



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Bill Perkins

Public Policy Choices and Gun Violence in Public Housing

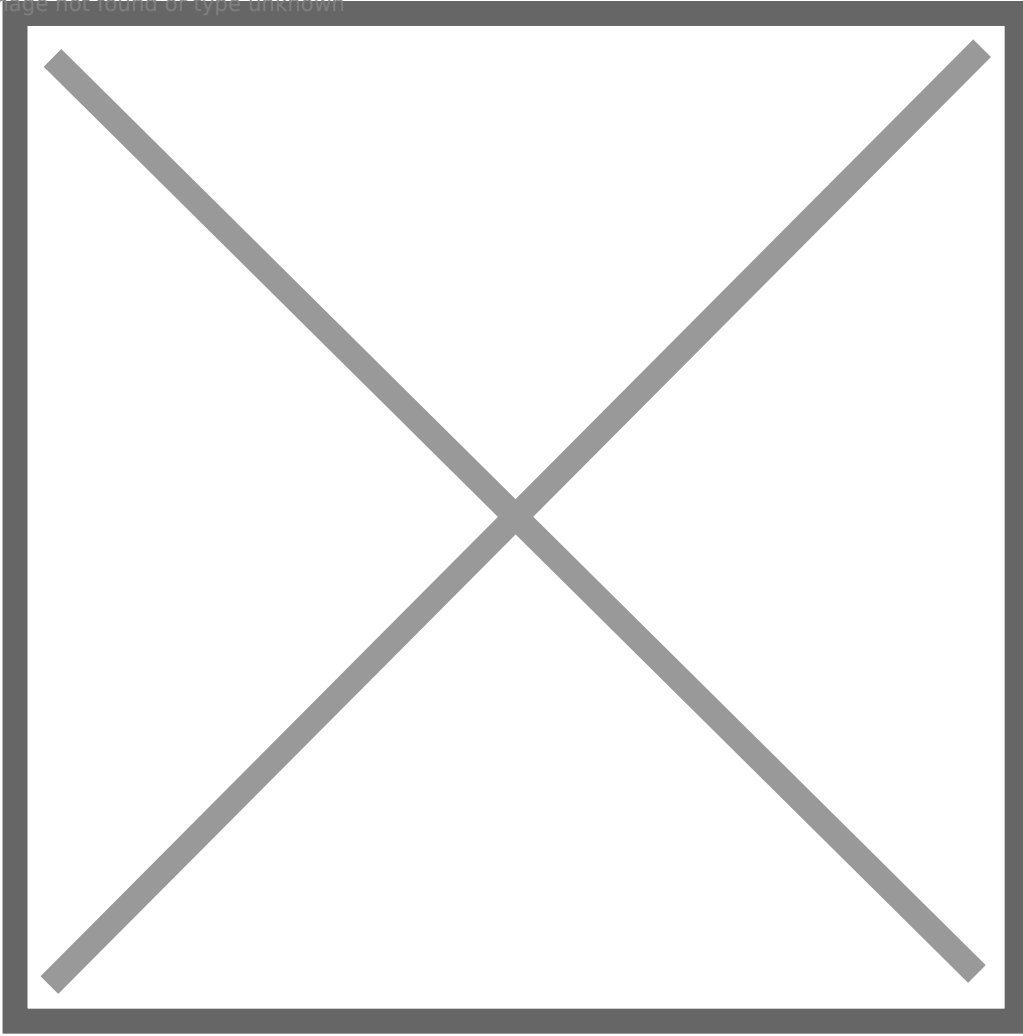
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Public Policy Choices and Gun Violence in Public Housing

A look at public policy and its affect on public safety and other quality of life issues.

By Senator Bill Perkins

A sense of safety is foremost among all the issues that impact one's quality of life. But long before a shot is fired or a knife is drawn, public policy choices sometimes help to determine negative outcomes. Frequently, another choice or a different policy might easily have averted disaster: sometimes, bad things happen as the unintended consequence of decisions that seemed to be sound at the time they were made.

Today from all over people mourn the tragic and senseless loss of 18-year-old basketball standout Tayshana Murphy. She was a lovely young woman of exceptional talent and great aspirations. Anticipating a brilliant future as a fulfillment of her hard work, she once promised her mother, “Mom, I’m going to get you out of the projects.”

Ms. Murphy lived at Grant Houses, a series of high-rise towers set amidst a leafy park. This development is home to over 3,000 residents. Long a great bastion of affordable housing for working people, a lot has changed at Grant Houses over the years. As with cities, and certainly many of New York’s public housing projects are as large as many towns elsewhere, the greater the population the more crime, refuse and other problems there are. Several years ago, during the Giuliani administration, one questionable change that effected public housing tenants throughout the city, was the elimination of a police force dedicated solely to complexes like Grant Houses.

The idea at the time was to consolidate three separate police departments into one, (the Transit Authority also maintained its own police department). The expectation was that redundancy, cronyism and bloat would be eliminated and scarce resources would be spent for optimal effectiveness.

Unfortunately, few seemed to contemplate less favorable consequences that might arise from reduced, less conspicuous police-presence. Pick any Public Housing Development you wish, and look at the statistics for crime since consolidation of the police force, everywhere one looks, the numbers are up dramatically.

Now then, I don’t mean to seem simplistic, to suggest either that things were ideal when the NYC Housing Authority Police Department was still in place, or that Tayshana Murphy would still be alive if they were. No. But, on the other hand what about her alleged assailants from Manhattanville Houses? With a highly visible police-presence, with cops who knew every child and every parent, would our public housing have evolved into such a haven for youth gangs and the attendant ills of drug-dealing, turf wars and gun-violence?

With the young dreams of so many who deserved success extinguished, we can all agree, none of our kids ought to die and they all ought to have more choices and greater opportunity.

I think we can also agree that eliminating token booth attendants from subway platforms ought not to mean that some stations, like the one at 116th on Frederick Douglass Boulevard, become havens of lawlessness. Un-policed stations seem to be encouraging anti-social behavior. Drug selling and use is up, as is the use of these poorly maintained platforms as public bathrooms, reeking of excrement and urine. Even the presence of a growing number of people offering ‘swipes’ on fare cards is a menace to many subway users.

Yes, government policies and government agencies play a big role in impacting our quality of life in Harlem. As a means of examining a manageable segment of the community that's been beset by crime, to make residents more aware of how by reaching out to the relevant agencies they can become pro-active in helping improve things for everyone, I am sponsoring an emergency community forum on Tuesday, October 4th 2011 at 6:00pm in the auditorium of Wadleigh Secondary School for the Performing Arts, 215 West 114th Street. I and other elected officials, city commissioners, tenant leaders and representatives of the 28th Police Precinct will be on hand for a dialogue with questions and answers about the recent crimes, accidents, trash proliferation and explosion of rats plaguing our neighborhood. Acting together we really do have a better chance of bringing about real change: and nothing less is called for.