



Ministerial Statement

By

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Gang Violence Reduction Team Response to Heroes Weekend Incidents

June 19th 2020

Mr. Speaker, I rise this morning to provide this Honourable House with an update on the Ministry of National Security's Gang Violence Reduction Team's response to the unfortunate violent and antisocial events over the National Heroes Day Holiday weekend.

Mr. Speaker, what was meant to be a weekend that celebrated our islands heroes of progression, equality and human rights, instead was marred by violence and death. On Friday, there was a major stabbing during daylight hours in the parking lot of Heron Bay Marketplace. Investigations into that incident are ongoing.

Mr. Speaker, most of us will have seen the videos circulating on social media of a large group of young people at John Smith's Bay engaging in

serious violent behavior. The BPS has already made several arrests, and the investigation continues. Later that same night, there was a firearm incident in the East End which left one man recovering from a gunshot wound at King Edward Memorial Hospital. Forensic evidence at the scene is assisting police with the investigation.

Mr. Speaker, the violence of the weekend continued into Sunday, culminating with the fatal stabbing of a 22 year old young man. I extend my deepest condolences to the family and friends of Mr. Joshua Rowse. Another Bermudian family is now in mourning because of senseless violence. Indeed, the entire community is in mourning.

Mr. Speaker, while we continue to battle COVID 19, the past few months have not been easy for any of us and I hasten to add that we are still not out of the woods. The events occurring this past weekend are manifestations of some of the psychological effects of this pandemic. Research has shown that chronic social isolation increases the risk of social and mental health challenges. Social isolation has an impact on the body and the mind; it is known to be a contributing factor to a surge of depression, anxiety and substance abuse. Some psychologists have noted that a surge of verbal and domestic violence, child abuse, sexual abuse, murder, robbery and cybercrimes can be expected as a result of the social

isolation induced by pandemic restrictions. The ramifications of COVID 19 will go further than a hit to the economy. COVID 19 is a storm that we must weather with collective effort.

Mr. Speaker, having said that, I must emphasize one point. That is, bringing harm to others and instilling fear in the public will not be accepted under any circumstance. We will continue to push back against those who insist on bringing violence and disorder to our community. The chain snatchings and thefts that are a precursor to the nefarious behavior and violent events we have witnessed this past weekend must stop. The country will not tolerate it.

Mr. Speaker, following times of crisis and events as witnessed this past weekend, many people will look to place blame for the ills of our society. There will no doubt be questions about the efficacy of the Gang Violence Reduction Team. What is the team doing? Where are the results?

Mr. Speaker, I want to reassure the public that the Gang Violence Reduction Team is working around the clock. The work of the Gang Violence Reduction Team is important and cannot be understated. This Government and the Gang Violence Reduction Team remains focused on coordinating resources to best address the issues; and despite the events

of last weekend, we are seeing results through our various programs and initiatives.

Mr. Speaker, following the past weekend's events, the Gang Violence Reduction Team's Coordinated Crisis Response Unit (CCR) was activated to support the community through emotional hardship. The public may recall that the unit is set up to assist family members, relatives or witnesses of violent incidents through times of crisis. The CCR Unit was deployed to the hospital several times this weekend, and also made home visits to support the families affected by the violence. The Coordinated Crisis Response Unit has systems, structures and trained staff in place to provide immediate emotional support to the affected families, and to provide immediate triage in order to connect families with long-term support through counselling services and support groups.

Mr. Speaker, in order to lower community tensions the GVRT further increased its focus on Street Level Outreach. Throughout the shelter in place, curfew and other emergency measures, the GVRT continued to visit targeted neighborhoods and build connections and relationships with at risk young people.

Mr. Speaker, the GVRT provides intervention through the formation of trust-based relationships that serve to deescalate and mediate tensions when necessary. The Outreach Workers have been out in our community directly mediating tensions and conflicts between individuals. The work is high touch, highly confidential and sensitive. It involves directly working with persons who are currently involved or have been directly impacted by gang violence. It is not appropriate for the Government to provide detail on the particulars of this outreach work in order to protect the confidentiality and security of those individuals willing to participate. The public can be assured however, that the outreach work of the GVRT connects many at-risk individuals to necessary neighborhood resources and long term case management. The goal is to steer these young men towards pro-social activities by providing a range of opportunities for change.

Mr. Speaker, The closure of schools as a result of COVID 19, and the impending summer holiday has removed young people from their normal, and at times preventative, social structures. Without the regularity of sports clubs, extracurricular activities, afterschool jobs, weekend jobs and most other social structures, there has been a surge of gatherings of sizeable groups of youth milling around in various neighborhoods. Consequently, there has been an increase in chain snatchings, theft and robberies amongst youth.

Mr. Speaker, to combat this, the GVRT has been conducting increased check-ins with youth who were previously in high school prevention programs; coordinating with the schools' management teams; and connecting with youth and families through WhatsApp calls, Zoom calls, and home visits where necessary.

Mr. Speaker, the GVRT has coordinated support for several families in need by connecting them to weekly food and basic needs support, court support, and to social assistance where required. Since the GVRT cannot access young men in the school setting, the team will continue to visit neighborhoods and encourage the young men they come across.

Mr. Speaker, Prior to Covid 19 the GVRT Coordinator, and the Outreach and Prevention Manager lead a mutli-agency effort to violence reduction and were hard at work. The team operates from a coordinated plan to tackle gang violence and anti-social behavior through a series of strategically designed prevention, intervention and rehabilitation programmes and initiatives. Our continuum of services focuses on Prevention, Community Engagement, Outreach, Intervention and Collaboration.

