers. Traditional methods of violence reduction are not achieving the outcomes the community hoped for. New approaches, like Cure Violence, are gaining ground, but can be difficult to implement. Entrenched systems are slow to change, and funding for fresh approaches is scarce especially now. Despite this, some new initiatives are growing, and regional coordination is gaining ground. This forum brings together some of the leaders in this arena to discuss their initiatives, the difficulties of challenging established thinking on violence prevention, and opportunities to effectively address the issue and move the region forward.

Panelists:

Sal Martinez, Chief Executive Officer of Employment Connection

Marcus McAllister, International Trainer for Cure Violence Global

Serena Muhammad, Director of Strategic Initiatives at the St. Louis Mental Health Board

Poli Rijos, Initiative Lead for the Gun Violence Initiative at Institute for Public Health at WUSTL

Panelist Biographies



Marcus McAllister, International Trainer for Cure Violence Global

Marcus McAllister joined CeaseFire Illinois (the program delivery partner for Cure Violence in Illinois) as a Violence Interrupter, and after serving in the position of Violence Interrupter was promoted to Outreach Worker. Shortly thereafter, Marcus was promoted to Program Manager where he managed two sites with a combined staff of 14 people. After successfully managing these sites, Marcus was asked to interview for a position as one of only three

Cure Violence national trainers to help hire, train and set up replication Cure Violence sites throughout

the world. Today Marcus serves in that capacity and oversees sites in NY, Philadelphia, New Orleans and Trinidad.

Marcus was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. As a child, he found himself shuttling between Chicago and Los Angeles, shifting between parents. Marcus was introduced to the gang & drug culture as a result of living in two cities with high rates of violence in America. At the age of 18 Marcus decided to return to Illinois to finish his last year of high school. Unfortunately, Marcus's mother never got to see him graduate because at the age of 18, Marcus found himself in a federal court room in Chicago fighting a drug & gang conspiracy charge. He was ultimately found guilty and sentenced to 10 years in a federal prison. After serving 9 years of his ten year sentence, he was released in December, 1998. After release, he had difficulty finding permanent employment, wound up working odd jobs and narrowly avoided falling back to life on the street.

In 2005, Marcus was approached by CeaseFire Illinois (now known as Cure Violence) where his street background was considered an asset and his status as an ex-offender could actually be used to change lives for the good. He became a violence interrupter, a highly-trained community health worker, whose job was to stop shootings and killings using a public health behavior change approach. Since joining Ceasefire, Marcus has devoted his life to helping others change their lives, just as CeaseFire helped him to finally turn his own life around.

Marcus has excelled in his role as a national trainer for Cure Violence, and was selected to receive the WARRIOR award from the King of Kings Foundation in New York City in June, 2015. He was also awarded a New York State Assembly proclamation in recognition of his dedication and commitment to stopping violence in New York City, across the US and globally.

Marcus and his wife of 17 years live in the Chicago suburbs. They are parents of a 14-year-old daughter and a 10-year-old son. Marcus travels regularly and is a frequent guest speaker/presenter on the contagion of violence at events across the U.S.



Poli Rijos, Initiative Lead for the Gun Violence Initiative at Institute for Public Health at WUSTL.

Poli Rijos, MSW, LCSW, moved from Puerto Rico to St. Louis in 1999 to attend Washington University in St. Louis where she received both her undergraduate and master's degrees. Her experience as a Behavioral Health Consultant, Medical Social Worker, and Health Educator has provided her with a solid background in the development of wellness and prevention programming. She serves as the Center Manager for the Center for Community Health Partnership and Research at Washington University's Institute for Public Health. She also provides coordination to the university's Gun Violence Initiative. Poli is a proud member of the Steering Committee of Alive and Well STL and the Leadership Council of the St. Louis Area Violence Prevention Commission.



