



FIRSTHAND PEACEKEEPERS

DISCUSSION GUIDE



Before Viewing

About the Project

As crime and public safety are top of mind across Chicago's communities, there are people who are working to prevent conflict before it happens and stop it from escalating when it does. ***Firsthand: Peacekeepers*** is a series of documentaries, expert talks, investigative journalism, and community engagement focusing on extraordinary people who are making a difference to interrupt and prevent violence. Through their firsthand accounts, we witness their struggles and triumphs as they mentor youth, build trust, and mediate conflicts.

The *Firsthand: Peacekeepers* **documentaries** introduce five individuals who are working to create peace in their Chicago neighborhoods. From a judge presiding over a restorative justice court in North Lawndale, to a community leader offering safe spaces for teens in Roseland, to community violence intervention workers in Roseland, East Garfield Park, and Humboldt Park, these peacekeepers draw on both ancient wisdom and modern research to heal their communities.

The *Firsthand: Peacekeepers* **Talks** offer historical context, exploratory research, and new ideas for possible solutions to crime and violence. Through the lens of personal experiences and hands-on professional expertise, five expert talks cover topics across the spectrum including how young people can play a role in peacekeeping efforts, how traditional police departments can shift perspectives, how a violence interrupter sees crime differently, where social media can come into play, and the toll this work takes on the people who have made it their life's work.

Firsthand is an award-winning, multiplatform, multi-year initiative focusing on the firsthand perspectives of people facing critical issues in Chicago and in major cities across the country. Where conversations often dissolve into stereotypes or generalizations, WTTW is positioned to tell these important stories through the eyes of people who have lived them. Visit the website (wttw.com/firsthand) to explore the project.

Using This Guide

This discussion guide supports viewers and facilitators in connecting with the WTTW *Firsthand: Peacekeepers* initiative through a personalized reflective learning and discussion process. It helps facilitate pre- and post-screening discussions on topics that empower audiences to reduce gun violence, build stronger communities, nurture relationships with neighbors, and build coalitions across Chicago to keep the city safe.

FIRSTHAND: PEACEKEEPERS screenings and conversations can:

- Strengthen and support Chicago neighborhoods
- Offer effective behavioral models of trauma-informed care and services
- Nurture healthy neighborhood culture rooted in relationships
- Address the epidemic of gun violence with peacekeeping efforts and tools
- Suggest pathways for young people to participate in their communities
- Provide a platform to learn from and listen to stories from peacekeepers

Planning Your Event

Checklist and Timeline

Planning a screening event is a powerful opportunity to unite the community, raise awareness, and inspire compassionate action. Follow this suggested schedule to prepare for a successful event.

Two Months Prior

- Set a time, date, and location. Ensure that the area is accessible to everyone.
- Build an outreach list of organizations and secure partnerships for the event.
- Decide on the formats for your screening and post-screening conversation.
- Brainstorm potential panelists for a post-screening conversation.

One Month Prior

- Send out invitations with the time, date, location, RSVP details, and a description of the project and post-screening conversation.
- If you are hosting a panel, ensure the speakers are familiar with the initiative and clear about expectations for the post-screening conversation.
- Connect with community partners and discuss having tables where additional information will be available.

Day(s) Before

- Send reminders to guests and speakers.
- Test all equipment at the site, both projection and audio.
- Assemble any promotional materials and remind partners to bring materials for informational tables.

Day of Screening

- Arrive at least 90 minutes early. This allows enough time to set up the room, test all equipment, greet guests and panelists, and review your agenda.

Day After the Event

- Send a thank-you note to all guests who attended and include any follow-up activities.
- Open up opportunities to stay connected and share ideas for future actions after viewing the project.

Planning an event is a powerful way to unite the community, raise awareness, and inspire compassion.

Suggested Formats for Community Screenings

As you know your audience and setting best, the format for watching one, two, or all of the documentaries is in your hands. We encourage watching the participants' documentaries and the talks before any event to prepare you to moderate meaningful post-screening conversations.

Screening + Q & A Session: Share background content and pre-screening questions provided in this guide with your audience prior to watching the documentaries, then lead an audience Q & A session.

Screening + Panel: Open your event by sharing background content and the pre-screening questions in this guide. After your screening, host a panel with *Firsthand* participants (if available) or invite representatives from local organizations for a panel conversation and Q & A session with audiences.

