

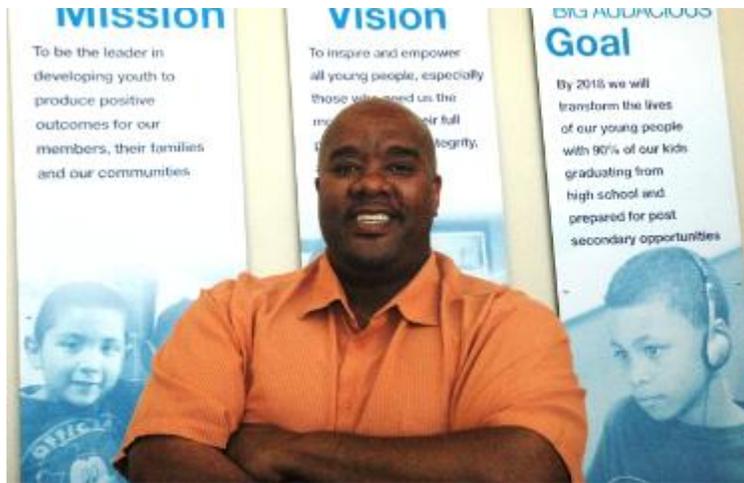
# The Capital City Hues/06/09/16/Boys & Girls Club and Partners



## ***Boys & Girls Club and Partners Release Community Action Plan***

### **The Bigger Problem**

Michael Johnson, CEO of the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County, was asked for assistance by some of the families of the recent shooting victims.



**By Jonathan Gramling**

**When the three shootings occurred on Madison's west and southwest sides this spring, it was almost a given that the ripples created by those tragedies would wash up on the shore of the Boys & Girls Club for it draws some of its membership from the communities in which the involved families live. And so Michael Johnson, the CEO of the Boys & Girls Club, acted, working with other community partners to formulate a 15-Point Community Action Plan to curb violence in Madison.**

**"Ninety-five percent of the folks who reach out to me are positive," Johnson said about his role. "I get positive feedback. But it is the five percent who feel this is not the role that the Boys & Girls Club should be playing. 'You should not be as vocal and visible as you are and allow other leaders to step up.' My argument is I have tried to do that and will continue to do that. But when I have some of the victim's families coming to me in**

this office saying, 'Can you pray with us,' I have to act. 'Can you help us bury our loved ones? Can you help us set up a GoFundMe?' I'm not calling these folks. People are calling us. And so in response, when you have an emotional connection to a community, I can't just sit back and not do anything."

Ever since the early 1980s when Madison experienced a large growth in its African American community in all socio-economic levels — but particularly lower-income families looking for opportunity and to escape the gang violence of other urban areas — any increase in violence in the Madison area's low-income neighborhoods has been attributed to "those people from Chicago." Johnson doesn't buy that argument.

"I think the bottom line is it all stems back to the racial disparities that exist in this community and the root causes behind that," Johnson said.

"So when you have young men who graduate from high school and don't go on to college and careers, they get involved in street activity.

Many of them lose hope. And as a result, you see some of the things that have happened over the last couple of weeks. The argument that

people are moving here from Chicago, we're all transplants from somewhere, all of us. We're all from somewhere. And once someone moves

here, they are citizens. People move to different cities to seek a better lifestyle for their families and there is nothing wrong with that. And so, I

think that as a community, if we are serious about attacking these issues, we have to invest in resources and being innovative and willing to

try new things and be willing to listen to people. And I think that is what needs to happen."

The 15-Point Plan involves a number of different initiatives, from gun buyback programs to hiring former gang members to do outreach in the streets to providing more employment and training programs for youth. While some of it would cost very little to implement, others like keeping neighborhood centers open until 10 p.m. on week days, midnight on Saturdays and some hours on Sunday would require an infusion of public and private resources.

