

Newsletter of the LCHR and BRCHR

Louisiana Council on Human Relations
And the
Baton Rouge Council on Human Relations

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Working Interfaith Network (WIN) Highlighted

This issue of the newsletter will highlight on-going and planned activities of the Working Interface Network (WIN), a faith-based organization in Baton Rouge. The information was provided by Rev. Alvin Herring who began serving as Executive Director in May 2011. Rev. Herring is an outstanding gentleman who brings many gifts and talents to this work. He is an ordained A.M.E. clergyman who has been called to the Ministry of Organizing. Rev. Herring has served as Executive Director of several non-profits and is very familiar with structures, polity, financial accountability and what takes to stay relevant.

Working Interfaith Network (WIN) Launches A Campaign To Stem The Tide of Youth Violence In Our City

On a hot summer day in June of last year, a half-dozen local ministers met in the mid-city office of the Working Interfaith Network to talk about the rising number of shootings and youth homicides in Baton Rouge. They shared their concerns, spoke about their frustrations and lamented the number of funerals they had preached in the last of couple of years, laying to rest young Black youths who had lost their lives on the streets of the toughest neighborhoods in our city.

- **There have been 208 murders in Baton Rouge in the last 3 years**
- **Baton Rouge ranks 7th nationally in murder rate per capita**
- **The murder rate in Baton Rouge is 6 times the national average for a city its size**

Collectively, they expressed that the efforts they had made over the last few years to speak to the youth of our city and support their parents in finding alternatives to the traumatic violence had not had the effect they desired. Some even felt that as their efforts had increased it seemed the shootings and murders just got worse. They were exasperated and at wits ends. Yet, they clung to a sense of optimism grounded in their faith and belief that the God of hope could reach the young and heal our community.

What was additionally remarkable about this group of ministers was their determination to band together and support each other as they searched for solutions and strategies that could be implemented by faith leaders and their congregations. They spoke about coming together to work collectively on the problem and to stand with one another in the process. And they were determined to search for

solutions that had a proven record of success and put the needs of the young people at the center of the effort. It was at that moment that Baton Rouge Lifelines/Ceasefire was born.

Baton Rouge Lifelines/Ceasefire is the local effort of the Working Interfaith Network – WIN – to introduce a nationally recognized, evidence-based youth homicide and violent crime reduction strategy to

what many experts are calling the “toughest problem” facing urban communities. Baton Rouge Lifelines/Ceasefire is part of a national campaign launched by PICO (People Improving Community Through Organizing).

Lifelines to Healing is an initiative of the PICO National Network marshaling local and national resources to combat the epidemic of violence, poverty, incarceration, recidivism and unemployment in communities of color. The Lifelines initiative seeks to empower local PICO federations to move boldly in addressing institutional systems, public policy, issues of access and opportunity and prevailing community norms that create and exacerbate the conditions of such extreme suffering for so many in urban America.

Lifelines seeks to channel local energy and local solutions into state-wide, regional and national policy remedies that can be successfully replicated and broadly applied to make our communities more just and able to work for all. Further, the Lifelines to Healing Initiative hopes to build the capacity of a generation of young people of color, who have been caught up in systems that have robbed them of their hope and their dignity and prepare them for a better life.

Lifelines to Healing encompasses many of the strategies of Operation Ceasefire, a highly acclaimed evidence-based, problem-solving approach to violent crime begun in Boston in 1996. Lifelines relies on effective community partnerships between grass-root community organizations, local clergy and faith institutions, law enforcement agencies, health and human services providers, and local government as it leverages community resources and partnerships to address the underlying causes of street violence and offers young people a “way out” of the vicious cycle of violence and despair. Beyond that, the Lifelines to Healing Campaign seeks to have an even broader impact on the communities where it is implemented. When effectively implemented, Lifelines points the way to system reform in critical areas such as employment,

education, housing, healthcare, youth and family services and civic engagement.

Boys and Men of Color, their families, and formerly incarcerated/re-entering populations is the entry point for our organizing work. We are working across the country to create local momentum for policy remedies that can ascend to state and national policy. Examples include:

1. Addressing employment barriers – Ban the box initiatives, regional economic studies, etc.;
2. Public Benefits – Achieve legislative victories related to restoring public benefits (i.e. food stamps, public assistance, etc, to drug offenders);
3. Public Housing – Reverse policies that create barriers for re-entering populations to access public housing;
4. School Violence – Implement Ceasefire related strategies in schools that can reduce violence, create restorative justice models and decrease school push-outs.
5. Create Healing Circles for communities and congregations
6. Protocols for mental health services

Important Elements of the Campaign

- Strong Clergy Engagement
- Intentional focus on young men of color
- Strong Voter Engagement Strategy that increases voter turnout and links policies with voting
- Intentional focus on economic policies and impact on families of color in targeted communities
- Large National Assembly of more than 5,000 Clergy and lay leaders in New Orleans, LA in the fall of 2011
- Intentional partnership with California Endowment, the Public Health Institute and Operation Ceasefire that provides guidance to targeted PICO Federations

What We've Done Thus Far

Lifelines has been under development for the last 24 months. PCIO has invested in its development at the national, regional, state and local federation level. A number of policy forums have been convened in individual communities across the country, regional gatherings and seminars have also taken place. A national PICO convening took place in Oakland California this past spring (Spring 2011) and was attended by local community leaders, clergy, laypersons, PICO federation leadership and national staff. The Lifelines Campaign was launched at the PICO National Clergy Gathering in New Orleans 2011 PICO Federations (and their respective cities) that have begun to implement the Lifelines Campaign:

