

Testimony on Use of Data and the 57+ Blocks Coalition

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Good afternoon, esteemed Council Members, and thank you for having me here today. My name is Nissim Lebovits and I'm speaking to you today as a representative of Clean & Green Philly, a member of the 57+ Blocks Coalition. I am grateful to be part of the conversation, and excited that City Council is giving consideration to place-based interventions to reduce gun violence in Philadelphia.

I would like to make one point to you today. We know that cleaning up vacant properties is one of the most impactful, cost-effective ways of reducing gun violence in our city. By more effectively using data that are already available to us, we can drive targeted, strategic interventions in Philadelphia's vacant properties. We will then find that these properties are not liabilities, but assets that can be leveraged to mitigate gun violence and achieve broader racial, economic, and environmental equity.

Dr. Gina South and her colleagues have shown in several peer-review studies that cleaning and greening vacant properties right here in Philly can reduce gun violence by as much as 29% in the surrounding neighborhood. These interventions also have a number of ancillary benefits, such as improving residents' mental health and reducing heat stress and air pollution. Cleaning and greening is among the most cost-effective, immediate responses to gun crime. Frankly, it's a no-brainer.

The challenge is that Philadelphia has roughly 40,000 vacant properties, each with unique physical conditions, owners, tax liabilities, and so on. Taken together, the challenges of gun violence and property vacancy can easily seem too big and too complex to solve. That's where data and technology can help.

Over the past year, my volunteer team at Clean & Green Philly has developed a free and easy to use online tool that combines public data to help users strategically target the vacant properties in Philadelphia that could have the highest impact on reducing gun violence. We take data on vacancy, gun crime, L&I violations, and active land stewardship to highlight which properties are most in need of place-based interventions. If you go to our website, cleanandgreenphilly.org, you'll see a map of all the vacant properties in Philly sorted into high, medium, and low priority. With this approach, we're able to filter the City's 40,000 vacant properties down to a list of fewer than 7,000 high priority sites.

On top of that, we help users understand what their options are for getting legal access to a property: whether it's available through the Land Bank, or cheap enough to purchase outright, or whether a private land use agreement might be appropriate. We let users filter by neighborhood, relevant RCO boundaries, and more. Our goal is to empower someone like Reuben Jones, from whom you are hearing today, to sort through the overwhelming list of Philly's vacant properties and wind up with just a handful of sites where he has the best chance of doing the highest impact work to reduce gun violence in his neighborhood.

Finally, we also use data to help people think strategically about what interventions might be the most appropriate for their specific situation. We recognize that Philadelphia's vacant properties need to be leveraged for a range of uses. That's why we encourage users to consider options as diverse as creating pocket parks, installing green stormwater infrastructure, creating outdoor seating for local restaurants, or even working to develop affordable housing. In the future, we hope to incorporate datasets that would let us suggest suitable uses for every vacant property in the city—not to tell users what they have to do, but to show them just how broad the possibilities are.

I am tremendously excited by the responses to our website so far. The stakeholders we work with repeatedly tell us how useful they think our site will be. Soon, we plan to add new variables to support more of their needs, like the boundaries of the 57 blocks with the highest rates of gun violence, or a way of assessing how suitable a given property might be for assemblage, or potentially even a model to predict whether a property might be a case of a tangled title. We also plan to share our data directly with key partners like the District Attorney's Office, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, and others. In short, we are optimistic about the potential for data and technology to help address gun violence in Philly through place-based interventions.

But I also want to remind the Council that data and technology can only go so far. What I have heard consistently from community members and other stakeholders is that their biggest obstacle to intervening in vacant properties is not a lack of data—it's that existing policy and law are exceedingly difficult to navigate, especially when community groups are already so limited in their funding and technical capacity. So, without improvements to relevant law and policy, and without funding and technical support for community groups, data and technology can only do so much.

Nor can this work without partnerships. There are so many people and groups in this city doing outstanding work to reduce gun violence and return vacant properties to productive use. Clean & Green Philly is trying to help bring these people together. We've built a steering committee comprising representatives from CDCs, affordable housing developers, the Land Bank, PHS, and DAO, among others. We're also planning training sessions later this year to bring community groups together to show them how to use our website and to connect them to people who can support their work. We believe that data and technology can bring us out of our silos and into active, sustained collaboration to fight gun violence through place-based interventions.

In conclusion: Philly has the immediate opportunity to proactively leverage our vacant properties to reduce gun violence. That means investing in historically marginalized areas by working with community residents to plant trees, create pocket parks, build affordable housing. My tool, Clean & Green Philly, aims to show how we can use data and technology to strategically target these

interventions for maximum impact. And hopefully, we can come to view vacant properties not as liabilities, but as assets that can help us build a better Philadelphia for all of our residents.

Thank you very much for your time. And please feel free to reach out if you'd like a demo of Clean & Green Philly!