

# **Study Committee to Reduce Gun Violence Report to City Council**

**Monday, November 16, 2020 – 2:00 pm session**

## **Priorities and Action Items – November 2020**

### **Summary of Work to Date**

The Task Force to Reduce Gun Violence was created on June 3, 2019 by City Council in response to increased incidents of gun violence in our community. The task force, now called the Study Committee to Reduce Gun Violence, is comprised of members of the community including educators, health care professionals, trauma-informed professionals, law enforcement and first responders, youth mentors and citizens whose lives are directly impacted by gun violence. The Task Force made its original recommendations to City Council on November 4, 2019.

The Study Committee's purpose is to study, develop, and recommend strategies for consideration by City Council for implementation to reduce gun violence within the City of Roanoke. Additionally, our efforts are focused on creating meaningful, tangible and transformative programs and strategies designed to invest in our community's brightest and best resources – our children, youth and families – to provide multiple paths to success and ways to belong and grow that are life-giving and life-sustaining.

The Study Committee convened Community Stakeholders on February 24, 2020 to identify and engage community partners in addressing the recommendations in five key areas: Safer Neighborhoods, Education, Reducing Gang Activity, Violence and Incarceration Recidivism, City Service and Rapid Response, and Communication and Marketing. Due to Covid-19, the Study Committee and Working Groups resumed meetings virtually in July 2020 to build out the recommendations into key priorities and action steps.

### **Current Realities**

During every meeting we receive updates on local data from the Roanoke Police Department's I-Star crime analysis team regarding incidents of violent crime in our community, with a focus on incidents of gun violence. In 2020, we have seen a significant increase in incidents of gun violence, with 10 homicides, 40 aggravated assaults and 1 domestic aggravated assault related specifically to incidents where the victim was hit by gunfire.<sup>1</sup> This compares with a year-to-date total of 13 homicides, 164 aggravated assaults and 48 domestic aggravated assaults.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gun Violence Data 11.12.2020, Roanoke Police Department, I-Star Crime Analysis Report, presented to Study Committee to Reduce Gun Violence.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

A three-year comparison where victims were hit by gunfire shows 8 homicides in 2018, 11 in 2019 and 10 in 2020. Aggravated Assaults were 36 in 2018, 23 in 2019 and 40 in 2020. Domestic Aggravated Assaults show one for each year.<sup>3</sup>

During our recent meeting on Friday, November 13, we received the following information related to incidents of gunshot violence with a confirmed or suspected connection to gang activity and violence:

51 Incidents of Gun Shot Wounds:

31 (78.4%) victims and/or suspects with confirmed connection to a gang

9 (17.6%) victims and/or suspects with suspected connection to a gang

11 (21.6%) victims and/or suspects with no connection to a gang

Through our community-based initiatives, combined with efforts in collaboration with the Roanoke Police Department, and the Office of the United States Attorney for Western Virginia, we are focused on a community-wide effort to focus on reducing gang activity and violence and make every effort to keep our community safe and a place where all citizens can feel safe, be healthy and thrive.

### **Study Committee Working Group Top Priorities and Action Steps**

**Safer Neighborhoods Working Group** (Nicole Ross and Rev. Tim Harvey, Facilitators)

Our primary purpose is to address the root causes that contribute to acts of violence and to create meaningful and transformative efforts that, with community engagement, will enhance Roanoke's priority of safe and healthy neighborhoods. These priorities are indicative of community-based programs that address prevention, strengthen and sustain relationships, and enhance neighborhood livability.

**TOP PRIORITY: Interactive Community Story-telling Public Art Project** (in collaboration with Roanoke Arts Commission) to hear stories of citizens regarding community health and safety. We recognize that citizens of Roanoke have different perceptions of safety based on life experience, and we also believe in the power of storytelling to increase our understanding of what life is like wherever we live within Roanoke. By learning of how we as a city can deepen our understanding of community well-being and safety as a whole city, we hope to broaden our imaginations on how we might collectively rise above our challenges and build on our strengths.

