

Written testimony submitted to the Connecticut General Assembly H.B. 6659- “An act concerning the state budget for the biennium ending June 30, 2025

Distinguished members of the Appropriations Committee, Chairs Osten and Walker, Vice Chairs Exum and Hartley and Ranking Members Berthel and Nuccio:

My name is Fr Michael Johnson, OFM and I am the Executive Director of the Franciscan Center for Urban Ministry and the Hartford parish of St Patrick St Anthony. In addition, I am a member of the Greater Hartford Interfaith Action Alliance, or GHIAA. GHIAA is a network of over 50 diverse congregations across the theological spectrum working together for justice. Thank you for the opportunity to offer this written testimony.

I am testifying in support of a \$20 million dollar allocation over 2 years to support urban community violence intervention and prevention organizations across the state that are on the front lines to bring down the level of gun related violence in our inner cities. Although this amount was not specifically included in the Governor’s budget, it is necessary and will save lives. Street outreach programs such as Hartford Communities That Care, Mothers United Against Violence, and Compass Youth Collaborative are associated with up to 37 percent reductions in gun injuries. However, funding for gun violence intervention and prevention in the state of Connecticut is not consistent enough to sustain these organizations and move the needle to end gun violence. Therefore, GHIAA is seeking funding from the state to support the work gun violence prevention and intervention organizations are doing on the ground, on the front lines.

The Connecticut Commission on Community Gun Violence Intervention and Prevention was tasked with distributing two million dollars to prevention and intervention organizations across the state. This is admirable, but it is not enough.

This past year, our then forty-nine GHIAA communities conducted hundreds of house meetings where we brought together groups of people from our faith communities to have deep conversations about their lives and their communities. We discussed pressing concerns such as What kept them up at night? Where did they find themselves struggling? What was keeping them and their families from thriving? For our communities in Greater Hartford, especially those in the city of Hartford, concern over gun violence was a recurrent theme. Folks in these communities had lost loved ones to gun violence, had lost children to gun violence, feared for their children when they left home because of gun violence. In the Christian scriptures, St Paul reminds us that we are all part of the one body and when one part of the body is hurting, the whole body suffers. Because this is a major concern for our brothers and sister in urban areas, it needs to be a major concern for all Connecticut. These are not just their streets, these are our streets. These are not just their children that have been lost or are at risk. These are our children. Then the question becomes how can we effectively address this issue.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells his disciples, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.” Some parts of this sermon are confusing like “Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth”. But the part about the peacemakers being blessed and a blessing, I think we can all agree on that. This past November, I listened to two of those peacemakers speak at an interfaith prayer breakfast, Andrew Woods of Hartford Communities That Care and Br Carl Harwick. They and other organizations like Mothers United Against Gun Violence have been doing violence work for decades. They have walked through the trauma with families who have been victims of violence. Some of their work involves calming gang violence to prevent escalation. Some organizations are doing prevention work, helping young people make better choices about their lives. Providing them with adequate funding is a proven way to reduce gun violence. They are the people on the ground, they are the people who understand from years of experience the problem and have a vision for a way forward. It is for this reason that GHIAA is supporting this allotment of twenty million dollars to reduce gun violence. This allocation will enable small organizations like these that rely largely on donations and grants from private foundations for their funding to get through the year and expand to meet the needs of the community. This financing will allow them to attract and retain people that are going to make the difference in these neighborhoods and to these families. Right now they are very short staffed and in danger of burn-out.

A budget is a moral document. It reflects our values, what we care about, by what expenditures we prioritize. We prioritize so many things in this state. Shouldn't peace be one of them? Shouldn't we work to keep all our children safe because, for us as Catholics, whether we live in West Hartford, Glastonbury, Newington, or Enfield, these are children at risk in urban areas are our children? They are the future of this state in this country. To provide them with a safe environment is what our faith calls us to.

As a Catholic Franciscan community of faith, our priorities are justice, peace and care for creation. Providing this funding will allow us to support peacemakers in the city that we call our spiritual home, as well as other urban areas throughout our state. Blessed are the Peacemakers. Blest are we the people when peacemakers have the funding to do their work, God's work.