

October 5, 2016

To: Members of Congress  
CC: Lisa Monaco, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism  
Secretary Jeh Johnson, Department of Homeland Security  
Attorney General Loretta Lynch, Department of Justice  
Director James Comey, Federal Bureau of Investigation  
Chairs and Ranking Members of the Judiciary Committee, House and Senate  
Chairs and Ranking Members of Homeland Security Committee, House and Senate  
Michael Ortiz, Deputy Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism, State Department

Dear Members of Congress:

As researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago, we are writing to express our deep concern regarding the questionable use of academic research to support policies, grant programs, and initiatives related to countering violent extremism (CVE). CVE supporters often reference the Montgomery County Model (MCM), developed by the World Organization for Resource Development and Education (WORDE), as an “evidence-based” and “empirically-driven” CVE prototype. Given the centrality of the MCM in the justification of CVE policies and programs, we revisited the external evaluation conducted by Drs. Michael J. Williams, John G. Horgan, and William P. Evans. We analyzed this Department of Justice-funded evaluation because it is the academic research that policymakers point to as evidence of the model’s success, despite its flawed findings. As a form of independent peer-review, the following analysis highlights our concerns.

**Evaluation Overview:**

WORDE’s website explains that the MCM (now known as BRAVE) “is a *community-led* public safety model” used to “generate[] public awareness about the risk factors of violent extremism and empower[] the appropriate figures to intervene with vulnerable individuals before they choose a path of violence.” The website also states that “the model is now evidence-based and has undergone an independent, scientific evaluation.” Through surveys and focus groups, the DOJ-funded research evaluation of the MCM first explored why people do or do not participate in WORDE programs and how WORDE programs change people’s behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge. The first phase of the study also identified what people considered to be risk factors of violent extremism and their willingness to report observation of these factors to a third party like law enforcement. Lastly, the researchers studied the barriers that prevent people from engaging in CVE help-seeking behaviors. Given these findings, WORDE created CVE-relevant curricula and a training manual called “Developing a Community-Led Approach to Countering Violent Extremism.” Meanwhile, the research team developed and piloted a set of instruments designed to evaluate CVE-relevant programs. The research team then used these instruments to evaluate WORDE programs. Despite how public figures celebrate the success of WORDE’s model, the conducted evaluation does not indicate the model is effective in countering violent extremism, nor assesses the utility of WORDE’s CVE interventions created partway through the evaluation.

**A Closer Look at the Evaluation:**

Through focus groups and surveys, the researchers explored why people do or do not participate in WORDE programs and how WORDE programs change people’s behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge. WORDE programs included both “CVE-specific” activities as well as “CVE-relevant”

events that emphasized multiculturalism and building community relationships. WORDE's CVE-relevant programs included Youth Against Hunger where families from diverse racial and faith groups delivered food to the homeless. WORDE designed this program to "promote volunteerism, youth civic engagement, cross-race/cross-religion social integration, and family relationship building" (p. 16). As a part of its CVE-relevant multicultural programming, WORDE developed justART, which brought together culturally diverse youth to produce digital art (p. 16). CVE-specific programs included Islamic Training for Law Enforcement, which aimed to build cooperatives between police and communities as well as "referral networks" to "channel individuals who are deemed at-risk for violent offenses" (p. 15). WORDE also offered community education opportunities, with topics ranging from conflict resolution to youth engagement (p. 15).

WORDE participants identified several experiential outcomes that encouraged their participation in WORDE programs, outcomes linked to *possible*, but not scientifically-identified, CVE-relevant risk factors (e.g., I wouldn't feel lonely) (p. 60). Researchers distilled participant responses to 14 main outcomes of WORDE programs that the *research team*, not other scientifically-proven research, "considered most CVE-relevant" (p. 60). These 14 outcomes correspond to participant phrases, sometimes used verbatim: 1) I feel welcome, 2) I feel a part of something bigger than myself, 3) I feel a sense of teamwork, 5) I make friends with people from other race, 6) I feel useful, 7) I have responsibilities, 8) I have leadership responsibilities, 9) I feel a sense of purpose, 10) I feel free of peer pressure, 11) I feel accepted, 12) I wouldn't feel lonely, 13) I wouldn't feel afraid to talk to others, and 14) I learn about cultures other than my own (p. 62). On the basis of these 14 identified outcomes of WORDE participation, the researchers created a "Brief Volunteer Program Outcome Assessment" (p. 60). This instrument is a survey that asked participants to rate their level of agreement with the 14 statements indicated above, on a 7-point Likert scale, from completely disagree (1) to completely agree (7) (p. 157).

