

Our City, Our Planet, Our Future: Chicago-Area Elected Officials Take on Nuclear Weapons

Report by Ms. Jacqueline Cabasso, Executive Advisor for Mayors for Peace

On June 22, 2021, the Union of Concerned Scientists hosted a virtual event, titled “[Our City, Our Planet, Our Future: Chicago-Area Elected Officials Take on Nuclear Weapons](#).” The forum was opened by David Combs, of the Union of Concerned Scientists, who declared: “We’re here to talk about the local issue of nuclear weapons.” Observing that when they had met just a week earlier, U.S. President Biden and Russian President Putin had reaffirmed that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought, he noted that “the U.S. is moving in the opposite direction,” maintaining a massive nuclear arsenal, keeping nuclear weapons on hair-trigger alert, and preparing to spend billions of dollars in the coming years on new nuclear weapons.

“In Chicago and all of Illinois,” he said, “we’re not waiting on a few national leaders to solve our problems.” He explained that [Evanston, Illinois “led the charge” in 2020 by passing a resolution](#) that calls upon the U.S. government to embrace the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and make global nuclear disarmament the centerpiece of our national security policy.

In passing the resolution, Evanston joined the “[Back From the Brink](#)” campaign by calling upon the U.S. government to spearhead a global effort to prevent nuclear war by: renouncing the option of using nuclear weapons first; ending the sole, unchecked authority of any president to launch a nuclear attack; taking U.S. nuclear weapons off hair-trigger alert; cancelling the plan to replace its entire arsenal with enhanced weapons; and actively pursuing a verifiable agreement among nuclear-armed states to eliminate their nuclear arsenals. Back From the Brink has been endorsed by 350 organizations, and resolutions have been adopted by more than 50 U.S. cities and counties and four U.S. states.

Mr. Combs expressed hope local organizers could build on Evanston’s leadership and support a proposed Chicago resolution as well as further statewide efforts. Panelists included Hirokazu Miyazaki, Professor of Anthropology in Evanston, Illinois and a Nagasaki Peace Correspondent, Chicago Alderwoman Maria Hadden, who plans to introduce a Back From the Brink resolution in the Chicago City Council soon, Mayor Daniel Biss of Evanston, Illinois State Representative Robyn Gabel, an early supporter of the Evanston resolution who subsequently introduced a resolution in the Illinois State House, Illinois State Representative Denyse Wang Stoneback, and David Borris, President of the Chicago Area Peace Action chapter, who introduced a [Back From the Brink sign-on letter from local, county and state officials](#), expected to be delivered to President Biden and members of the U.S. Congress in August 2021.

Mr. Combs also recognized Chicago area Members of the U.S. Congress, Jan Schakowsky and Mike Quigley, who support these efforts to fundamentally reform U.S. nuclear policy but were unable to join this event because they were called away to vote in the House of Representatives.

The Back From the Brink Campaign is cooperating with Mayors for Peace to recruit new members in the United States. [Advocacy Tools | Back from the Brink \(preventnuclearwar.org\)](#)

Links:

Recording of the webinar: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5imju2xaASg>

Evanston, Illinois Back From the Brink Resolution:
<https://preventnuclearwar.org/resolutions/Evanston.pdf>

Back From the Brink Campaign: [Back from the Brink](#) | [The Call to Prevent Nuclear War](#)

Back Form the Brink sign-on letter from local, county and state officials: [US Officials Letter](#) | [Back from the Brink \(preventnuclearwar.org\)](#)

[Advocacy Tools](#) | [Back from the Brink \(preventnuclearwar.org\)](#)

Highlights from the panelists remarks.

Hirokazu Miyazaki, Professor of Anthropology at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois and a Nagasaki Peace Correspondent began by reading a message from Mayors for Peace Vice-President Mayor Tomihisa Taue of Nagasaki. In his greeting, Mayor Taue recalled the tireless efforts of the Hibakusha and declared that the January 2021 entry-into-force of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons marked the fruition of their wishes and a start to the realization of a world without nuclear weapons.

Professor Miyazaki explained that through the Mayors for Peace campaign, the mayors and citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have long worked with mayors and citizens around the world to advance a vision of a world without nuclear weapons. Noting that Chicago and Evanston are members of Mayors for Peace, Professor Miyazaki observed that while there are skeptics who see no role for ordinary citizens and local elected officials in international security matters such as nuclear disarmament, in his view, international peace cannot be built without careful attention to locally specific issues, experiences, and memories.

Nuclear weapons are not simply strategic military tools, he explained. They also have economic, racial, environmental, and moral implications whose manifestations are “deeply local and personal.” In order to fully appreciate the inhumanity of nuclear weapons we must first understand the specificity of the long-term human and environmental consequences of these weapons of mass destruction in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the Marshall Islands, and other test sites in the U.S. and around the world, many of which are colonized, indigenous territories.

If we are to build a world without nuclear weapons, he said, we must work together as global citizens in solidarity with these communities that have endured violence and injustice of all kinds. Professor Miyazaki concluded: “Each small step we take toward a more peaceful world, and the City and State level resolutions we are considering, is not simply symbolic. It represents new relationships anchored in shared knowledge and hope. These relationships are concrete resources for the peace that will render nuclear weapons unnecessary.”