Screening + Workshop: Focus your outreach on one of the themes organized in this guide and screen one or more of the documentaries that illuminate this topic. Use and adapt the questions created for the theme as a basis for a panel discussion or more informal Q & A sessions with audiences.

Tips for Facilitating Conversations

Practice Self-Care: Watch the entire project and read through this guide in advance of your event. Pay attention to your emotional responses. Talk about them with a trusted confidant so you feel supported.

Set Expectations: State the purpose of your event clearly, so that your audience knows what to expect with regard to the topic and purpose.

Build a Sense of Community: Watching this initiative together is a meaningful way to share an experience and build community. *Firsthand* documentaries and talks do not present one solution or point of view; rather offer an opportunity to hear the stories of those working to survive.

Create Group Agreements: Before you begin, set group agreements for your conversations. Remind audiences that they all will have different experiences in their communities. It is important to stay open to learning from one another. Pay attention to how much or how little you are speaking, listening to understand, and not interrupting may be helpful to ensure all voices feel welcome to share.

Allow Space for Emotion: Audience members may have an emotional response to the initiative; some may even be moved to share their own experiences. Validate their emotions, thank the person for sharing, and where appropriate, let audience members know that you have community resources available. After a few moments of acknowledgment, advise the group to take a deep breath together and move forward with the conversation.

Share Your Story: As a moderator and organizer, your responsibility is to set the tone. This can be conveyed through your own story or by sharing why you organized this event. This personal touch can often open the space for others to feel comfortable to share more readily.

Create a Space for Multiple Perspectives: There may be many points of view on how best to interrupt cycles of violence and strengthen communities. With diverse perspectives, it is essential to bring openness and curiosity to these nuanced conversations.

Be Aware of Fatigue: The issues surrounding gun violence and trauma are difficult and discussed in the initiative. It is important to acknowledge the toll this work can take and create opportunities for reflection, celebration, and self-care.

Make Your Space Inclusive: Ask for RSVPs for your event, including any special needs. Prepare your space and screening so it is inclusive of people with any physical or environmental needs, such as child care, closed captions or language interpretation, accessible doors and seating, and others.

Incorporate a Content Warning: The stories of gun violence can be potentially triggering. It is important to open your screening by acknowledging the sensitive nature of the content. Here is one way to do so: *Firsthand: Peacekeepers* contains sensitive content, including gun violence. Please support one another with this in mind."

Make Mental Health Support Services Visible: We recommend inviting local mental health organizations to your screening. If they are unavailable, please remind your audience that mental health support is available and share national resources such as SAMHSA's National Helpline, 1-800-662-HELP (4357). This is a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year information service in English and Spanish. Use the [online treatment locator](#) or send your zip code via text message to: 435748 (HELP4U) to find help near you.



Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra, Assistant Professor, Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois Chicago giving her *Firsthand* Talk, "The Hidden Toll of Peacekeeping"

The Documentaries

Damien Morris

Chief Program Officer, Violence Prevention, [Breakthrough Chicago](#)

Damien is dedicating his life to making one Chicago neighborhood safer. He drives from one crisis to the next as he stops at crime scenes, visits victims at the hospital, mediates disputes, brokers peace agreements, and leads peace circles. When Garfield Park's violence hits too close to home, Damien finds his peacekeeping skills put to the test.



Damien Morris

Judge Patricia Spratt

[Restorative Justice Community Court](#)

Judge Spratt spends most of her week in a traditional courtroom. Every Thursday she turns her attention to reconciliation in North Lawndale, where she leads the neighborhood's Restorative Justice Community Court. Her job is to transform lives through restorative justice, an approach that not only addresses the harm caused by crime, but actively works to repair the harm. The goal is to heal victims, the community, and the offenders.



Judge Patricia Spratt

Diane Latiker

Founder, [Kids Off the Block](#)

For 20 years Diane has been keeping the peace in Roseland by offering alternatives to gangs and drugs. She runs her grassroots organization Kids Off the Block from her living room, offering youth denied necessities amid neighborhood disinvestment. Diane hopes that by helping her neighbors thrive, she will help them avoid becoming a shooter or a victim. But she is reminded that that can be a difficult task when one of her "kids" loses his mother to gun violence.

