

REMARKS FROM GOONZ PRESS CONFERENCE

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I. Introduction

Good afternoon and thank you all for braving the heat and joining us here today. My name is Tim Heaphy, and I am the United States Attorney for the Western District of Virginia.

I have asked you all here today, to the thriving Hurt Park Community Garden, to speak about the many exciting things happening in this community. It is a community which has been the subject of recent attention from many diverse sources - from law enforcement to business leaders to community activists. A diverse array of interests and energy has come together to revitalize this neighborhood. I want to talk about all of that diverse activity, and how it is making Hurt Park a safer and more productive community.

II. Three-Legged Stool of Community Safety

I have talked in the past about the necessity of coupling enforcement efforts with community empowerment. We must continue to work hard to identify and remove dangerous criminals from communities. But arrests alone don't make us safer. We must also work to support viable crime prevention and prisoner reentry programs if we are to achieve real public safety. These solutions must be co-located and thoughtfully implemented in the very same communities.

We must plant a "three-legged stool" of safety in communities that are afflicted with crime. Those legs are enforcement, prevention and reentry. Just as the legs of a stool must each stand firm for the stool to stand, we must couple enforcement solutions with support for vigorous crime prevention and prisoner reentry programs. Only comprehensive solutions work, and that requires a holistic approach to public safety. That is the model that we've been working to bring about in Roanoke and across the district since I became US Attorney.

III. Goonz Case

One of the places where this model is starting to show signs of success is the Hurt Park neighborhood in Southwest Roanoke. We've planted that three-legged stool of safety right here, in this community.

The obvious first-step in the revitalization effort in Hurt Park was the weeding out of unwanted criminal elements by local law enforcement. We have had to remove the bad in order to make room for the good.

The federal prosecutors in our office have recently had great success in charging members of a violent street gang that lived and worked in this area with a variety of federal crimes. They called themselves the "Goonz," and they were involved in serious criminal activity from drug selling just up the street from this garden, to violent home invasions throughout the Roanoke Valley.

The Goonz sold drugs in SW Roanoke, including locations right here in Hurt Park. They operated like any other business - obtaining their product from outside the area, packaging it for distribution, and spreading it to willing buyers in this community. Their product was the poison of crack cocaine, and their business was successful for a period of time. They made money selling crack at various locations. In so doing, they profited from the addictive weakness of others.

The Goonz didn't stop with drug-selling. Their organized criminal activity extended into violence. Specifically, they committed over 40 violent home invasions. During these violent robberies the defendants pistol whipped victims, restrained them, broke bones, fractured skulls and, shot at a victim.

While the Goonz did target the homes of individuals known to be drug dealers, it is important to note that in most cases the targeted drug dealers were not at home during the home invasion. Instead, wives, children, parents, girlfriends and in one case an infant child, were brutally assaulted and robbed. These innocent people were beaten and brutalized at the hands of the Goonz.

In one case, on February 17, 2010, the defendants broke into a home and took two adult males, two adult females, one of which was pregnant and three children hostage. They beat one of the men in the head and forced him to open a safe. The defendants restrained him and dragged him through the house. A second victim was hit in the head with a tire iron, was restrained and had his teeth knocked out. The female victims and the children were forced to the floor at gunpoint.

In another home invasion, during which the intended target was not at home, the defendants ordered a female and a one month old child to sit in a bedroom while they searched the home for money and drugs. During this robbery, they held a gun to the head of the one-month-old child.

These are simply chilling details of what was a very violent group of organized criminals. A group that was a cancer to the community that had to be removed before the community could change.

The Goonz took all of these actions as a group. Their drug business was coordinated and hierarchical. Their violent home invasions were well-organized attacks meant to frighten and intimidate their victims. Most importantly, all of this crime benefitted the Goonz as a whole. These men were members of an exclusive, criminal enterprise, with which they proudly associated.

The Goonz operated their enterprise until they were brought to justice recently in United States District Court. Five of the leaders of the Goonz pleaded guilty to participating in a racketeering enterprise - violating the RICO statute that has been used to prosecute organized crime. Eight additional defendants, including several Goonz members, pleaded or were found guilty of participating in a drug conspiracy. Finally, five others defendants, some with ties to the Goonz were charged and convicted in separate drugs and firearms offenses.

In all, the Goonz investigation led to the prosecution and conviction of 17 defendants. They have been sentenced to a combined period of 171 years of incarceration. That is a stunning figure, and one that should send a warning to other gang members in this and other communities. It shows that we're serious about targeting serious violent criminals who organize into groups and commit crimes together. We will continue to make these kind of impactful investigations and prosecutions our highest priority.

The Goonz prosecution has had a direct, measurable impact on public safety not only in Hurt Park, but throughout the Roanoke Valley. These men are no longer on the corners of this neighborhood selling drugs. They are rather sitting in federal prison, looking up at long prison sentences. Their absence has led to a tremendous decrease in violent home invasions throughout this area. In a 16-month period from the middle of 2008 through 2009, prior to the prosecution of the Goonz, there were 87 home invasion robberies in the City of Roanoke. In 2010, following the prosecution of the Goonz, there were 11 reported home invasion robberies. That decline is attributable to the fine work of these investigators and our prosecutors. It shows that targeted enforcement makes communities safer.

The results in the Goonz case are the product of a truly outstanding and coordinated investigative effort. Law enforcement agencies across all levels have worked to combat the violent crime we've discussed. We are fortunate that the law enforcement community in the Roanoke Valley maintains good working relationships. Those good relationships allowed these investigators to work cooperatively to build a case against this violent criminal enterprise.