It is important to highlight that the researchers assessed the 14 outcomes of WORDE programs in relation to *hypothetical but not scientifically-proven CVE-relevant risk factors*. In fact, the researchers later admit that "scientists have yet to discover reliable, generalizable risk factors regarding the likelihood that individuals (from the general public) will commit extremism violence" (p. 53). Moreover, the researchers argue that "a thorough discussion of the theoretical, and empirical, linkages between those outcomes and factors (reported in over two decades of peer-reviewed terrorism studies and intergroup-conflict literature) associated with preemption of violent extremism is beyond the scope of the present work" (p. 60). Although the researchers cannot identify CVE-relevant risk factors nor understand how the outcomes they included in its Brief Volunteer Program Outcome Assessment connect to the preemption of violent extremism, they used this instrument "to assess the extent to which WORDE's volunteer-service or multicultural programming resulted in the *potentially* CVE-relevant outcomes purported by other participants" (p. 60, emphasis added). In other words, the instrument evaluates if WORDE programming outcomes correspond to the outcomes *earlier identified by WORDE participants* and if these outcomes relate to *possible but not scientifically-proven CVE-relevant risk factors*.

By way of summary, the researchers ask, "Are WORDE's programs effective" (p. 64)? The researchers claim that "the final phase yielded validation that WORDE's volunteer-service and multicultural programming had intended effects on 12 of 14 outcomes *believed* to be CVE-relevant" (p. 64, emphasis added). Although the researchers cannot scientifically prove that the outcomes they (and research participants) identified are CVE-relevant risk factors, they conclude that "these data make (to wit) WORDE, with respect to its volunteer-service and multicultural programming, the first evidence-based CVE-relevant program in the U.S." (p. 64). WORDE's programs may have proven effective, but *we do not know what the programs are effective at doing*, aside from producing outcomes that may or may not be related to countering violent extremism. In fact, the tested outcomes are based on what participants in the first phase of the study identified as key outcomes, rather than outcomes that have been scientifically-proven to reduce violent extremism. That is, the

research evaluated if WORDE programs achieved what participants said it achieved, without knowing if these outcomes counter violent extremism.

### **Study Limitations:**

In addition to the concerns we outlined above, we also note a few limitations of this research study. First, the researchers acknowledge that the study did not evaluate CVE interventions WORDE developed “midway through the present evaluation’s data collection” (p. 85). These interventions include a “peer gatekeeper training,” which “trained high school students on recognizing and assisting peers experiencing isolation, personal crisis, and bullying (including cyberbullying)” (p. 85). Although the peer-gatekeeping training program was not evaluated, the researchers state that “there remains great promise in peer-gatekeeping as a means of locally-led, individually focused, early CVE intervention” (p. 50; p. 88). Moreover, the researchers did not evaluate its Crossroads program, one of WORDE’s “tailored/secondary prevention initiatives, whereby professionally trained, culturally sensitive clinicians engage with clients (including refugees) on a wide range of psychological and social work issues, including those related to acculturation” (p. 85). The exclusion of Crossroads from the evaluation is concerning because it is one of WORDE’s most controversial CVE programs, as it involves assessing participants for purported, but not proven, violent extremism vulnerabilities and then assigning interventions which may or may not include law enforcement notification.

Second, although some participants “were informed that the study was sponsored by the National Institute of Justice as part of a multi-faceted, community-led effort to promote community cohesion, resiliency, and the prevention of violence” (p. 109), the researchers do not report informing research subjects that their participation in WORDE’s volunteer programs may expose them to an assessment of their vulnerability to violent extremism nor indicate who will conduct that assessment (WORDE staff or other participants like police officers). This is a primary concern expressed by opponents of CVE.

Given these limitations, it is important that policymakers recognize that WORDE’s CVE interventions were not evaluated, and that the concerns regarding the assessment element of WORDE programs were not addressed.

### **Conclusion:**

Held up to academic scrutiny, the evaluation does not support the claims made by Dr. Mirahmadi and others. In fact, there are additional concerns, including the “Suite of CVE-Relevant Outcomes and/or Control Measures” it offers as evaluation instruments based on hypothetical scenarios about “illegal acts” that could “end up injuring someone” (p. 38), the validity of its findings, and how statistically insignificant data were interpreted. Given these concerns, we urge you to recognize the limitations of the Montgomery County Model evaluation, which do not support claims of “empirically-driven” or “evidence-based” programming that effectively counters violent extremism. Although there is evidence that the MCM volunteer programs are effective at achieving the outcomes identified by participants as important, the results of this evaluation do not verify that these programs are effective in countering violent extremism. Lastly, the evaluation does not address any of the concerns raised by civil rights advocates and community organizations regarding negative impacts of CVE programs.

Sincerely,

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