- ACT (Sacramento)
- WIN (Baton Rouge, LA)
- BIC (Brockton, MA)
- BOCA (Berkeley)
- CBC (Modesto)
- CCISCO (Richmond)
- CCO (Kansas City)
- CCOP (Camden, NJ)
-
- COR (Union City)
- Detroit
- FACT (Flint, MI)
- FIA (Bakersfield)
- FIC (Fresno)
- Indianapolis
- LA Voice (Los Angeles)
- MICAH (New Orleans)
- PACT (Stockton)
- PACT (San Jose)
- PIA (East Palo Alto)
- PICO Florida
- POWER (Philadelphia)
- OCO (Oakland)
- SDOP (San Diego)
- SFOP (San Francisco)

Baton Rouge Lifelines/Ceasefire

From that hot day in June the Baton Rouge Lifelines/Ceasefire effort has grown steadily. What ensued after the initial brainstorming session has grown into a full-blown strategic effort. We have expanded the number of clergy and congregations involved in the effort. We have held multiple training sessions in the Lifelines model. And we have met with national experts and with a group of clergy who are launching a similar effort in New Orleans coordinated by our sister agency, the Micah Project.

In the last few weeks we have begun to organize a number of community walks – *Night Walks* – that are clergy-led walks through some of the neighborhoods in the city where shootings, drug dealing and violence have terrorized the community and left residents feeling afraid and unsafe.



Member of New Gideon Baptist Church pray and link arms before the Night Walk in the Valley Park area

During the walks, people hand out flyers letting the community know about the effort to confront the violence in the community and how they can get involved. We also use the opportunity to share information about the churches involved and their

interest in partnering with residents in making the community safer for all.

But perhaps the most important aspect of the walks is the opportunity to listen out to the voices of residents and engage them as partners in the process of improving the neighborhood and bringing opportunities for the young people as alternatives to life on the streets. In every encounter we stress our love for the youth and our respect for residents who have been trying on their own to improve their neighborhood.

Next Steps

The next steps in the effort will take place on Friday, February 24, 2012 where we will mount a public action with local, state and national law enforcement officials, local clergy and elected political officials to formally commit to work together with the broader community to implement Baton Rouge Lifelines/Ceasefire. The event, jointly hosted by WIN and NOBLE (National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives) is titled: *Lives In The Balance: A community Speaks Out Against Violence*

WIN Participates In A Community-Wide Transportation Equity Initiative

WIN, in conjunction with a broad-based, community-wide coalition of non-profit, business and faith institutions is participating in the launch of a local campaign to develop needed funding for public transportation expansion in the metro Baton Rouge area.

Currently, metro Baton Rouge struggles with one of the most outdated and under-funded public transportation systems - for a city its size - in the country. Baton Rouge lacks a comprehensive system that offers options to the riding public and lacks a dedicated funding source for its main service, CATS. The CATS system is plagued with old and hard to maintain buses, long wait times, escalating fares, poorly marked bus stops, inadequate distribution of bus shelters, and an outdated "spoke and hub" system that doesn't put the busses where the ridership needs them most.

Last year a special blue ribbon panel of local leaders, CATS riders, and non-profit agencies came together to

research the problem and make a number of recommendations to improve the system. Out of that work came the Baton Rouge Transit Coalition (BRTC). The BRTC has the following mandate:

"The Baton Rouge Transit Coalition (BRTC), a diverse group of citizens and stakeholders focused on improving the quality and sustainability of transit in the Capital Region, was announced today. The coalition will strive to advance the recommendations put forth by the Blue Ribbon Commission on East Baton Rouge Transit earlier this year. The BRTC will be comprised of six committees and will be guided by an 18-member steering committee. "Our committees are open for participation. We're committed to reaching out to various stakeholders and engaging in genuine conversation about transit," says BRTC chair Pastor Raymond Jetson. "We will align and adapt when necessary, and are open to negotiate, but we won't walk away or give anything less than our best effort for improving transit in Baton Rouge."(CPEX Website: <http://cplex.org/news/official-formation-of-the-baton-rouge-transit-coalition>.)

Some of the findings of the blue-ribbon panel:

Inefficiency of System & Route Design

- Long wait times & time consuming transfers
- Unpredictable and unreliable on-time performance
- Existing service area not always based on ridership potential
- Poor "internal connectivity"

Public Perception

- Perception is that current transit system is not an option for most citizens
- Low per-capita ridership compared to peer cities

Transportation Design & Amenities

- Shelters are in poor condition or do not exist
- Poor and uninformative signage at bus stops

Funding: Structure & Amount

- Absence of dedicated funding source makes Baton Rouge a national outlier, limits system expansion, and risks losing federal match funding and grants

Governance

- Accountability: need for single transit entity responsible for leadership, vision & performance

(Blue Ribbon Commission on East Baton Rouge Public Transit, 2011)

The CATS system is seeking a 10.6-mil property tax increase to the Baton Rouge, Zachary and Baker areas that would generate roughly \$18 million a year, more than doubling CATS \$12 million current budget, paying for 18 additional routes, 25 new buses, new bus stop housing, express routes and GPS tracking in each bus. (wbrz.com, January 2012)

Our Next Steps

WIN will be hosting 2 transportation forums and community engagement sessions to mobilize the community and help them better understand the issues relative to public transportation. These sessions are scheduled for Saturday, March 17, 2012 and Thursday, March 22, 2012. The location for both sessions will be announced at a later date.



Our Mission

Working Interfaith Network (WIN) is a nonpartisan grassroots coalition of congregations and faith institutions working to bring innovative solutions to the problems facing the Greater Baton Rouge community. WIN builds community leaders and trains them to take leadership that puts their faith and their values to work in the public arena in pursuit of "justice for the common good." WIN works to ensure that all people, particularly the most vulnerable, have a stake in creating their community's future.

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