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EDITOR'S PICK | TOP STORY

'Unprecedented' night of gun violence prompts Madison officials to discuss solutions

ABIGAIL BECKER | The Capital Times | abecker@madison.com | [@abecker_4](https://twitter.com/abecker_4) 2 hrs ago



DEAN MOSIMAN, STATE JOURNAL

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Mayor Paul Soglin in October unveiled a \$299.5 million operating budget for 2017, which includes \$400,000 for the first year of a 15-point plan by the newly formed Focused Interruption Coalition to address racial disparities, violence prevention and recidivism. Coalition members -- from left, Aaron Hicks, Caliph Maub'El, Michael Johnson and Anthony Cooper Sr. -- attended the mayor's press conference and applauded the proposed investment.

After a night of what Madison Police Chief Mike Koval called "unprecedented" in terms of dangerous calls Monday, he is sounding the alarm on an increasing trend in gun crimes.

Koval has repeatedly asked for more officers and social programs to address the uptick in crime. In a blog post Tuesday, he said the city must be willing to take steps to "prevent and investigate crimes against our community."

"No one is more supportive of the long-term, social service initiatives that are required to deal with the deep-rooted concerns that may lead to the desperate acts of desperate people," Koval said. "But we must also continue to keep pace with the necessary resources needed to prevent or diminish crimes of violence against our community."

Five of the eight incidents involved calls of shots fired, two were armed robberies and another involved a BB gun. In perhaps the most disturbing of the incidents, a six-year-old girl — one of several children in the residence — was nearly hit by a stray bullet while watching TV in her apartment on Russett Road around 8:30 p.m.

"I have been attempting to sound the alarm of the progressively disturbing trends we are experiencing with guns, armed robberies, drug overdoses and gangs for a long time," Koval said in a blog post Tuesday. "This is a snapshot of our reality, Madison."

Koval said it is too early to determine if any of the incidents are connected.

In a letter sent to Mayor Paul Soglin and the City Council, Koval assured city leaders the MPD is using all available resources to investigate the incidents. Meanwhile, a grassroots initiative to reduce violence is waiting to get off the ground.

About a year ago, Ald. Maurice Cheeks, District 10, and Matt Phair, District 20, announced efforts to reduce youth violence following three homicides and an uptick in gun violence, though they had been working on the proposal for some time prior to the violence.

At that time, the MPD reported just over 30 incidents of shots fired in a year. Koval noted that since the beginning of 2017, the MPD has responded to 48 incidents of shots fired in addition to 64 robberies — a number Koval said he hasn't seen in his time at the MPD.

In July of last year, a grassroots group called the Focused Interruption Coalition released a comprehensive plan building off of Cheeks' and Phair's recommendations in addition to another plan released by Dane County Boys and Girls Club CEO Michael Johnson.

Soglin allocated \$400,000 of city money to the effort, but it won't be fully underway until the city contracts with a non-profit organization to oversee a peer-support program. That won't happen until later this summer, Johnson said.

"I just hope they can do something in the interim to hire people from the community to deal with these issues or we're going to have a very deadly summer," Johnson said.

Johnson said he feels policing resources are too heavily focused on preventing crime and not enough on intervention.

"I support community policing and I support law enforcement having the technology, the human capital support that's needed to address crime in our community, but at the same time you can't over police these kinds of issues," Johnson said.

Phair said the events of Monday night are an "unacceptable level of violence" but that he is not surprised. He said the city lacks a comprehensive strategy for dealing with this type of violence.

"We're not all around the table and we haven't prioritized that," Phair said. "The council needs to take responsibility for that, as does the mayor, as do we all."

While Phair acknowledged more officers may be part of the solution, beefing up staffing numbers will not help to implement long-term generational change, he said. He said he plans to talk with council leadership about prioritizing this issue.

"We need to be more proactive instead of reacting," Phair said.

Ald. Paul Skidmore, District 9, agreed that social service programs are needed, and noted his support of affordable housing in his district and the coming downtown day shelter for the homeless. At the same time, he said the MPD needs more resources.

"I don't see any changes to any policy or procedure coming from the city that are changing the culture," Skidmore said.

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Abigail Becker

Abigail Becker joined The Capital Times in 2016, where she primarily covers city and county government. She previously worked for the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism and the Wisconsin State Journal.



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