Prevention Programs

The team was working the administration and student services teams at Cedarbridge Academy and Berkeley Institute to provide support services for at-risk students. The team was visiting the school daily providing Incident Management Support; Mediation Services; Individual Student Support Sessions; and Group Sessions. Through these ongoing interactions, the Gang Violence Reduction Team along with other service providers are able to help these students realize their self-worth and see the many opportunities of self-improvement available to them.

Mr. Speaker, This team's involvement in young people does not start at the high school level. The Gang Resistance Education and Training Programme (G.R.E.A.T.) was rotating through all public Primary 6 and Middle 1 year levels in collaboration with the Bermuda Police Service and H.M Customs. I am pleased announce that several hundreds of young people were able to complete the program pre COVID 19.

The GVRT, Targeted Primary Prevention Initiative, Elliot Kings Group and Victor Scott Hype Kings. We have 32 young kings between the ages of 10-12 fully engaged experiential based sessions, that focus on building self-confidence; self-esteem, positive relationship building skills; teamwork; and building resilience.

Adult Outreach and Intervention

Mr. Speaker, Outside of the school Initiatives the GVRT are focused on lowering community tensions the team also focuses on Prison Outreach, Street Level Outreach, Mediations, Court Support, Negotiations, Incident Management Support and Restorative Justice.

Another GVRT Redemption Farm Initiative has provided 10 young men successful engagement in the program for 28 weeks. Which included Personal Development Sessions, Case Management Sessions, Farming Sessions, Life Skills Workshops, Counselling and other connection to other social support services. The GVRT are now working with the trainees to with the goal of seeing each of them transition into full-time education and employment opportunities.

Community Engagement

Mr. Speaker the Gang Violence Reduction Team relationship with community partners and community underscores much of the important work that they do. The team continues to create and partner with community Initiatives such as Mothers on a Mission (MOM) Bermuda, the Clergy Working Group, Living Legends Community Group, Interagency Gang Enforcement Team, Coordinated Case Management Systems, and Coordinated Crisis Response Team. The GVRT attend

many community meetings, community events and provide many Community Presentations.

Mr. Speaker, at this time I would like to publicly announce the 2020 Live Love Life Art Competition Winners in partnership with The Masterworks Foundation. An initiative that was a part of the anti-violence campaign encouraging the community to stand up and express themselves through art to fight against violence in our communities.

I would like to congratulate Austin Dowling's work "He Will Rescue Them," a haunting painting of a boy gazing through smashed glass, won the overall prize of \$2,000. Further winners included, Keino Lambert winning for Best Traditional Painting, Je-Shae Pace for Best Mixed Media piece, Legend Stevenson for Best Digital piece, Best Student 16 and Under was won by MSA student Kelsey DeSilva, and Student 12 and Under was won by Eshe Holdipp-Lynch of West Pembroke School. Alshante Foggo took home the People's Choice award for her piece, "I Trigger Love".

Mr. Speaker, The effects of the COVID 19 pandemic have necessitated that the Gang Violence Reduction Team Strategic Plan around its programs to successfully reach the needs of our community.

To that end, the team will immediately commit to:

1. Increase the number of Outreach Workers and Community Case Managers;
2. Increase Street Outreach; and
3. Double the number of available placements in the existing Work Placement and Mentoring Program this summer.

Mr. Speaker, the events of the past weekend are not just a Government problem. This is a community problem. Statistically, violence and criminal activity increases during the summer months. With the added anxieties caused by COVID 19, we must all do everything that we can to insure that we do not return to the crime levels experienced in previous years. The Gang Violence Reduction Team continues to make positive influences with our at-risk population, however this work alone will not save our young men.

Mr. Speaker, we as a community know these young men. They are our family members, our brothers, our cousins and our friends. I implore all of us who love this country to continue to support the GVRT through meaningful assistance with the work required to rid our home of gang culture and senseless violence. The COVID 19 Pandemic has been a

challenging time for Bermuda and our at-risk young people have not been excluded from that challenge. We need to collectively support them.

Mr. Speaker, it is vitally important that parents and families continue to be involved with their sons and daughters. Parents should engage with their children often. Ask them how they are doing and be involved in their day to day life. Parents and families must be aware of the social gatherings their children are attending. Seeking out activities and events that you and your children can enjoy together will help to strengthen family relationships, thereby reducing the likelihood of gang involvement and antisocial behavior.

Mr. Speaker, our churches must continue to look for ways that they can support their communities outside of the church walls, specifically to engage with young people. Throughout COVID 19 recovery, sports clubs must develop strategically designed programs that engage displaced young people, diverting them away from anti-social activities. Members of the community should seek to ally with helping agencies such as The Family Centre, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Bermuda, The Coalition for the Protection of Children or any of our other numerous charities in providing meaningful programs and social interactions for our young people.

Mr. Speaker, as the economy begins its recovery from COVID 19, business owners are encouraged to create summer internship and mentoring opportunities for these young Bermudians. The causes of violence in our community are multi-faceted and therefore require a solution that can only be found with an all-hands-on deck community approach. The Government and the Ministry of National Security are working endlessly to combat the social ills that we are faced with. We are calling for peace, calm, collectivity and the support of the community in order to defeat both COVID 19 and senseless violence.

Thank you, **Mr. Speaker**.