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**SEEKING SAFE PASSAGE**

# Right under our noses?

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We can't prove that the beating death of 16-year-old Derrion Albert near Fenger High School could have been prevented. We do know that a remarkable Chicago anti-violence program called CeaseFire was working to lower hostilities between rival Fenger factions until June 30 -- when an interruption in funding from Springfield reduced CeaseFire's staffing and all but quashed that effort. Disputes at Fenger intensified as this school year began. And, after the Sept. 24 plank-thumping seen worldwide, Derrion lay broken, dead.

Chicago now is caught up in another perennial discussion of how to quell street violence. You've read here before that the unsparing history of homicide in this city brims with earnest yet failed attempts to halt the killings of children and young adults. For those failures, Chicago can blame its lack of perseverance. Programs come and go; some of us get distracted. The bloodshed endures.

What Chicago hasn't appreciated seriously enough is that one proven treatment for this pathology is right under its nose. CeaseFire now has street-level workers defusing gang rivalries and other menacing tensions in 32 of Chicago's 281 police beats. Intensifying the current effort and expanding it to all 101 of the beats considered most dangerous likely would reduce -- in dramatic fashion -- the frequency of murders and shootings citywide. That will require government and foundation backing to quadruple CeaseFire's $4.5 million budget for Chicago -- serious money, but a pittance compared to the massive medical, criminal justice and social costs of today's carnage.

CeaseFire doesn't focus on root causes of violence, or on saving one at-risk child from the mix. CeaseFire doesn't even focus on youth violence, the topic captivating post-Fenger discourse. Rather, CeaseFire succeeds by keeping Assailant A from shooting, stabbing or beating Target B -- *tonight*. It strives to prevent not only the horrific killings of adolescents but all homicides in a city that, last year, recorded 510 of them.

The approach is epidemiological: CeaseFire tries to change community norms so lethal assault isn't the default remedy for grievances between individuals or groups. "Violence is learned behavior," says Dr. Gary Slutkin, the Chicago native and World Health Organization veteran who patterned CeaseFire after public health attacks on tuberculosis, cholera and AIDS in Africa. "Violence also can be *unlearned* behavior."

The results are impressive. An elaborate 2008 study for the U.S. Department of Justice found drops of 41 to 73 percent in shootings and killings in CeaseFire zones, and 100 percent reductions in retaliation murders in five of eight neighborhoods examined. The study, written by Northwestern University crime researcher

Wesley Skogan and others, found decreases in the intensity of shootings in all but one area studied, and in several of those areas, "this was due to the introduction of the program."

CeaseFire workers aren't responsible for all of those reductions in the bloodshed: Since 2003, Chicago police, federal authorities and other provocateurs have found new ways to disrupt patterns of violence. But the casual dismissal of CeaseFire by some cops and public officials early in this decade has all but evaporated. The statistical evidence that CeaseFire can make a substantial difference in violence is beyond dispute.

Politicians know this, which is why many legislators and aldermen clamor for expansion of CeaseFire to more areas. Gov. Pat Quinn also is a vocal supporter. But coverage remains skimpy: Chicago has many needs, and in the past, city, county and state pols haven't embraced the economy in preventing street slaughter before it occurs.

We don't know whether the killing of Derrion Albert will change that. But his death ought to have all of Chicago asking what expanding CeaseFire would achieve.