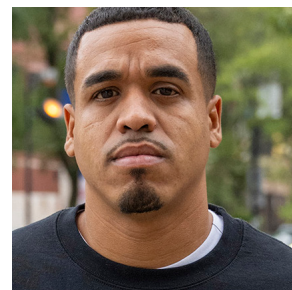


Diane Latiker

Adrian Rodriguez

[Puerto Rican Cultural Center Violence Prevention](#)

Adrian is working to bring peace to the streets that his gang-involved family once claimed as territory. His parents were among the founders of Humboldt Park's Spanish Cobras in the 1970s. Now he's using those connections to broker peace. But a late-summer walk through the park reveals that Adrian's neighborhood's challenges run deeper than he imagined.



Adrian Rodriguez

Cedric Hawkins

Outreach Supervisor, [Chicago CRED](#)

After his life prison sentence was commuted, Cedric returned to Chicago to push peace in the same neighborhoods where he once sold narcotics. He is working for a nonprofit, where his job is to de-escalate conflicts, broker peace agreements among local gangs, and recruit others to help in the effort. Cedric gets a painful reminder of how much work is left to be done when one of his teenage participants is killed.



Cedric Hawkins

The Talks

How Youth Lead Peacekeeping

Montserrat (Monse) Ayala • Youth Program Liaison/Organizer, [Increase The Peace](#)

Through intimate stories of loss and transformation, Mose Ayala reveals how meeting young people's core needs for belonging can break cycles of violence. She describes how intentional community organizing based on core needs transformed hundreds of young lives. Ayala demonstrates how investing directly in youth leadership doesn't just prevent violence – it builds a generation of civic leaders who continue giving back to their communities.



Monse Ayala

The Hidden Toll of Peacekeeping

Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra • Assistant Professor, Jane Addams College of Social Work, University of Illinois Chicago

Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra reveals a critical blind spot in community violence intervention: the trauma of peacekeepers themselves. She demonstrates how violence intervention workers carry deep wounds while healing others. Bocanegra presents a revolutionary framework for supporting these “homegrown healers.” Her insights challenge traditional approaches to violence intervention by showing how healing the healers can multiply their impact in breaking cycles of violence.



Dr. Kathryn Bocanegra

Can Social Media End Gun Violence?

Olivia Brown • Program Manager, [Project Unloaded](#)

How can we harness social media to save lives? Olivia Brown answers this question by challenging conventional views of social media and presenting a powerful framework for reducing gun violence. Brown demonstrates how empowering youth to create social media content can transform cultural perceptions about guns.



Olivia Brown

When We Become Visible

Ernest Cato • Chief Public Safety Officer, Illinois Department of Corrections

Ernest Cato III challenges conventional wisdom about urban violence by revealing how the perception of invisibility shapes behavior. He demonstrates how community empowerment can transform high-crime areas. Cato provides a blueprint for partnership-based policing that reduced citywide gunshot victimization. His methodology redefines the relationship between law enforcement and communities.



Ernest Cato

Interrupting Violence Through Mercy

Ricardo (Cobe) Williams • Director of National Programs for [Cure Violence Global](#); Co-Founder of the [One City Basketball League](#)

When Cobe Williams faced his father's killer, he chose mercy over revenge – a decision that would launch his career in violence prevention. Through intimate storytelling and evidence-based methods, Williams demonstrates how authentic connection can interrupt cycles of violence. Through his “listen, connect, empathize” approach and the One City basketball program, Williams has prevented hundreds of shootings and trained thousands nationwide.



Cobe Williams

Discussion Questions

Pre-Screening Questions

Before screening of *Firsthand: Peacekeepers*, choose one or more of these framing questions to help set the stage for a meaningful post-screening engaged discussion.

- How would you describe the work of a peacekeeper?
- If you were to describe your community, how would you characterize it?
- Do you participate in community-building activities in your neighborhood? What do you do?
- What helps you feel safe in your community?
- How would you describe the feeling of being seen and belonging?
- How do you build strong relationships within your community?
- If you could do anything to improve the lives of individuals and families in your community, what would you do? What resources would you need to accomplish your vision?