Sal Martinez, Chief Executive Officer of Employment Connection

Sal Martinez has established himself as a force in the comprehensive revitalization of the St. Louis region. Martinez who received his Bachelor of Science degree in Urban Education in 1994 from Harris-Stowe State College, was employed by the college as its Neighborhood Services Coordinator from 1996-1998. This experience had a profound effect on Martinez, as he developed a keen interest in assisting in the rebuilding of St. Louis's many disinvested neighborhoods. Martinez later accepted the position of executive director of the Grand Rock Community Economic Development Corporation. During his term with the agency, Martinez lead efforts to develop new mixed income housing and innovative economic development programming. While serving the Grand Rock agency, Martinez was approached by then-Mayor Clarence Harmon about serving on the board of commissioners of the St. Louis Housing Authority, and was quickly elected as the agency's youngest chairman ever. Early in Martinez's tenure as chairman, he lead planning efforts that lead to the submission of a HOPE VI proposal to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development on behalf of the Blumeyer public housing development. As a result, HUD awarded the St. Louis Housing Authority a \$35,000,000 grant to rebuild the deteriorated Blumeyer area into a new, vibrant, mixed income community now referred to as Renaissance Place at Grand. Martinez also began to work with senior staff members to chart a course to improve the agencies rating from troubled status its current status as an outstanding performer. In 2002, Martinez accepted the position of executive director with the Vashon/Jeff-Vander-Lou Initiative. Just prior to Martinez's arrival, the Initiative had received a \$5,000,000 grant from the Danforth Foundation in efforts to rebuild the city's Jeff-Vander-Lou neighborhood. Martinez quickly fashioned a multi-faceted series of activities which resulted in the development of new housing, economic development, safety and security and health related programming for Jeff-VanderLou residents. Martinez was later approached by local elected officials who represented neighborhoods in close proximity to the Jeff-Vander-Lou area. As a result, the Initiative soon began offering programming to over 10 neighborhoods in the City of St. Louis. In 2004 with his St. Louis Housing Authority term nearing its end, Martinez was re-appointed to a new term by current Mayor Francis Slay. Soon thereafter, Martinez worked with residents, developers and other stakeholders to submit another HOPE VI proposal to HUD on behalf of the Cochran public housing development. Once again, the St. Louis Housing Authority received a substantial grant in the amount of \$20,000,000 to rebuild the historic Cochran community, now referred to as Cambridge Heights. In 2004, Martinez departed the Vashon/Jeff-Vander-Lou Initiative to become the inaugural executive director of Community Renewal and Development, Inc., a community development corporation dedicated to the revitalization of North St. Louis. Under his leadership, "CRD" spearheaded the development of over three hundred units of mixed income housing in the St. Louis region in addition to fostering numerous human development programs for low and moderate income families. In 2012, Martinez co-founded the Minority

Contractor Initiative (MCI) which provided training, capacity building and technical assistance to minority (MBE) and women owned (WBE) and Section 3 construction firms in the St. Louis region. In January of 2017, Martinez was appointed the executive director of the North Newstead Association “NNA”. NNA (who had subsequently merged with CRD) is a recognized community development corporation that has developed over 125 units of affordable housing in addition to providing other services including; home repair assistance for low-income families, neighborhood safety training, neighborhood beautification services and landlord training. Martinez also created a new program which addresses food insecurity that impacts senior citizens residing in North St. Louis city. In the fall of 2018, Martinez was appointed the CEO of Employment Connection, which assists individuals with limited opportunities to self-sufficiency. The agency currently serves over 2,000 clients on an annual basis; including exoffenders, veterans and the homeless. Martinez was then appointed back to the board of directors of NNA, to serve as its Treasurer and was also reappointed to the St. Louis Housing Authority board by Mayor Lyda Krewson to serve as its Chairman. Martinez has received numerous community service awards from such entities as the; Human Development Corporation, Community Development Administration, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., Better Family Life, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., Metro Sentinel Journal, St. Louis Argus, St. Louis Housing Authority, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday Committee and the East-West Gateway Coordinating Council. Martinez also has received the Harris-Stowe State University Distinguished Alumni Award. He also serves on the boards of several civic organizations including; Community Builder’s Network, Central Patrol Business/Police Association and the Civil Rights Enforcement Agency. He is also a former board member of Grand Center, Inc., Big Brothers Big Sisters of Eastern Missouri and also a former president of both the Monsanto Family YMCA’s Board of Advisors and the Friends of Julia Davis Library.



Serena Muhammad, Director of Strategic Initiatives at the St. Louis Mental Health Board, & Managing Director, COVID Regional Response Team

As the Director of Strategic Initiatives for the Saint Louis MHB, Serena is responsible for regional and state-wide initiatives that focus on alleviating the social, educational, and health inequities that keep people and places from reaching their full potential. Her recent appointment as the Managing Director of the Regional Response Team, allows her to lend her expertise in system building to strengthen the crisis response infrastructure in the St. Louis region. Serena staffs the St. Louis Area Violence Prevention Commission and is active in several criminal justice reform efforts. She also provides oversight to the System of Care St. Louis, a federally funded initiative to improve access to behavioral health services for children with serious emotional disturbance and their families.

In addition to leading regional efforts, Serena provides support to other regional collective impact initiatives and provides technical assistance on building backbone infrastructure, using disaggregated data to support racial equity, authentic community engagement, and cross-sector collaboration. Serena was instrumental in helping the St. Louis County Department of Public Health secure a five-year \$4.7 million Federal Grant (ReCAST) to build resilient communities in the Promise Zone through a participatory budgeting process that supports youth engagement, violence prevention, mental health, peer support, and trauma informed care. Serena has also been responsible for helping to build capacity in the local philanthropic sector by convening funders to establish peer learning exchanges on issues including racial equity in grantmaking and funder collaboration. She also serves as the Founding Board Chair of Build Missouri Health - an affiliated nonprofit of the Missouri Foundation for Health.

Serena received her B.A in English from Xavier University in Louisiana and her M.P.P.A. from University of Missouri – St. Louis. She has received the following awards and recognition: Gateway Center for Giving Emerging Leader in Philanthropy Award, St. Louis American Young Leader Award, Focus St. Louis What’s Right with the Region Award, and the Bernard G. Gill Urban Service Learning Leadership Award.