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## MEMBER EXCHANGE: Cincinnati tries new way to stop gun **violence**

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Dr. Victor Garcia's aim is starkly simple: Stop young men from shooting each other.

The trauma chief and pediatric surgeon at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center has pleaded since the mid-1990s to reverse the rising numbers of young gunshot victims.

Now, with the Cincinnati City Council's unanimous approval, he gets his chance, as board chairman of a counteroffensive against street **violence** that's different from anything tried here before.

It's called CIRV Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce **Violence** and one novel feature is to call in the street packs causing most of the bloodshed and offer them a blunt choice: Accept a way out of the feud-like shootings, and you'll get help on the spot. But if you persist in **violence**, we will use every legal means, including stiffer federal prosecution, to put your group out of "business."

Similar "targeting strategies" in Boston, Chicago and other cities have sharply reduced youth homicides, when the community spoke to shooters with one strong moral voice and backed it up with relentless enforcement.

What's the message CIRV wants to send? "The shooting must stop or else."

Face-to-face "call-in" sessions with chronic offender groups may include their family members, police, ministers, prosecutors, neighbors, treatment agencies.

But is polite Cincinnati tough enough to issue a credible threat to young offenders, up to their eyeballs in illegal drug dealing?

"Follow-through is not a threat," Garcia corrected. "It's a promise."

He persuaded criminologist David Kennedy, architect of Boston's Gun Project, to come here in December and coaxed officials to hear him. Although Garcia is insistent CIRV isn't about him and deflects credit to Kennedy, University of Cincinnati crime analysts John Eck and Robin Engel, Police Chief Tom Streicher, Sheriff Simon Leis and other CIRV partners, Kennedy says Garcia has been a constant presence in his life for years and has never let go of this issue.

"This is all happening because of Vic," Kennedy said. No one else in any of the cities Kennedy advises has shown

such tenacity.

Six-foot-two, compassionate Vic Garcia, M.D., is a nearly perfect fit for his new role. Born in Harlem of African-American and Puerto Rican parents, he is the son of a New York City police officer who witnessed every day the forces that can divert good people to criminal activity.

Education was a family value.

"If it weren't for education, I would have suffered the fate of many of my friends," he said.

He found ways to get a great education, beyond what the family could afford. A graduate of Jesuit-run Brooklyn Prep and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, he went on to the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. His military career stretched from Army Ranger School to tours of duty in Germany, Korea and Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington.

How does an Army Ranger company commander trained to kill with his bare hands end up saving Cincinnati gunshot kids in operating rooms and heading an anti-**violence** mission?

"It's the military officer who best knows the horrors of war and will work the hardest to preserve the peace," he said.

It's one thing to be shot in combat, but even more emotionally devastating to be shot in your own neighborhood. "We've seen children paralyzed from the waist down or the neck down or who have lost extremities," he said. "From my 20 years in the military, I know, unfortunately, the psychological consequences are lifelong."

Garcia trained as a pediatric surgeon at Children's Hospital in Philadelphia under Dr. C. Everett Koop, who later became the U.S. surgeon general. Koop passed on to him two principles: Read outside your traditional medical literature and have the courage of your convictions.

Garcia says he's been "hard-wired" since Harlem to take on causes such as minority health disparities. To him, CIRV-like programs are a "cure" for **violence**. It would be unethical not to offer that cure here.

"We have tried everything here," Garcia says, yet the homicide rate has kept rising, to the highest in Ohio. Average age of gunshot victims seen at Children's: 12.9 years old. "David Kennedy can speed this initiative up," said Garcia, worried **violence** will spike again this summer. "We're three months behind my original schedule." Part of his challenge, he understands, is to create a sense of urgency.

"Dr. Garcia is a very intense guy because he needs to be," said Cincinnati Mayor Mark Mallory. "He brings an awful lot of passion to preserving human life. He's not concerned with agency turf battles or politics. He's the type of person who won't let any of us stray from this path."

Some here, inside government and outside, remain skeptical. Westwood Concern co-founder Mary Kuhl hopes CIRV works, but the community leader can't forget the track record of minority groups bailing out of an agreement to improve police-community relations after 2001 riots. "The black community dropped the ball," she said, pointing out that most gunshot victims and perpetrators are black.

Kennedy says he's never worked anywhere where everybody likes each other. Sometimes there's even extreme friction. But everybody can agree they want the **violence** to stop.

Garcia is frustrated at opponents who want to continue business as usual or serve up protests as a solution. "Protests don't work," he said.

But one thing he's learned from sculling: if you try too hard, you can't accomplish as much as you can if you go

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with the flow. He laughs that his 5-foot-7 wife, Gail, can outrace him when he tries to row too hard. He knows he needs to hear what CIRV opponents say.

The police chief believes Garcia brings a sense of objectivity that can keep CIRV's individual partners from thinking their way is the only way. "That sense of objectivity can help all of us perform at a much higher standard," Streicher said.

At Children's, Garcia is seeing the age shift to younger victims and perpetrators. They're now dealing with 10- to 12-year-olds. The shootings aren't just a police problem. CIRV is designed to bring all the disciplines together for maximum impact.

"The community knows who the perpetrators are," Streicher said, "and needs to help identify them." That includes school officials, public and parochial, who know which kids are absent and at risk.

"The dynamics of these street groups are not as we think of them," Garcia warned. Kennedy has found youth shootings are overwhelmingly about personal "beefs" such as respect, disrespect, boy-girl issues, group vendettas not drug-trade business.

But once in, many don't know how to get out. In a second innovative strategy, UC analysts will collect intelligence from the best front-line cops and residents to "map" how violent street groups interact which are allies, which are bitter enemies. This network "link analysis" will help target the worst of the worst. Many high-rate offenders are already under parole or probation control, and can be ordered to the last-chance "call-ins." Then, if any of those offenders commits another shooting, it should bring down the full heat of the law on the entire group.

But CIRV's endgame isn't mass arrests, as in periodic police sweeps. The aim is fewer homicides, fewer shootings. "If we do our job really well," Garcia said, "there will be hardly any arrests."

Procter & Gamble Co. executives Keith Lawrence and Alan Spector are at work on a third innovation: making Cincinnati's plan self-sustaining from the start. They volunteered to design a system that tracks results and flags nonperforming agencies.

After early successes, Boston and other cities slacked off. Kennedy thinks if Cincinnati can create a model for sustaining the strategy, it would be "most important" not only for Cincinnati, but for the whole country.

Garcia is convinced CIRV can put Cincinnati on a trajectory toward becoming the Midwest's safest city. "We are going to surpass everybody else in immediacy and longevity," he said.

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