

# **BUILD urges city voters to be irate about alarming murder rate**

An interfaith group wants the Baltimore faithful to show their outrage at the city's soaring homicide rate and flex their political muscles as candidates for mayor and city council seek their votes during the summer campaign season.

With 45 city churches making up a bulk of its membership, Baltimore United In Leadership Development (BUILD) is seeking 25,000 signatures backing its political agenda, pushing voter registration and urging candidates to adopt aggressive plans to battle Baltimore's gang violence, illegal drug market and murder rate.

"We've met with Mayor (Sheila) Dixon and Police Commissioner (Leonard) Hamm, but we haven't been able to get them to publicly admit the murder rate has produced a crisis in the city," said Father Joseph L. Muth Jr., pastor of St. Matthew, Northwood. "The murder rate is out of control in the city and we want our leaders to admit it, so we can find a way out of this mess we are in."

With at least 140 confirmed city homicides since the start of 2007 – 18 more than last year at the same time – BUILD leaders are pressing candidates to develop viable long-term plans to address city violence.

The organization hosted a candidate's forum at St. Matthew June 10, drawing a crowd of more than 1,000, providing residents with an opportunity to voice their concerns for city youth safety, after-school programs and affordable housing.

Our Lady of Pompei, Highlandtown, parishioner Cristita Martinez told the candidates for mayor and city council president she had withdrawn her son from the public school system because he had been brutalized too often by other youth and she feared for his safety.

William H. Lemmel Middle School student Anthony Dantzler, 13, told the candidates he has known 13 young people who have been murdered during his lifetime, his West Baltimore neighborhood lacks a recreation center and is riddled with boarded

up homes, and that he believes city leaders have abandoned his section of the city and urban youth.

The BUILD agenda calls for city leaders to address Baltimore's lack of opportunity and safe places for young people and to invest in city youth as part of a long-term plan to rein in violence.

"We have to start with the kids," Father Muth said. "We need a long-term investment, but we also need immediate action to address what I believe is a state of emergency."

The organization is calling for the creation of 30 fully funded, fully staffed recreation centers which will be open nights and weekends to provide safe havens for city youth. There are currently 46 recreation centers, but very few of them are fully staffed or fully funded.

BUILD also wants the city to work with corporate leaders to double the number of summer jobs for youth, provide 2,000 extra slots in after-school programs and fully fund the Affordable Housing Trust Fund.

Catholic and protestant churches have been recruiting volunteers to go door to door in city neighborhoods to encourage voter registration, educate residents about BUILD's agenda, add signatures to their petitions and encourage citizens to express outrage to candidates about Baltimore's homicide rate and gang violence.

Though the non-profit group is prohibited from endorsing any of the Democratic candidates in the Sept. 11 primary election, it does plan to inform its faithful base about each contender's stance on the issues and allow voters to draw their own conclusions, Father Muth said.