"In the end, once the discussion goes, what happens now," Johnson asked. "People say, 'All you think about is the money.' You've got to think about the money. If you run a church, churches take an offering so they can keep the lights on. It's just like the Boys & Girls Club. I can't have kids graduate from high school and go to college if they don't have the resources in order to be able to do that. Other states in this country have promoted initiatives like this and some have started a sugar tax or a cigarette tax. You don't have

to raise property taxes. The state legislature could authorize a bill — and Republicans and Democrats have done this in different states — here in Wisconsin. After we came out with our 15-point plan, I've had several legislators reach out to me and one actually wants to craft a bill and propose it to the legislature. It might fail. It might pass. But at least it's going to be presented. We have to do something."

In Johnson's view, part of the solution is the Madison community becoming committed to giving young African American and Latino men hope and real opportunities over the long haul. Right now, Johnson feels that the bottom line is that people just don't care and the young men eventually give up hope. And that commitment must go beyond "one and done" if one member of a racial or cultural group doesn't do well in an employment situation and therefore individuals with the same socio-economic characteristics aren't given real opportunity in the future.

"What is sad about that is I've had different people, different races, different genders do well and some not do well," Johnson said. "And some people say when the first one doesn't work out to say, 'Well, we tried.' Well you try again. You keep trying. And if you are looking at my team here — granted we are a small operation, but we are a small business in the business of helping kids — we have a workforce of almost 200 people including consultants and tutors. But if you look at the diversity of my team, you will see Black, White, Muslim, young, old and LGBT. It's here. I want people who have different opinions, different voices to help advise me and also support our kids and know that our staff is reflective of the community that we serve. And that is why I feel we have been somewhat impactful in the work that we do, because we have embraced diversity and inclusion. We've hired young African American men and have taken chances on them. And I think this community has to do the same."

In some ways, if the community doesn't take a chance on them now, it can have negative consequences down the line as it relates to demographic shifts in the greater Madison area.

"A reporter called me yesterday and said, 'Well crime in Madison has actually gone down,'" Johnson related. "Absolutely, it has. With murders over the past 10 years, I think we had 11 in 2008 and we have five right now. For the most part, all crime has gone down. We are the fourth safest city in the country. But you can't ignore these issues and the demographics are changing in this community. It's already starting to

happen. You look at the school district, MMSD lost 400 students last year. Most of those students are going out to Middleton and Sun Prairie.

Then you lose your tax base. And when you lose your tax base, you can't support public safety and the non-profits in your community. Then you have to pull back resources. And then crime will go up. You have to begin to address these issues now to make sure that the proper resources are there and people feel safe living in this community. And that is my argument. People ask if we are over reacting. Anytime someone gets killed in our community, we should always overreact. I don't care who it is. The moment we become numb, that's when we are going to have a problem."

The recent economic recovery has been going on for eight years now and there is a correlation between the crime rate and economic growth and opportunity. When — not if — the national economy heads toward another recession, it will impact the existing economic and employment opportunities for young African American and Latino men, opportunities that are meager, at best, today.

"When recessions hit, people start losing their jobs and crime goes up," Johnson said. "Relatively speaking, we have it good. The unemployment rate is low for the majority of us. When those numbers begin to double down, you'll see crime goes up."

While it may seem far-fetched in a tight economic time when the legislature is dominated by individuals who see any increase in public tax dollars as a waste of taxpayers' money, Johnson sees some cause for hope.

"I would love to see the state legislature pass a bill," Johnson said. "I don't know where the money would come from, but I think they could do a sugar tax or something. Some people would lobby against it because the price of soda would go up an extra penny or two. If we could demonstrate that those investments are actually going to improve the quality of life for people in our community, let's roll with it and give it a try. I'm going to be working with State Representative Chris Taylor. I had a Republican reach out as well. So I'm going to talk to all of them. And Chris is researching right now whether or not it could be done right now in terms of the laws. Hopefully, people will get behind it and support some state reforms to support social justice programs collectively throughout the state."

Quite possibly, a social investment now, coupled with efforts to reduce state expenditures on corrections and warehousing people in prison,

**could mitigate problems that the city and state would experience in a future recession. If only we can learn from today's tragedies to create a better tomorrow.**