CU-Boulder to lead five-year, $6.5 million effort to reduce youth violence in Denver's Montbello neighborhood

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The University of Colorado Boulder is receiving $6.5 million from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to fund a five-year effort to reduce youth violence in Denver's Montbello neighborhood.

The effort will be led by CU-Boulder's Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, which CDC also named a National Academic Center for Excellence in Youth Violence Prevention. In prior years only 10 other schools in the nation have received the designation, including Harvard University, the University of Chicago and the University of California, Berkeley.

The CU-Boulder center will work closely with the residents of Montbello and a special community board to reduce levels of youth violence among those aged 10 to 24 during the five-year period beginning Sept. 30. The project aims to reduce rates of serious violent crime and gang-related violence, in addition to self-reported rates of drug and alcohol abuse, gang participation, fighting, and bullying or being bullied in schools.

Montbello has more than 30,000 residents and is located northeast of I-70 and Peoria Street and south of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge. It has experienced longstanding problems with crime and gangs.

The proposed grant received extensive community support when it was submitted last year, including letters of support from Denver Mayor (then-City Councilman) Michael Hancock and Colorado Gov. (then-Denver Mayor) John Hickenlooper.

External partners on the effort will include the Centers for Disease Control, Montbello Community Board, Northeast Park Hill Community Board, Denver Mayor's Office, Denver Public Schools, Colorado Department of Education, Colorado Department of Public Health and Employment, Montbello Recreation Center, Now Faith Christian Center Church, Lowry Family Center, Montbello Family Health Center, Denver Public Health and the Gang Reduction Initiative of Denver.
The principal investigator on the project is Delbert Elliott, director of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence and a distinguished professor emeritus of sociology. Elliott is a nationally recognized expert on juvenile violence and school safety and was the senior scientific editor of the U.S. surgeon general's report on youth violence issued in 2001.

"Currently, the responsibility of addressing youth violence falls primarily on the school systems and the juvenile justice system," Elliott said. "We intend to create a novel combination of risk assessment and interventions in a broad partnership with the community, and in collaboration with a local hospital, to address the problem of high levels of violence."

In addition to reducing juvenile violence, the project also will work with the CU School of Medicine to train future youth violence prevention researchers in the areas of behavioral science, public health and adolescent medicine. It also will train medical practitioners to recognize and treat youth violence.

Dr. Eric Sigel, an associate professor of pediatrics at the CU School of Medicine, and fellowship director of Children's Hospital Adolescent Medicine Clinic, will serve as a co-investigator of the initiative. He will oversee the training of public health students and medical practitioners, including cross-disciplinary research training and exposure to clinical programs focused on youth violence prevention.

CDC is leading the initiative because youth violence is widely considered to be one of the most important public health issues facing today's teenagers and young adults. A 2007 CDC study found that homicide and suicide are responsible for approximately one-quarter of the deaths among persons aged 10 to 24 years old.

At least four CU-Boulder graduate students and four CU medical trainees/public health students will participate in the effort.

The first year of the project will be spent collecting baseline data in the Montbello community and in the comparison neighborhood of Northeast Park Hill, establishing a community coalition and creating a community action plan.

The second through fifth years will involve implementing evidence-based programs and strategies chosen by the community board, monitoring the programs' implementation and evaluating their impacts.

The Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence is part of CU-Boulder's Institute of Behavioral Science. Founded by Elliott in 1992, the center assists schools, communities and policymakers in their understanding of juvenile violence. The center provides information on the causes, consequences and prevention of youth violence in addition to conducting research and providing assistance services.

Some of the center's major school violence prevention efforts over the past 10 years include:

Safe Communities-Safe Schools Initiative -- The center led this statewide effort, begun in 1999 after the Columbine High School tragedy, to provide safe school planning to Colorado schools. Currently funded by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the initiative provides informational resources and training and technical assistance for safe school planning, free regional training opportunities, and a free online school climate survey and report for all Colorado schools. More information is posted at www.colorado.edu/cspv/safeschools.

Bullying Prevention -- The center is collaborating with the Colorado Shakespeare Festival to bring Shakespeare's play "Twelfth Night" to Colorado schools. The play will set the stage for modern-day discussions
about school bullying prevention. The center also promotes the Bullying Prevention Program as one of its 11 model Blueprints for Violence Prevention programs. The program reduces bullying up to 50 percent.

Blueprints for Violence Prevention -- Since 1996, the center has assessed more than 800 violence prevention programs and identified 11 model and 17 promising programs based on a rigorous, scientific standard for certifying exemplary programs. The Blueprints programs inform schools and policymakers about those programs that have been proven to be effective. Descriptions of all the certified programs are posted on the center's Web site at www.colorado.edu/cspv.