

State Senator



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District 4



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## ***Seven-Night Police Beat Experience Reinforces Critical Need for Early Childhood Education***

It's been an eventful month since I last wrote. First, we had our biggest event of the year, our 3rd Annual Basketball Tournament and Community Fair at Fairground Park, attended by 2,000+ people and over 70 non-profit organizations. Second, after seven all-night police ride-alongs, I began to see crime in the City through new eyes. The two are related, even if I didn't realize it at first.

Because of the stagnant economy, a lack of job opportunities, a stubbornly high dropout rate that leaves many unprepared for the jobs that do exist and lacking the social networks to find them, the widespread availability of handguns, and the nihilism of some who have seen far too much violence in their short lives and don't expect to live past 30, the crime rate in some neighborhoods has risen sharply this summer. My law-abiding constituents have suffered a great deal; the ten neighborhoods home to the most murders this year all lie in my Senate district.

After marching with 50,000 other men on June 1st in a show of unity against this violence, I felt compelled to seek a better of understanding of crime in the City: how and why it happens, what we're doing to address it, and how we can improve our efforts. So one night at a community meeting, I asked an officer if I could join him on his beat, and he accepted. We began in a relatively safe area, the 2nd Police District, covering the City's southwest corner. It was quiet for a few hours, and I asked if we could check out a higher-crime area. We did, and soon stumbled upon a minor incident. By the end of the shift, I wanted to see what a whole night of action was like.

Two nights later, I visited the North Patrol, which covers the 6th, 7th, and 8th Police Districts and is home to several neighborhoods that have experienced a sharp rise in violent crime. At the outset I asked the officer I accompanied if there were any ground rules. He asked if I'd signed the waiver releasing the Department from liability if I were

**injured or killed.**

**"Sure," I replied.**

**"Then do whatever you want," he said, in somewhat more colorful terms. I laughed uneasily.**

**From the minute we began, our car was in demand. Over the course of this night and the next several that I spent in squad cars, we saw domestic disturbances, stabbings, robberies, car thefts and other property crimes, prostitution, drug dealing, and gunshots fired (but thankfully no murders).**

**When the wire crackled, we perked up. The dispatcher's description did not always resemble what was actually happening at the scene, thus the mix of adrenaline and anxiety upon arriving at some stops. In no instance did I see an officer display anything but professionalism. I saw empathy as they comforted victims, patience as they listened to witnesses, and even-handedness as they dealt with suspects. Particularly trying were the victims and witnesses who painted vivid portraits of a crime, but refused to name the offender. "Snitches get stitches," the saying goes, and unfortunately for both police investigators and future victims, besieged law-abiding citizens living under fear of retribution sometimes tacitly abet the criminals that terrorize their neighborhoods. On my last night at 4 a.m., an aunt had reported that her nephew had stolen a federal government tax rebate check, \$20, and a bag of marijuana from a safe in her apartment. Apparently she missed the irony of asking the police to return the drugs to their rightful owner.**

**Children streamed out of a 1st floor unit as we pulled into the parking lot. Two women (sisters, we gathered) berated each other, one accusing her nephew of thievery and threatening him. As usual, there were several different accounts of what had happened, none consistent with any other. The grandmother circled the periphery in a sort of fugue state, talking to herself but not the officers, lamenting her family's strife.**

**Several kids snuggled in the backseat of a nearby car, wondering what was going on. I thought about how scared I'd have been, as a 6 year-old, had my family's house been surrounded by cops at 4 a.m. I asked one of the kids if he was OK. He looked at me with a blank smile, numb to the screaming, the uniformed men, the squad cars' mesmerizing lights. "I just wanna go back to sleep," he said.**

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**I met former Police Chief Joe Mokwa about 2 years ago and I asked**

him how we could reduce crime in the City. I expected he would ask for better equipment, higher salaries, and more beat officers.

"Early childhood education," he said. "We've gotta get these kids ready to read by kindergarten. The ones that can't read when 3rd grade starts end up across the street." He nodded out the window to the city jail.

I'm still reflecting on all this, trying to figure out what we should do differently. I developed a deep respect and appreciation for the work our officers do every day to protect us, and I understand some of their frustrations in a way I didn't before. Some are frustrated at a federal government that spends hundreds of billions patrolling Iraq but is so strapped that it cut federal grants to help police patrol our cities, forcing most officers to ride solo through even the most dangerous neighborhoods. Others are frustrated at department policy prohibiting officers from chasing stolen cars, allowing joyriding kids to mock them as they speed away. (The potential danger to innocent bystanders outweighs the potential benefit of recovering the vehicle.) And many are frustrated at some parents who have abdicated their parental duties and left children to be raised in the street, which teaches that only violence can settle scores.

But Chief Mokwa was onto something: it's cheaper to educate than incarcerate. And so I return to our youth, trying to help them find fun, constructive ways to be involved in their community. Our Basketball Tournament/Community Fair is one small attempt to do so. Nearly 100 teams played 3-on-3, and other kids enjoyed tennis and soccer lessons, face painting, and arts and crafts instruction. Volunteers distributed new books, school supplies, dental care kits, and raffled off \$100 gas cards. People signed up to vote and to mentor children. Experts offered information on job training, foreclosure prevention, fire safety, parenting, nutrition, literacy and library services, and preventive health. The City health department tested for lead poisoning, high blood pressure, and HIV, while trained professionals provided chiropractic and optometric exams. People ate, drank, and danced.

I want to thank the volunteers who helped referee, set up tents, tables, and extra hoops, and manage tournament registration. Thanks also to Laborers Locals 42, 53, and 110, who grilled and served food, and to the firemen and policemen, the City Parks and Recreation division, St. Louis Public Schools, our many sponsors, and my crack staff who made it all possible.

For me, the enduring image of the day was seeing the policemen in the park that day playing football and laughing with a group of teenagers. The kids' sullen looks I had seen so frequently during the ride-alongs

were gone. Instead I saw joyful smiles of kids being cared for, respected, positively engaged by adults in uniform. I know football isn't the answer to our crime problem. But seeing this - and learning about the officers who, with Alderman Greg Carter, started a midnight basketball league where they play with kids from the neighborhoods - gave me hope. Hope that our City's youth can trust and respect and even enjoy getting to know our police officers. And hope that this will lead to more dialogue, more crimes solved, and fewer committed in the first place.

Of course, we also need help in more urgent and concrete ways. We need funding to enhance dropout-recovery programs, add slots in after-school programs, and reintegrate ex-offenders into society. We have successful programs in the City right now in all of these areas, and I hope to translate the experiences I had into effective Senate floor arguments on behalf of these and other innovative programs.

Because next summer, I want to attend fewer vigils and more graduations.

Best,

*Jeff*

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