The investigation was led by federal agents at the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. These agents identified the Goonz and started the investigation by developing intelligence about their activity. They handled this matter with their characteristic skill and professionalism. The results are a credit to them and their hard work.

The ATF investigators worked with a talented team of local law enforcement officials in pulling this case together. The work of Botetourt County Sheriff Ronald Sprinkle and his men jumped started this case, as one of the most violent home invasions the Goonz committed occurred in that jurisdiction. Sheriff Sprinkle and Commonwealth Attorney Joel Branscome set territory aside and agreed to subsume their case into our larger federal investigation - a significant development that broke the case wide open.

Agents from other area jurisdictions similarly cooperated with this team. Police officers from Roanoke County, Roanoke City, and Vinton provided manpower and intelligence as the case moved forward. In short, the men and women behind me worked seamlessly together across political boundaries to achieve a successful result. Their work in this case is a shining example of what is possible when law enforcement works cooperatively.

Two Assistant United States Attorneys deserve a large share of the credit for putting this case together and bringing it to court. Our Deputy Criminal Chief Thomas Cullen and AUSA Charlene Day worked tirelessly on these cases. They debriefed defendants and put witnesses in grand juries. They drew up charging documents and made careful charging decisions. They were effective advocates for the United States in court. They worked closely with Commonwealth Attorneys in the areas where these home invasions occurred. Like the agents, the lawyers on this team worked together with great effectiveness.

Thank you Thomas, Charlene, and all of the officers for your hard work on this case.

IV. Front End Solutions

As I said, even prosecutions as significant as the Goonz can't alone solve public safety problems. They must be coupled with community empowerment. The stool has two other legs, both of which are being planted in this community.

Today in Hurt Park, without the presence of violent criminal elements, the community is thriving. Private citizens, community groups and local government officials are planting the seeds of success. We are seeing those seeds take root.

Today in Hurt Park a Freedom First Credit Union is under development to provide fair and affordable neighborhood banking.

Today in Hurt Park the West End Center for Youth will announce a new leadership initiative and enjoys 32 years of providing safety and stability to over 2,000 Hurt Park children.

Today in Hurt Park, Roanoke City Schools is setting a new standard for academic excellence by providing increased community experiences and exposure to the arts.

Today in Hurt Park, TAP, Rebuilding Together, Habitat for Humanity and the Roanoke Housing and Redevelopment Authority are in the second phase of improving housing options.

And Today in Hurt Park, a team of community leaders, TAP, Apple Ridge Farm, local churches, NAACP, business leaders, city schools, city officials, the United Way and the Chamber of Commerce, and other organizations, are toiling to complete a Promise Neighborhoods Planning Grant from the U.S. Department of Education, a grant my office fully supports and will do what we can to achieve.

The Promise Neighborhood grant will build a continuum of cradle-through-college-to-career solutions. The grant will give the community the ability to knock down stumbling blocks that get in the way of education, things such as nutrition, financial literacy, health care challenges and the stresses of poverty.

We are pleased to be part of this grant and are confident that the local community will use this money to continue growing the Hurt Park community into a fully revitalized and productive part of Roanoke.

Our support for the revitalization of Hurt Park is just one way in which the Department of Justice is planting the seeds of crime prevention and community revitalization.

Last February, my office partnered with the Council for Community Services to provide free grant training to 75 community representatives throughout the district.

We have also partnered with Gov. Bob McDonnell's Secretary of Public Safety and will present grant information at a Statewide Gang Prevention Training conference in Richmond next month.

With the leadership of our Community Outreach Coordinator Gwen Mason, our office will continue to do what we can support prevention and reentry programs. And we will continue to find ways to link that community empowerment with our traditional enforcement functions.

V. Community Garden

We chose the community garden to talk about the positive developments in Hurt Park because it is the perfect symbol for our holistic approach. Today, this garden thrives. It has been tended by the residents of this community. Like the Hurt Park neighborhood, it is full of vibrant life and hope.

To make this garden thrive, community members prepared the soil by removing unwanted weeds, planted seeds and watered each individual plant.

We must now do the same for the Hurt Park Community. We must weed out those unwanted criminal elements of the community and replace them with the seeds of hope and progress. As those seeds take root in the soil, we must nurture and care for them, making sure they have the proper resources they need to thrive. Soon, the seed of hope will spread and, like this garden, Hurt Park will be a thriving community full of hope.

My office, along with other law enforcement agencies in the area, community groups and members of the community, have begun to see the first seeds of revitalization take root here. We must now work to water and care for those seeds to continue to progress we are already making.

VI. National Night Out

Today in Hurt Park, and all across the city, all across Virginia and all across this great nation, as the sun sets, National Night Out begins. National Night Out is a program which recognizes the value of the most important players in the effort to keep communities safe - the people who live there. At barbeques, fish fries, cookouts and concerts across this and other communities, people will literally come out together and demonstrate their collective priority on safety. They will walk with police officers and their partners in government who share that priority. They'll celebrate, relax, and get to know each other.

They'll also reinforce relationships and cement the cooperation necessary to keep neighborhoods like Hurt Park safe. None of us who work in government can achieve that result if the folks who live in a community are not supportive. We can't be all places at once. We need the assistance of people who live there who take collective responsibility to keep their neighborhood safe.

Tonight, neighbors here and across Roanoke will stand united with their law enforcement partners in the fight against crime. Tonight in Hurt Park and in other neighborhoods across town, people will stand up for safety. We invite each citizen to be a part of the solution to criminal activity in their own backyard. Tonight, walk your streets with your neighbors. Say hello to the officers who are sworn to protect and serve. Thank the police for the great work they do. In so doing, you will help send a powerful message that lawbreakers like the Goonz have no place in Hurt Park and our communities.

Thank you.