

CENTER FOR
YOUTH  **WELLNESS**
health begins with hope



Mike Aldax of the SF Examiner covers CYW's unique approach to crime fighting in last Sunday's paper. We wanted to share the thoughtful article. See [here](#) for the original piece. @SFExMikeAldax

Bayview center pioneers approach to crime prevention by fighting stress in youths

- Mike Aldax

"Police in the Bayview district are getting crime-fighting help from an unlikely source: A pediatrician.

Founded by innovative pediatrician Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, the Center for Youth Wellness on [Third Street](#) has been a pioneer in the treatment of "toxic stress" in children who are exposed to violence, neglect and other trauma, and who lack a support system. The federal government plans to pump money locally following studies showing there are biological reasons for why a child who suffers chronic adversity might engage in high-risk behaviors as an adult.

In September, District Attorney George Gascón lobbied in [Washington, D.C.](#), and received help from House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, [D-San Francisco](#), to secure \$1 million to

evaluate victimized children in the Bayview. In the eastern section of that neighborhood, Gascón says, 70 percent of black youths are referred to the juvenile justice system by age 17.

Burke Harris has already been doing this work through the Center for Youth Wellness, which has partnered with the California Pacific Medical Center's Bayview Child Health Center to create an integrated health and wellness center for kids. Children being treated for common ailments such as sore throats and fevers are also screened for toxic stress.

To begin to explain this intense type of stress, CYW cites a person's encounter with a bear in the forest. In that moment, the human body enters "fight-or-flight" mode and emergency stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol are released. While that reaction helps humans focus on a problem and survive, children who experience repeated intense stress often find it difficult to turn off their fight-or-flight reactions. The resulting high levels of emergency hormones can alter the structure and function of a child's growing brain and other organs, studies show.

Sitting still in a classroom can be difficult for children who suffer from toxic stress, said Suzy Loftus, CYW's chief operating officer. Research shows that children enduring repeated stress are at higher risk for developing a heart condition or cancer as adults. "If they are exposed to chronic adversity — gunshots, violence in the home, unstable living environment — how are they also supposed to learn to read by the time they're 8 years old?" Loftus said. "When you're not able to read at 8, it will probably lead to behavioral problems in the classroom, suspensions and then truancy."

A 2011 study of more than 700 children in the Bayview showed that just 3 percent of children who had never suffered an "adverse childhood experience" had learning or behavioral problems in school. However, more than 50 percent of the children who had suffered at least four of those adverse experiences ended up with learning or behavioral problems in school. Toxic stress is treatable, Loftus said, adding that CYW's mission is to discover what treatments work best and to make them the national standard.

Loftus, a former San Francisco prosecutor, helped Burke Harris build out the center after working under then-District Attorney Kamala Harris, who is now the California attorney general and who also supports the science and data behind toxic stress in children. CYW and its lead pediatrician have received international recognition, including a profile in *The New Yorker*. Burke Harris was also recently featured as part of Hillary Clinton's philanthropic campaign Too Small to Fail, which promotes research into brain development and nutrition in children. San Francisco police, having seen the cycle of violence afflicting generations of Bayview children, are supporting CYW's work. Police Chief Greg Suhr, a former Bayview station captain, recently spoke about the center at a conference of police chiefs.

"It was something that didn't occur to a lot of the other chiefs," Suhr said, adding that top brass in other cities plan to apply for the same \$1 million grant The City already won.

DA ready for a different approach to preventing crime in the Bayview

The District Attorney's Office is currently in the planning stages to determine how \$1 million in federal funding will be used to help ease violence in the eastern Bayview district. District Attorney George Gascón wants the three-year U.S. Department of Justice grant to test the theory that helping victims and witnesses can work to reduce future crimes. "Many people who are victims in an area where there is a high level of violence and crime become offenders at a later date," Gascón said. "It becomes a vicious cycle." About 15 percent of San Franciscans who are on active probation live in the 94124 ZIP code, where exposure to violence is estimated to be four times higher than the citywide rate, according to Gascón. "Lots of funding has been provided for policing and prosecution," Gascón said. "Too little attention has been given toward working with the victims." Gascón wants the federal grant to lead to a "nuts and bolts strategy" on how to provide treatment and services to victims. The project will involve organizations within the community who are already doing that work, Gascón said.

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