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TO: Detroit City Council

FROM: David Whitaker, Director 
Legislative Policy Division

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RE: The Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission

City Council Member Coleman A. Young II has requested the Legislative Policy Division (LPD) produce a report regarding the Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission, discussing its makeup, effectiveness, and implementation. The requested information is contained in the following report.

In 2004, in response to an escalating homicide rate in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a group of individuals including the Mayor, Police Chief, Assistant US Attorney and District Attorney assembled a working team charged with reducing homicides in Milwaukee through the development of a homicide review process. As a result, the Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission (MHRC) was formed in January 2005.

The MHRC was led by Dr Mallory O'Brian PhD, an academic and epidemiologist who is credited with developing the homicide review model and securing a mix of private and federal funding to launch the MHRC from various local and national agencies and organizations. The MHRC set off on the mission of finding interventions that could predict and prevent escalations of violence. The commission developed a system for collecting homicide data by taking a deep dive into the cases and parsing out commonalities, and sharing the information with public health agencies, mental health agencies, social workers, and community organization. And MHRC operated on an annual budget of approximately \$275,000 in grant funding; it conducted monthly strategic planning meetings, reviewed homicide cases, and explored future intervention and

prevention strategies. In between meetings, committee members would evaluate cases, offering recommendations at subsequent meetings.

At the heart of the methodology of the MHRC were four tenets that shaped the entire initiative and affected its governance, leadership, and staffing structure; partnership development; collection and use of real-time data; and preference for multilevel and multiagency decision-making:¹

1. Homicide is preventable.
2. Only a collaborative and well-coordinated effort of community, nonprofit, business, government, academic, legal, and medical partnerships will lead to lasting change;
3. Data-driven strategies are essential; and
4. Multi-level responses help ensure meaningful, robust, and sustainable results over the long term.

Operating through three cohesive sub-committees, the MHRC's data collection arm was staffed by a small group of individuals, a police officer assigned to the MHRC, a fulltime office assistant, a part-time project coordinator, and a consultant. While the working group, included fifteen mid-level staff responsible for data collection, review of individual homicides, and providing recommendations to the twenty-four-member executive committee. The executive committee comprised of senior level representatives from various professions was charged with approving and implementing recommendations received from the working group.

This process was designed to allow for law enforcement, criminal justice professionals and community service providers to share information and work collectively on violence prevention strategies and methods to reduce crime.

The original pilot program reviewed homicide related data from three of the seven Milwaukee police districts over a two-year period. Districts 2 and 6 on the south side, and District 5 on the north side.

The commission's review process required a significant pledge of resources from not only the Milwaukee Police Department (MPD) but other agencies. Dedicated Police Department personnel included data analysts, community liaisons, precinct officers, members of the violent crimes, gang squad, homicide, and vice units. Others included were representatives from the mayor's office, City Attorney's Office, District Attorney, community groups, social services agencies, Milwaukee Housing Authority, Medical Examiner, Department of Corrections, the Wisconsin Department of Justice, U.S. Marshals, United States Drug Enforcement Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, American Federation of Teachers, the public-school districts, and US Attorney's office. The work of the commission required a great deal of cooperation

¹ O'Brien, Mallory, and Michael F. Totoraitis. 2021. *The Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission: A National Model for Violence Prevention*. Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

amongst various departments and agencies, involving monthly and sometimes weekly meetings to review cases.

As the program showed signs of promise, validation of the commission's effectiveness was received during an evaluation of the program by Harvard's School of Public Health. Researchers from Harvard examined the MHRC's work from January 2005 through December 2007 and found that the implementation of the MHRC interventions was linked with a 52-percent decrease in the monthly count of homicides in the treatment districts in comparison to a small insignificant decrease in the other districts homicide rates. Nevertheless, the downturn in the number of homicides in the subject districts cannot be totally attributed to the MHRC, however statistically it did demonstrate a notable change.

After the encouraging Harvard evaluation, the Mayor of Milwaukee and the City Council took steps to take the MHRC citywide in 2008. As a result of the work of the commission, the City was successful in instituting a program to assist ex-offenders re-enter the community and pass two ordinances to improve surveillance at licensed premises (taverns, 24-hour establishments, etc.) that are considered nuisance properties by requiring them to install video surveillance systems and to allow law enforcement to target the owners of problem establishments.

In 2010, five years after launching the review model, homicides had declined by 43 percent while the clearance rate for Milwaukee Police Department homicide cases rose by twenty-two points (including 93 percent of cases in 2008). Milwaukee became a national leader in preventing and solving homicides. In the same year, the Department of Justice commissioned MHRC to develop a homicide review training manual to provide other cities with replication. Upon receiving a Community Oriented Policing (COPS) grant through the Department of Justice, training and program implementations were conducted in cities across the country like New Orleans, Wilmington, Seattle, Pittsburgh, and D.C. This was the height of the success of the MHRC.²

As a result of the trainings, many police departments replicated components of the MHRC model, but none of the municipalities adopted it in its entirety. Instead, municipalities took certain aspects of the review commission's process and incorporated it into their current approach to crime solving and prevention. The University of Pittsburgh's Center for Health Equity now facilitates regular community service provider homicide reviews. During these reviews, community organizations participate, and only closed cases are reviewed. The City of Pittsburgh is now working to develop working groups to oversee recommendations, while the City of New Orleans has been able to strengthen analytic capacity and establish a homicide review process with other law enforcement partners.

