

**TESTIMONY OF THE PUBLIC INTEREST LAW CENTER OF PHILADELPHIA
BEFORE THE PHILADELPHIA HUMAN RELATIONS COMMISSION
PUBLIC HEARINGS ON SCHOOL VIOLENCE**

JANUARY 28, 2010

Good afternoon. My name is Jennifer Clarke and I am the executive director of the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia. The Law Center, or PILCOP, is the first and the oldest civil rights non-profit law firm in the city. We were founded 41 years ago, as one of the original Lawyers Committees for Civil Rights. PILCOP has deep and abiding roots in this City. Throughout our history, we have challenged discrimination on the basis of race, national origin and disability. I am here with my colleague Michael Churchill who is Counsel with the Law Center and led the organization for most of its history.

The Law Center joined the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission in its 40-year old litigation to improve the schools with the highest poverty rates. We continue to work to make sure that the money that comes from Harrisburg for schools is divided up fairly so that a child in Philadelphia has the same chance to receive a good education as a child in the suburbs. We have pressed the school district and the teachers' union to make sure that the children in our poorest schools have the same experienced, high quality teachers and administrators as our richest schools.

I would like to thank the Philadelphia Human Relations Commission for conducting these hearings. I understand that this is the first of eleven hearings that you will be conducting around the city. What you are doing today is that which all political leaders and all adults need to be doing: creating a space for us to find *common* ground. All around us we are hearing blame. But this is not and should not be a blame game or who is right and who is wrong.

What we need to do—and your hearings are an important first step—is to find the points where we all agree. We may have vastly different cultures, but we share our humanity. I hope you will encourage everyone to listen closely to each other to find those points of agreement. Here is one: we love our children and we want them to be safe—in schools and in our neighborhoods. If we can all agree on just that one point, it means that we can work together to bring that about, and in the process build a deeper understanding and respect.

In addition to helping this community and others to find our common ground, I encourage you to help create places where people —one on one—can come together to learn about each other and to respect each other’s cultures. Let’s find activities for children—Asian and African American, Latino and Caucasian—to do together. It can be music or sports or video games or something else. Let us help the children and young people find ways to get to know each other as people, so that they can get beyond the fear and stereotypes.

We aren’t writing on a clean slate. Let’s build on what we already have and what other cities have done. The student ambassadors are a start—they want to help. Let’s use them to create these interactions. You, as the commission can help find other programs here and around the country that work to bring people of different races and national origins together.

This is a big job: big in its importance and big in the amount of effort it will require. And that brings me to my next point. We have to stop thinking about this as solely a *school district* problem. This is a neighborhood problem. Children and teenagers bring into the schools all of the fear and misunderstanding from the outside. We as adults have to lead the way in listening to each other and finding common ground. The adults have to model the behavior we want our children to follow. I encourage you to also look for and help create opportunities for adults to

interact and get to know each other. These meetings are a good start, I hope that you, working with community groups, will help find or create structures that will last.

But this is not just a school and neighborhood problem. This is a City of Philadelphia problem. You, the Commissioners and staff, should not be the only leaders out here working. Where is the Mayor? Where is City Council? Where is Council President Verna? Our elected leaders need to speak out. The problem of racial violence is a city wide problem and will take time, money and leadership. They should be holding the hearings, listening, creating spaces for adults and children to interact. I encourage the Commission and everyone here to demand that our public officials take responsibility for this problem.

Last night, President Obama spoke to the nation about the power of working together. He could have been here in this room. He said: "Let's leave behind the fear and division, and do what it takes to defend our neighborhoods [nation] and forge a more hopeful future."

Thank you.