

THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENT

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STATE HOUSE OF MASSACHUSETTS
MAY 30 2006
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MITT ROMNEY
GOVERNOR

KERRY HEALEY
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

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ROMNEY SIGNS BILL TO CRACK DOWN ON GANG VIOLENCE

Law adds new crimes, stiffens penalties to protect witnesses in gang crimes

Governor Mitt Romney today took aim at gang violence and witness intimidation by signing into law a measure that gives prosecutors the tools they need to protect witnesses. Elected officials, religious and community leaders and law enforcement officials participated in the bipartisan signing ceremony in Dorchester.

"Our criminal justice and public safety professionals now have a real tool to protect those who join with us to take a stand against crime and violence in our communities," Romney said during the ceremony at St. Peter's School, which specializes in youth programs that have shown great success in keeping students out of gangs and connecting them to their community. "Witnesses who have the courage to come forward and testify should not have to live in fear for cooperating with prosecutors to keep their communities safe."

The new law, based on legislation filed last year by Governor Romney and Lieutenant Governor Kerry Healey, is a major re-write and expansion of what constitutes witness intimidation and establishes a witness protection program in the state for the first time.

"With new laws on the books, we can help protect witnesses who live in fear and allow them to come forward and participate in the criminal justice system," said Lieutenant Governor Healey. "Empowering witnesses will reduce the backlog of unsolved gang-related homicides that threatens the safety of our citizens."

Under the new legislation, prosecutors will be able to seek punishment for those who attempt to interfere with cases by intimidating potential witnesses. Anyone who threatens or injures a witness will face up to 10 years in state prison and up to a \$5,000 fine.

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New protection services are now available for those testifying in gang-related cases. Prosecutors will have the authority to provide armed protection during or after a criminal proceeding, as well as transfer witnesses to safe housing facilities and provide public school relocations for children.

"Concerned citizens have worked so hard to put an end to gang violence in the City of New Bedford and I am so happy to see this day arrive," said Phyllis Lopes, whose grandson Cecil was murdered by gang members on Halloween night in 2004. "We will never stop working together to help make our streets and communities safe and we hope this new law will restore confidence in our neighborhoods."

The law also cracks down on gang members who circulate grand jury testimony with the intent to impede criminal proceedings or deter witnesses from testifying. The use of grand jury transcripts or minutes of testimony to carry out that purpose is now a crime punishable by up to five years in prison or up to a \$5,000 fine.

"As a community leader, I am pleased to see this bill signed by our governor. It directly helps law enforcement, but also benefits those of us on the frontlines of moving our communities away from the culture of violence and the silence that feeds it," said Reverend Jeffrey L. Brown, pastor of the Union Baptist Church in Cambridge and Co-Founder of the Boston Ten Point Coalition. "Our neighborhoods are physically, psychologically and spiritually torn apart as young people kill each other, and this law will encourage those who see shootings to report them so that those who perpetrate violence will be brought to justice."

The new witness protection program, funded by a \$1.5 million appropriation, will be overseen by a Witness Protection Board comprised of the Secretary of Public Safety, the Attorney General, the Auditor, a chief of police and a District Attorney.

"At its heart, our justice system relies on the courage of citizens who step forward and testify. Beginning today, these witnesses can speak knowing that they are not alone; that law enforcement can provide basic protections and that there are tools available to punish those who intimidate to undermine justice," said Suffolk District Attorney Dan Conley. "This smart and balanced new law is an accomplishment that the Romney-Healey administration, the Legislature, District Attorneys, mayors, police chiefs, and community and faith-based leaders should take great pride in. It is an enormous step forward for the safety of our neighborhoods and the confidence of citizens to access our criminal justice system."

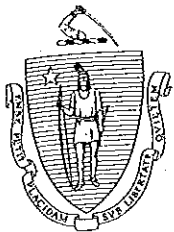
The legislation also creates harsher punishments for unlawful possession of a firearm and a new criminal penalty to discourage the trafficking of "community" or "block" guns, which are shared by gang members who leave them unattended in public for use by other members.

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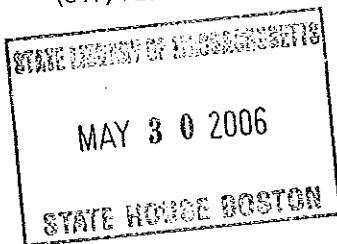
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HEALEY PUSHES FOR PASSAGE OF ANTI-GANG VIOLENCE BILL
Community activists and concerned residents kick off grassroots signature drive

NEW BEDFORD – Lieutenant Governor Kerry Healey today joined local activist, Phyllis Lopes, to launch a petition drive and build support for an anti-gang bill pending on Beacon Hill. Phyllis is the grandmother of Cecil Lopes, who was murdered by gang members on Halloween night in 2004.

The signature drive, led by the Cecil Lopes Foundation, is part of a public effort to pressure the Legislature to pass an anti-gang bill currently stalled on Beacon Hill. To reach citizens across the Commonwealth, the Foundation created a website – www.endgangviolence.com – where visitors can add their name to support tougher laws that crack down on gang crime.

“Crimes go unsolved when witnesses fear retaliation and face intimidation in their neighborhoods and the courtroom,” said Healey. “For more than a year, there has been a bi-partisan effort to protect critical witnesses and put gang members behind bars. We are taking that message to the people in order to get the bill passed.”

Healey filed legislation to protect witnesses of gang crimes from dangerous or life-threatening situations over a year ago and has repeatedly called on the Legislature to send a bill to the Governor’s desk.

In December, Healey traveled across the Commonwealth to meet with law enforcement, education and civic leaders and discuss issues of gang violence. During a meeting in New Bedford, the Lieutenant Governor was inspired by Phyllis and her determination to put end to the violence plaguing her city. According to the Cecil Lopes Foundation, less than five percent of homicides in New Bedford have been solved in the past year.

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Determined to move the anti-gang bill forward, Healey invited Phyllis to join her at the State House where they met with members of the Legislature two months ago. Since then, Healey has visited New Bedford to hear from concerned citizens and victims who have been caught in the crossfire of violent gang activity.

"We're here today to make a difference in the fight against gang violence," Phyllis Lopes. "We need to keep working together and through the leadership of the Lieutenant Governor and concerned citizens, we will make our streets and communities safe."

As a criminologist and former consultant to the U.S. Department of Justice in the 1990s, Healey extensively researched domestic and gang-related violence as well as victim and witness intimidation, identifying measures to improve practices throughout the criminal justice system.

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