#### **Action Steps:**

- **Phase 1** includes a mobile, interactive chalkboard where people will be able to answer short questions about how they perceive the safety of their neighborhoods. There will also be an opportunity to interact on a deeper level through a smartphone app or some other internet-based device. We imagine

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

the chalkboard being available at neighborhood association meetings, the high schools, events at Elmwood Park, various libraries throughout the city, and other such public gatherings (when it is safe to gather). **Phase 2** will expand what we learn in Phase 1 through personal interviews. The collected data will be presented on an interactive GIS map available for all citizens to use, learning about parts of the city with which they are unfamiliar and growing our mutual understanding of each other's lived experiences.

**Additional Priorities and Action Steps:**

- Annual **Bridging the Community Gap Anti-Violence program**, December 10, 2020
- Finish an Educational Video featuring "The Little Blue Truck" teaching K-3 values of self-worth, empathy and kindness in building healthy relationships. The video features community leaders as story tellers and will be available through Roanoke City Public Schools and our city libraries.

**Education Working Group** (Taisha Steele and Decca Knight, facilitators)

Create a city-wide, family educational program that increases child and youth self-awareness, confidence, love, and empathy in the value of human life, while incorporating nonviolent and peer-mediation based practices, through utilization of community partnerships.

**TOP PRIORITY:** Vetting curricula for best practices on educating youth on empathy in relation to prevention and intervention of trauma related to gun violence.

- **Action Step:**

Work with Roanoke City Public Schools, a trauma-responsive school district, to understand the social emotional needs of Roanoke's youth. Social emotional learning is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Social emotional learning is also a foundational aspect of a trauma-responsive community. RCPS is currently assessing the SEL needs of its students in an effort to properly align SEL curricula with student needs. Once RCPS has a broad understanding of our youth's SEL needs, we will be able to determine SEL programming for our larger community. Such programming will address the undercurrents of community violence with a particular focus on emotional growth, empathy, and healthy relationships in the valley.

**Reducing Gang Activity/Violence and Incarceration Recidivism** (Antwyne Calloway, Rabbi Kathy Cohen, facilitators)

A focus on educating the community on the realities of gang activity and violence, along with addressing recidivism for returning citizens who are experiencing transformation, are two essential keys to reducing violent activity in our neighborhoods and city.

**TOP PRIORITY:** To review and adopt a Comprehensive Gang Model to include specific strategies to raise awareness of and strategies toward reducing gang activity and violence. (Completion date: End of January 2021)

**Action Steps:**

- Identify and review three comparable localities with successful gang prevention and reduction models
- Identify persons in the community who have emerged from gangs and are working to mentor youth into multiple positive pathways of belonging and success
- Create and train a mentoring team of these individuals to build relationships with youth
- **Hire a Youth and Gang Prevention Coordinator** to build relationships with youth in the community, create educational programs for community partners on practices to reduce gang activity and violence, train and coordinate mentoring program, and facilitate creation of supportive programs for youth including trauma resiliency and employment opportunities

**TOP PRIORITY: Incarceration Recidivism Efforts**

**Action Steps:**

- Bring together community and regional re-entry program stakeholders to determine if there is a coordinated comprehensive plan for offender reentry
- Research and identify essential re-entry program needs for the Roanoke City Jail and Regional correctional facilities
- Create an education program for employers in the City of Roanoke regarding the benefits of offering a second chance to offenders reentering the workforce
- Review a summary of case law regarding child support and incarceration
- Explore marketing opportunities around promoting the hiring of offenders reentering the workforce

**City Services and Rapid Response Working Group** (Shakira Williams, Stacey Sheppard – Facilitators)

To fully increase city-wide engagement in reducing gun violence, an evidence-based, best practice model is needed. By adopting the Cure Violence public health model to guide the planning and implementation of a RAPID response and crisis intervention center. By providing persons' in crisis with an immediate confidant trained to listen, de-escalate, and connect with healthy resources, we can address simple hurts before they become major crises. This strategy will require the collaboration, cooperation, and coordination of all city services across the board.

