

CITY OF MERCED

"Gateway to Yosemite"



May 6, 2016

The Honorable Adam Gray
California Assembly
California State Capitol
PO Box 942849
Sacramento, CA 94249-0021

Dear Mr. Gray,

I am writing to strongly endorse your effort to include desperately needed funding to address an epidemic of homicides and gang related violence in Merced County. For the last couple of years, Merced County has earned the unwanted distinction of being the murder capital of California. This designation is based on the state Attorney General's annual report on Homicide in California. In 2014, the last year for which statistics are available, Merced County reported 10.9 homicides per 100,000 people, the highest for any county with a population of 100,000 or greater.

Merced County was number two in this category in 2013, and after another 31 homicides in 2015 we are bracing for news that we are first in the state again in this most unwelcome category. In the last three calendar years, 2013-15, Merced County recorded 93 homicides, an alarming increase over previous years and a grim statement of escalating gang violence in our communities.

The reasons for this dramatic upswing in homicides are rooted primarily in gang violence, often directed by gang leaders incarcerated in state prison. Two major undercover operations undertaken in the last three years in Merced County, Operation Red Eye and Operation Red Right Hand, coordinated by the state Bureau of Investigations out of Fresno, resulted in the arrests of more than a hundred gang members and revealed a sophisticated network of gang communication originating in state prison and directing gang violence and narcotics sales on the streets of Merced County.

Because of systemic poverty in Merced County, and the lingering effects of the recession, law enforcement resources have been decimated at a time they are needed most. Some of the local law enforcement agencies that have participated in Merced County's gang task force in past years have been compelled to withdraw their personnel because of financial crises in their own jurisdictions.

Of particular note and concern is that the spiraling murder rate in Merced comes at a time when homicide numbers are falling dramatically across California.

According to the gang suppression experts in the Attorney General's Fresno office, the most essential need is extensive and accurate intelligence gathering regarding gang activities. Accordingly, we have fashioned a new strategy that is less reliant on after the fact criminal investigation and more focused on identifying and interrupting gang violence before it occurs. This violence interruption/prevention emergency response, or VIPER, program would utilize information management to direct enforcement and prosecution resources. It is well understood that much of the gang violence is coordinated by a few key players, both in state prison and in the local community. By identifying and targeting those individuals, we believe we can substantially bring down the activities that are resulting in epidemic violence.

An integral part of the VIPER strategy is developing new community initiatives and relationships which have been shown to be effective in persuading current and potential gang members to abandon the gang life.

Intelligence information that has been obtained in previous undercover operations underscores the fact that Merced County is in the epicenter of a transnational narcotics distribution network and thus our problem is, in fact, a state problem. Consequently, we believe it is a necessary and appropriate use of state resources to target one of California's festering gang violence centers.

The funds requested in the state budget will be targeted exclusively to identifying and interdicting the wave of gang violence that is currently swamping a county of 260,000 people. We believe this will require a multi-year commitment consistent with the funds requested.

On behalf of the citizens of Merced County, we are extraordinarily grateful for the consideration of this request.

Sincerely,

Stanley P. Thurston, Mayor
City of Merced