Post-Screening Discussion Questions

There is a great deal to learn from the lived experiences shared directly by *Firsthand: Peacekeepers*. Individual stories, often difficult to hear, sit alongside moments of tremendous compassion, kindness, and love. These glimpses into the critical work of community violence intervention across Chicago are important to recognize, support, invest in, and amplify to effectively break cycles of violence.

Take a moment to reflect on all the stories shared, discuss as a group, and learn from one another.

- What connection, if any, did you see between community outreach work, peacekeeping, and restorative justice?
- What differences emerged?
- What new questions did the participants' stories or the talks bring to the surface about the work of peacekeepers in Chicago?
- What new or surprising information did you learn?
- What were the most effective solutions for peacekeeping that you heard from the *Firsthand* project?
- Across *Firsthand: Peacekeepers*, we see the central role relationship building plays in breaking cycles of violence. What common practices and values for relationship building were expressed across the stories and talks?
- Did the *Firsthand: Peacekeepers* stories and talks inspire or discourage you? How?

Themes for Diving Deeper

The stories captured in the *Firsthand: Peacekeepers* documentaries and talks offer insights and perspectives from a range of Chicagoans working to strengthen their communities, prevent violence, and spread the pride and love they feel for their neighborhoods.

The three themes identified for a deeper dive allow audiences to explore different approaches and strategies for peacekeeping, including breaking cycles of violence, building stronger communities, instilling hope, and providing opportunities. We invite moderators and audiences to use these ideas as a springboard for additional organizing work, community connections, and opportunities for relationship building.

Peacekeeping Requires Building Relationships

Participants: Cedric Hawkins, [Chicago CRED](#); Adrian Rodriguez, [Puerto Rican Cultural Center](#); Judge Patricia Spratt, [Restorative Justice Community Courts](#)

Talks: Dr. Bocanegra, Olivia Brown, Cobe Williams

Discussion Questions

Adrian Rodriguez shared:

"In violence prevention, there is a term we use: 'My Story, My Glory.' It is just telling your story, how you got to where you are now. I was just tired of hurting. I started to heal my community, I started to make change. It is a redemption. It is every day trying to give back, and when you decide to turn that leaf, and you really believe it, other people will believe it."

- Why do you believe telling your story is important in violence prevention?
- Giving back to his community is one way Adrian is choosing to interrupt a cycle of violence in his life. What other examples of violence prevention did you witness in the *Firsthand: Peacekeepers* initiative?

Cedric Hawkins, Adrian Rodriguez, Damien Morris, Diane Latiker, and Judge Patricia Spratt know that relationships based on trust are central to interrupting cycles of violence. Dr. Bocanegra describes the role of community violence intervention (CVI) workers, saying,

"They don't just show up during the calm; they're there during the storms, forming relationships with men and women who are at the epicenter of violence in their communities."

- What interpersonal and emotional skills did all of the storytellers employ?
- How did their life experiences inform their current work?

Dr. Bocanegra's research also revealed that CVI workers require individuals to confront their pain and trauma to effectively show up for their community. She identifies the need for self-care among peacekeepers and outreach workers, and the traumatic stress the ongoing exposure to violence has on their mental health. She emphasized,

"If we care about safety in our communities, we must care about the individuals disrupting cycles of harm and violence through healing unaddressed trauma in the individuals at the epicenter of violence in their community. Let's change the way we think about violence interruption, how we fund the work, and how we train and support the frontline."

- What programs and practices do you believe would strengthen violence intervention work?
- How would you answer Kathryn's question, "How do we better support the healers?"
- How did you see the storytellers practice self-care?

Peacekeeping Strengthens Community Ownership

Participants: Damien Morris, [Breakthrough](#), Diane Latiker, [Kids Off The Block](#)

Talks: Monse Ayala, Ernest Cato

Discussion Questions

- What are Monse Ayala, Ernest Cato, Damien Morris, and Diane Latiker doing to invest in the young people in their respective Chicago neighborhoods? What is common across their work and what is unique to each of their roles or organizations?

"When all members of a community believe they are seen and valued, they will come out of the shadows to play a positive role within the communities they live in." — Ernest Cato

- What did you learn from the *Firsthand: Peacekeepers* documentaries and talks that reinforces this belief?