In 2014, key enforcement agencies began to reduce resources and phase out collaborative approaches to violence prevention, including with MHRC. Police agencies began to restrict access to data and the incident reports used by the commission to analyze violent crimes. This led to a decline in the commission's activities in the form of less reviews and recommendations.

² [A LOOK INTO THE HOMICIDE REVIEW COMMISSION'S ROLE IN THE CITY OF MILWAUKEE — Stanicek Art & Design \(lilystanicek.com\)](#)

As the interagency interaction and information sharing portion of the model began to go away so did the overall effectiveness of MHRC. In the following years, the homicide rates in Milwaukee began to rise as the case closure rates increased. The MHRC released its last annual report in 2017.³

The Commission is no longer the active working group it once was. The MHRC, now operating through the Medical College of Wisconsin Department of Epidemiology and Social Sciences, currently manages an interactive dashboard of data regarding violent crimes with the help of a small staff. There are no longer annual reports, and the data no longer goes through an independent verification process.

The initial success of the program can certainly be attributed to the robust review process and the commitment of the government and agencies to careful analysis of all data and the ability to share this information between agencies. Trying to find solutions to homicide and gun violence from a public health perspective was an innovative approach and the contributions of Dr. O'Brian and the commission should not be overlooked. In fact, the Center for Disease Control now recognizes Gun Violence as a public health crisis. The development of the review process, its success, and the training and educational tools the model produced has aided both law enforcement and communities across the country. Homicides are indeed preventable. With most homicides in urban areas occurring amongst persons who are known to each other, this dynamic alone makes homicides more preventable, however, at the same time it's less likely for police to intervene prior to a non-fatal shooting or homicide taking place. Thus, the need for community intervention and violence prevention strategies, education, mental health services, and jobs are crucial in breaking the cycle of senseless violence in our communities.

However, along with the success of the commission, were problems that were inherent to the system and structure of the model itself and many questioned its overall effectiveness. Those critical of the MHRC, expressed concern that the expenses were not worth the products the commission was producing, and that data collection and analysis does not effectively help the "cop on the street." While some, referred to the commission as a glorified data collection clearing house. There were others who felt that when the homicide numbers declined the MHRC was quick to take credit. However, when the homicide rates increased the Commission's response was there was nothing they could do.

From the very beginning of the project, there were serious concerns relative to the ability of the commission to maintain the necessary level of participation from the various agencies. The truth of the matter is that the MHRC and its model required a tremendous amount of time and commitment from numerous agencies. This requires a certain level of collaboration and trust that is difficult to obtain, not to mention maintain. The exact number of man/woman hours involved in the actual work of the commission is not known, but this certainly amounted to a huge undertaking by all agencies involved. The level of participation for organizations and agencies in this process is most likely unobtainable in our post pandemic world. Even prior to Covid the commitment to attending the meetings and the level of cooperation required between agencies was unsustainable.

³ [Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission | Results for America \(results4america.org\)](https://www.results4america.org/)

Throughout the time the MHRC was fully active, no reported instances of legal challenges to criminal proceedings and or convictions because of the commission's activities were found. But law enforcement officials did question whether certain information should continue to be shared between law enforcement agencies and non-law enforcement personnel. From the inception of the MHRC, the City of Milwaukee committed to allowing the on-site evaluator (Dr. Mallory O'Brien) full access to all project materials, this included all reports from law enforcement regarding specific cases. Eventually the unrestricted access to incident reports, cases files and other police data was discontinued.

In some cases, the commission during its due diligence, exposed weakness in the policies and procedures of outside agencies involved in the program. These situations could have been a positive aspect of the commission's operations if it served to help improve policies of procedures in the subject agency, however these findings were often met with push-back and contempt. For example, while investigating and reviewing homicide cases involving children, it was determined that the agency in charge of children's services possibly could have prevented the deaths with earlier intervention. The agency disagreed, therefore, in this case it created an adversarial atmosphere where this agency and others were now reluctant to provide information.

The MHRC was reactionary, the focus was not to solve crimes but to collect data and study homicide cases to find the root causes for violent acts. This criticism is unwarranted because the fight against gun violence is in great part in reaction to the over proliferation of guns and gun violence in our nation and communities, and every little bit helps.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, in Milwaukee's case, the MPD had five different police chiefs since MHRC launched (including three since 2018), requiring MHRC staff to cultivate buy-in and start the relationship-building process over each time. Each new leader had varying familiarity with the frequency and intensity of MHRC's collaboration, along with the importance of MPD's regular stream of data inputs. As a result, several key agency leaders reduced their commitments of staff members and other resources, including data, to the program.⁴

The city of Milwaukee had 122 homicides in 2005, when the MHRC was founded. In 2020, with the Covid crisis contributing to the uptick in gun violence across the country, Milwaukee reported a record 193 homicides, double the total in 2019. Milwaukee, a leader in gun violence prevention a decade earlier, reported one of the highest homicide rates in the country between 2015-2019 – 2.7 times the national average, as compared to the city of Detroit's 356 homicides in 2005, and 327 in 2020.⁴

It has been reported that under new leadership the Milwaukee Police Department has revived its partnership with MHRC, providing access to crucial data, the use of a department crime analyst, and office space. However, this program is not as robust as the MHRC process, and it is currently run by the MPD utilizing some of the previous methodologies and reviews. However, the data is much more actively managed and monitored by the MPD.

⁴ [Milwaukee Homicide Review Commission | Results for America \(results4america.org\)](https://www.results4america.org/milwaukee-homicide-review-commission)