Chicago Alderwoman Maria Hadden began by saying that as a member of the millennial generation, the role of nuclear weapons did not have a heavy presence as she came of age. We need to bring this issue to younger generations, she said. Chicago is contributing about \$500 million a year in taxes to nuclear weapons that can completely destroy life on earth. When we brought this to the attention of our youth advisory committee, she explained, the members, who are mostly high school age, found it to be ludicrous, and expressed their support for a Chicago City Council Back From the Brink resolution.

If a teenager can, within 30 minutes, absorb the information and use their life experience to understand how we should not be spending our dollars on nuclear weapons, and that we should be working towards demilitarization, honoring international treaties, and abolishing nuclear weapons, Ms. Hadden declared, then I believe we can make our case to a broader range of individuals. We have been working with the Union of Concerned Scientists on a resolution that we will be entering into council next month, she said. The resolution is to make a statement for the City of Chicago, to call upon the U.S. government to cease spending Chicagoans federal tax dollars on nuclear weapons, to embrace the United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, and to make global nuclear disarmament a centerpiece of our national security policy.

She concluded: “The threat of nuclear devastation is very real.” With all of the other issues we have to face, from climate change, to gun control to violence prevention, and a lot of local things we’re focused on, “we can walk and chew gum at the same time.” As Chicagoans and local elected officials, talking about the violence prevention we want to do while giving our federal government \$500 million a year to arm at the global scale, seems like a disconnect. Now is the time.

Mayor Daniel Biss of Evanston has only been mayor since May 10, 2021, but as a resident he’s enthusiastic and supportive of its 2020 resolution. In response to the imagined question, why are you talking about this as the mayor of a small town” There’s a specific nexus.... There are two fundamentally different frames of mind regarding questions of shared safety and security. One positions state violence as a protector, the other positions state violence as violence. Even if state violence is in some circumstances necessary, it is inescapable that violence generates cycles of increased violence, perpetuates harm, and does damage that is felt not only months later, but years and generations later.” The way we conceptualize the deployment of state violence in the context of geopolitical relations, he explained, is connected to the way we contemplate the deployment of state violence when the perpetrator is a local government law enforcement entity.

Mayor Bliss continued: “I think we have a real moment now in this country where we’ve been gifted an opportunity to engage in a radically different kind of thinking about what it means to deploy violence and what it means about ourselves when the solutions we construct to our most pressing problems are themselves designed in the language of violence. I think if we rethink that properly, we’ll see a really different society, a society built on a much more humanistic vision of our relationships with one other, a society built on restoration rather than vengeance, and a society where we’re going to have a very different vision of what true shared safety and security means. I think the work being done on an international context is conceptually and morally of a piece that we’re trying to do in our own communities.”

He concluded: “I think we have a chance if we seize the moment to change the way decisions get made right now. If we do that properly there will be a greater level of safety around the globe, safety from the most heinous forms of violence, but a fundamentally different way of treating one another and reacting to one another’s errors and lifting one and other up. I think that’s a goal we should all aspire to.”

Illinois State Representative Robyn Gabel, an early supporter of the Evanston resolution, subsequently introduced a resolution in the Illinois State House. She explained that she grew up doing duck and cover drills in school because there could be a bomb dropped any time. “The idea of nuclear war has been with me my whole life.” She was extremely fearful during the Trump presidency, she said, when we know he had his finger on the trigger and that at any point he could press the button. “Having that kind of power in one person is terrifying.” One objective of the Back From the Brink Campaign is to prevent one person from having their finger on the trigger.

“The United Nations Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons has entered into force,” she said, “and I think we have a responsibility to make sure it is implemented.” There’s a lot of support around the world for this. We’re not the only ones in fear of a nuclear holocaust. “I think it’s important for Chicago to join with the other municipalities that have supported the Back From the Brink campaign, including Evanston, my hometown.”

Illinois State Representative Denyse Wang Stoneback, a state representative for a district which includes parts of Chicago, was sworn in in January 2021. “What brought me into politics was activism,” she explained. Following the Sandy Hook school shooting she formed a grassroots activist group which grew to become an Illinois nonprofit organization that continues today. She endorsed Mayor Bliss’ comment that “violence perpetuates further cycles of violence,” and explained the importance of both working together and setting goals for bold, forward thinking change.

“We need to urge the United States to be a leader in the pursuit of global nuclear disarmament,” she said. “When you think about the destruction that could be brought by a single detonation nuclear weapons should be on everyone’s radar.” One nuclear detonation anywhere in the world could kill millions of people and have a devastating impact on the economy and the environment. “The implications are too large for any elected official to ignore.... It would be utterly catastrophic. It behooves all of us to act to prevent.”

The amount of money we spend annually on building and maintaining nuclear weapons in unconscionable, Ms. Stoneback said. Nuclear weapons make us less safe and accelerate the arms race. “Here we have the opportunity to not only prevent mass destruction, but also to use those funds in other real issues that our communities are facing. Government at all levels see the need for economic recovery, public health preparedness, health care, food insecurity and climate change. “Addressing racial and economic injustices through investment in underserved communities is critical. This issue has no boundaries. Our children and future generations deserve to live in a world where there is hope and I am really heartened to see all of us working together to make that a reality.”