"We are here for support, to help [youth in our community] thrive, to survive, to live life, and get them the resources they need to do these things. That foundation is what helps prevent violence, and not [being] in the streets carrying guns or shooting each other...but [having] a sense [that] 'I am helping in my community.'" — Diane Latiker

- What do you think is the necessary foundation for all youth to thrive?
- Who and what is required to build this foundation?
- How do you see the *Firsthand: Peacekeepers* establishing this foundation?

"When communities feel supported and empowered they will become partners to address violence."

— ERNEST CATO, FIRSTHAND TALK, "WHEN WE BECOME VISIBLE"

Restorative Justice Is a Second Chance

Participant: Judge Patricia Spratt, Restorative Justice Community Courts

Talks: Ernest Cato, Cobe Williams

Discussion Questions

Harm reduction is not often at the forefront of criminal justice conversations, nor is placing agency in the hands of those who committed crimes. Judge Pratt states,

“Retributive court is just not working. We can’t just lock people up and throw away the key and forget they are there because we don’t want them in our society anymore. It is our obligation to help them.”

- What was new or surprising about Judge Pratt’s approach to criminal justice?
- Judge Pratt, Ernest Cato, and Cobe Williams’s work all reveal that crime and violence do not happen in a vacuum. What new insights did you gain about intergenerational trauma and its relationship to poverty, crime, and violence?
- Do you believe a harm-reduction approach is an effective approach to peacekeeping work? Why or why not?



Photo: WTTW / Ken Carl

A Q&A with the four expert speakers: Ernest Cato, Cobe Williams, Monse Ayala, and Olivia Brown

Resources

Community Partners

Breakthrough Urban Ministries: With a focus in Garfield Park, Breakthrough offers education and youth development, economic opportunity, housing, health and wellness, violence prevention, and spiritual formation. Through prevention, intervention, and restoration, Breakthrough works to increase hope by creating opportunities for at-risk residents to pursue a safe, stable, and engaged Garfield Park.

breakthrough.org

BUILD Chicago (Broader Urban Involvement & Leadership Development): A nationally respected gang intervention, violence prevention, and youth development organization

buildchicago.org

Chicago CRED: An anti-gun violence organization co-founded in 2016 by Arne Duncan, former U.S. secretary of education and CEO of Chicago Public Schools, and Laurene Powell Jobs, the founder and president of Emerson Collective, a Palo Alto-based social impact organization

chicagocred.org

Community Resources

All Chicago: All Chicago Making Homelessness History partners with local, state, and federal agencies to work to end homelessness. They offer targeted emergency funds, work with community partners that help diverse populations, and provide information and preparation needed to meet challenges.

allchicago.org

Casa Central: Casa Central strengthens communities, with a special focus on Hispanics. Their network of social services propels a diverse population of all ages toward self-sufficiency and a higher quality of life.

casacentral.org

Institute for Nonviolence Chicago: Guided by Dr. King's principles, practices, and teachings of nonviolence, the Institute for Nonviolence Chicago connects to individuals at the highest risk of shooting or being shot, offering conflict mediation, victim advocacy, case management, and nonviolence training.

nonviolencechicago.org

R.A.G.E. (Resident Association of Greater Englewood): A resident-driven association established to build relationships with fellow residents, Englewood's public officials, business owners, and organizations, R.A.G.E. creates tangible solutions and mobilizes residents and resources to restore their community.

rageenglewood.org

Resources

National Resources

Community Violence Intervention (CVI) Ecosystem:

An initiative that deploys coordinated, community-driven strategies to reduce violence using credible messengers
cviecosystem.org

Community Violence Intervention - Office of

Justice Programs: An approach that uses evidence-informed strategies to reduce violence through tailored community-centered initiatives

ojp.gov

Everytown for Gun Safety: Americans working together to end gun violence and build safer communities

everytown.org

Giffords Center for Violence Intervention: A center that champions the lifesaving work of community organizations and strategies that break cycles of gun violence

giffords.org

Health Alliance for Violence Intervention (HAVI): An organization that builds and connects hospital-based violence intervention programs to promote equity for victims of violence

thehavi.org

National Center for the Prevention of Community Violence (NCPCV):

Guides communities and schools globally through evidence-based violence prevention strategies

ncpcv.org

National Network for Safe Communities (NNSC):

A research center at John Jay College that collaborates with communities to reduce violence, arrests, and incarceration, and enhance trust between law enforcement and the public

nnscommunities.org

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