



MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

BY THE MINISTER OF NATIONAL SECURITY

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INTER-AGENCY GANG TASK-FORCE UPDATE

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Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to update this Honourable House on the work of the Inter-Agency Gang Task Force and to set the tone for the next phase of our work. In the time since the increase in violent crime in Bermuda, this Government has led the fight to win back our communities and to promote alternatives to the gang lifestyle. Using the various agencies under the public umbrella, hard working professionals in the helping professions have devoted considerable time and effort to addressing the issues that present themselves as symptoms of the gang culture.

Mr. Speaker, the formation of the Inter-agency Gang task Force has brought together a cross-ministry working group at various levels – strategic, enforcement and community with the sole aim of addressing the problems of anti-social behaviour and gang-related violence.

This effort continues to be successful. The sharing of information and the cohesive strategy, particularly around enforcement has yielded positive results. Operation Nightlight, where the Police and officers from the Department of Court Services aggressively monitor compliance with probation and parole conditions is one such success story.

Mr. Speaker, I am extremely grateful to US Consul General Shelton for all that the US Consulate Office has done to assist Bermuda since the formation of the Inter-agency Gang Task Force. We are particularly grateful for the opportunity provided by the US- sponsored Volunteer Visitor Exchange programme. This initiative allowed for a cross-ministry working group at various levels to witness firsthand the best practices and successes in other jurisdictions.

Building on these successes is the important next step for the Task Force. Where do we go from here? Sharpening the focus for what can be a broad and varied set of problems is never easy. However, in these six areas, Mr. Speaker, we provide a platform for continuing to break down the gang culture and building our communities.

- 1. We must continue to support the Police's aggressive, targeted prevention and enforcement actions.**

If we are to depend upon the Police to strongly enforce the laws of the land and to meet a challenge which threatens our way of life, our responsibility as citizens is to support the lawful exercise of their authority and to encourage people of all ages to respect their work and to play their part in bringing an end to this violence.

Mr. Speaker, throughout my visit to Boston last December, each expert highlighted that the Police cannot do it on their own. There must be a unified community effort.

The successful prosecutions of those persons who have chosen this life of gang behaviour are a testament to the commitment of the Police to match the public's desire for justice with their action as the front line of law enforcement. For this they must be applauded.

2. We must advance the proposal for additional sentencing tariffs for offences committed as part of or in furtherance of unlawful gang activity.

Mr. Speaker, I have already indicated that I favour a sentencing regime that permits a judge to take account of the circumstances in which certain offences have been committed and to add an additional term of imprisonment where those circumstances involve unlawful gang activity.

We cannot treat these offences as ordinary and our criminal justice system should have the means by which to reflect public sentiment and the accepted detrimental effects on our country at the sentencing phase.

3. Prioritize gang mediation

Mr. Speaker, intelligence indicates that gangs have leaders and some structure. With that in mind we have followed best practice from other jurisdictions and have set in motion the means by which to bring these individuals together. Bermuda is too small for there to be warring factions separated by parish or neighbourhood boundaries. In some cases, families are split by this defined affiliation to gangs.

A dialogue must be cultivated and if what we hear is to be believed, in some cases the issues that divide these young men can be resolved through the mediation of an honest broker leading a full discussion.

Mr. Speaker, this effort is by definition undertaken away from the glare of the cameras but it is important for the community to know that this Government is actively facilitating this initiative.

4. Identify gang signals early

Recognizing the crucial role to be played within our education system, my colleague the Honourable Member, the Minister of Education joined with me in sponsoring the Paper that was discussed recently by Cabinet.

Mr. Speaker, we must equip our teachers and educators with the know-how to identify “red flags” in our children so that no opportunity to prevent a descent into the gang culture is missed. Simply put, the school intervention effort must be: **identify, prescribe, intervene and follow-up.**

5. Dedicated case management leading to positive lifestyle change

Mr. Speaker, a key element of transforming lives and ensuring at-risk individuals stay on the right path is effective case management. Our social assistance framework is consumed with meeting the needs presented by many problems in our society. However, with my colleague the Honourable Member, the Minister of Youth, Families and Sports, I intend to urge a priority tasking for case management in support of gang prevention and where possible a renewed focus on wider familial issues in this area.

As part of this action we must establish a family assessment service to carry out a comprehensive assessment of the needs and challenges of multi-problem families in high risk neighbourhoods, leading to an intervention/service plan to address those identified needs. Concurrently, we will address overlaps and gaps in existing approaches by agencies, aligning their work to a critical continuum: **gang prevention, gang intervention and gang suppression.**

6. Increased support and demands of sports clubs/community clubs

Mr. Speaker, if communities are to be the building blocks of success in this effort against the gang lifestyle, we must empower central points of the community and position them to be positive factors in the lives of all our citizens. There is no need to re-invent the wheel in this area. An untapped resource exists in our local community sports clubs but we must partner with them to meet the needs.

Mr. Speaker, the Government cannot do it all and with my colleague responsible for sport we intend to innovatively encourage the private sector, both local and international, to adopt clubs in support of much needed infrastructure improvements. We cannot claim to be a cosmopolitan and sophisticated jurisdiction and not have sports facilities that meet minimum standards of comfort and quality. Simple things like lights, family friendly design, varied activities and the like will encourage positive activities at sites that already have contributed so much to our community.

In the first instance, the public/private partnership must be one that offers specific skills and administration to our clubs so that they are well positioned to encourage the donor community to rally to their cause.

Mr. Speaker, in this same vein, local community leaders must encourage community based projects that improve surroundings and provide positive social networking opportunities. This will build an atmosphere of inclusion, providing the familial-style base, the absence of which lures some into the gang lifestyle.

Mr. Speaker, much has been said in the community about Operation Ceasefire. I support the programme and already steps have been taken to implement it in Bermuda. I think it is important to point out that the Ceasefire programme uses community policing and relationship building with several agencies as the means by which to bring gang members into closer, positive contact with these entities. Ceasefire confronts gang members and pointedly describes the consequences of their destructive behaviour and compliments these warnings with strong enforcement.

Mr. Speaker, the series of programmes that undergird Ceasefire by and large exist in our community already and with the all-inclusive approach I have outlined today we are well on our way to the

coordinated effort required to meet the challenges of this kind of criminal activity.

Importantly, Mr. Speaker, regular public updates are a feature of building confidence in the ability of the agencies of Government to address these challenges. Today I have set out the broad approach to these issues being undertaken by the Government and where we seek to engage the assistance of other sectors of the community.

Mr. Speaker, I do not use the term “national security” lightly. It indicates that this is a national imperative and a national priority that transcends the cut and thrust of the political arena. Our efforts in this area are non-stop. Every day is committed to drawing upon each of the agencies involved to play their part in inspiring lifestyle change leading to safer communities for all. The Government is leading in this effort and we will continue to support the work of the Inter-Agency Gang Task Force and commend the public officers who have demonstrated their commitment to the cause.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