**TOP PRIORITY:** Create 24-hr Rapid Response Volunteer Team to provide wrap-around services for individuals and families impacted by incidents of trauma including gun violence

**Action Steps:**

- Work with RESET Grant Community Mitigation and Volunteer Coordinator in collaboration with City of Roanoke and Roanoke Police Department in response to events of trauma related to violence. The Rapid Response team is compiling a list of service providers and resources to leverage that will enable a coordinated 24-hour community response.
- Create comprehensive list of services and resources available to families impacted by trauma, along with a flyer for service providers to use for quick reference in contacting resources
- Create a virtual support group for victims of gun violence
- Partner with the VA VICTIM Fund to utilize resources in place for victims and families. Connections have been made and representatives are working with the Roanoke area team to better utilize state resources. The team recently reviewed resources and flyers provided by the VA VICTIM Fund
- Assist FEDUP organization to become 501 (c) 3. This is a priority area as other areas of interest hinge on this endeavor, (i.e., go fund me accounts and memorial donations)
- Explore creation of safe houses for individuals and families experiencing effects of gun violence (partner with TAP DV model). Sheltering and relocation needs are urgent in making sure families have options. This is a costly endeavor and includes options for hotel, moving expenses, fuel cost, bus tickets, train tickets etc.

**Communications and Marketing Working Group** (Courtney Penn, Chris Turnbull – Facilitators)

Communicating effective messages is paramount for community buy-in and positive community participation. Not only does communication need to be broad and comprehensive, it must be accurate, honest and proportionate. Likewise, changing attitudes towards gun violence is a long-term strategy that is most effective when programming, public perception and aspirations are in alignment. Therefore, we recommend the development and implementation of a comprehensive communication and marketing campaign designed to support the work of the task force and its partners to reduce gun violence in the city.

**TOP PRIORITY:** Create a branded public influence, evidence-based marketing campaign to reduce gun violence in the community (Virtual Strategic Planning Session, December 3, 2020, 9-11 a.m. facilitated by Chris Turnbull, with Working Group Leaders and Community Marketing Stakeholders)

## Summary

Why do community-based violence intervention programs work? By creating a community-based framework of response, we create the potential to deter high risk individuals from engaging in violent acts involving firearms, we help to resolve potentially violent and/or deadly disputes before they occur, and we connect persons to education, employment, mental health, social, housing, and family services that lead to transformation of lives.

The work of the Study Committee is long-term and is in collaboration with community stakeholders focused on prevention and intervention. This community wide effort is not a sprint, but a marathon and community ownership of this work is essential in its effectiveness

We are grateful for the hard work of the Study Committee members and all of our community stakeholders. We are also grateful for citizen input and engagement in this work. Together, we will create meaningful change that will reduce violence in our community.

**Study Committee Members:** Shakira Williams, Chair; Courtney Penn, Vice Chair; Taisha Steele, Secretary; Nicole Ross, Antwyne Calloway, Decca Knight, Rabbi Kathy Cohen, Natasha Saunders, Jordan Bell, Irisha Goodman, Rev. David Jones, Joshua Johnson, Bishop J.L. Jackson, Stacey Sheppard, Hannah Oakes, David Thomas, Dr. Mark Hamill, Rev. Tim Harvey, Anthony West, Vice Mayor Joe Cobb, Mayor Sherman Lea (ex officio)

**Community Stakeholders:** Carilion Clinic, Roanoke Neighborhood Advocates, Goodwill Youth HQ, Youth Advocate Program, Roanoke Fire and EMS, Roanoke Police Department, Trifecta, TAP (Total Action for Progress), Roanoke Arts Commission, NuFocus Media, Family Service of Roanoke Valley, Points of Diversity, Roanoke City Public Schools, Boys and Girls Club of Southwest Virginia, The Foundry, Carilion Children's Clinic, Smart Solutions, Department of Social Services-Department of Child Support Enforcement, United States Attorney of Western Virginia, Dorcus Home, Youth Haven, Virginia CARES, Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice, Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services, Council of Community Services, Carilion Trauma Services, FEDUP, MetaPeace Team Roanoke Valley, Roanoke Sheriff's Department, City of Roanoke

### Meetings:

The Study Committee meets virtually on the third Friday of each month. For more information visit: <https://roanokeva.gov/2542/Task-Force-to-Reduce-Gun-Violence>