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GUN VIOLENCE | support and prevention program IN LIMBO

As violence mounts, infighting deals setback to city's 'Rapid Response' program

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AMBER ARNOLD, STATE JOURNAL

Zandra Hagberg and Jerome Dillard, members of the Focused Interruption Coalition, speak to the media about the need to res; violence with peer support and more resources after a press conference at the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County.

Amid continuing incidents of gunfire, including a home invasion Tuesday in which a Madison man was killed, the city is still struggling with how to partner with local nonprofits to create a “rapid response” to gun violence aimed at providing immediate help to victims and their families and preventing further shootings.

After talks between the mayor’s office and community leaders fell apart last week, Mayor Paul Soglin is proposing a pared-back program for the summer that provides \$25,000 in direct aid for short-term housing, food, clothing and other needs of people and households affected by violence.

But it doesn’t include another \$50,000 earlier envisioned for critical peer support and coaching to those at risk of criminal behavior, and for individuals and families directly affected by violence.

Some City Council members, however, are still hoping to craft a separate resolution that would spend the \$50,000 on peer response in a way that would satisfy concerns of the nonprofits that would receive it.

The funds would be drawn from \$400,000 the council placed in this year’s budget to fund initial pieces of a 15-point plan offered by the Focused Interruption Coalition of community and faith leaders last year to address racial disparities, violence and recidivism.

The need for more resources and collaboration was underscored after the city’s third homicide this year on Tuesday, when a 33-year-old man was fatally shot during a home invasion in the 500 block of Northport Drive on the North Side, coalition members said at an emotional press conference with the victim’s family on Wednesday morning.

For now, coalition members said they are continuing to respond to such crises and attempt prevention as unpaid volunteers.

“We’re dealing with chronic stress and chronic trauma in our community,” said Jerome Dillard, director of re-entry services for Focused Interruption and state director of EXPO, Ex-Prisoners Organizing. “We need to get boots on the ground to get the outreach we

need to get these lives on track. Many of our young people don't see themselves as being part of America.”

The \$75,000 proposal that included peer support collapsed in recent days after the city and nonprofits could not agree on who would receive a service contract, with the mayor's office and nonprofits blaming one another.

Those engaged in the sometimes heated negotiations, including the mayor's office, the Community Development Division, Focused Interruption, Nehemiah Community Development Corp. and the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County, appeared to have settled on language late last week.

But the tentative deal collapsed amid conflicting explanations.

“I can't believe, with what's going on in this city, we can't get this done,” Boys & Girls Club president Michael Johnson said. “They don't have a plan. Last night was another example of that. They can't respond because they don't have anything.”

Johnson, who has been a constant presence in support of victims of gun violence and their families, blasted Soglin after he said the mayor misrepresented the status of the rapid response program and how it would work while offering few details at a press conference late last month.

“We do have a plan,” Deputy Mayor Gloria Reyes said, noting that the mayor's 11-member rapid response team of city, Dane County and nonprofit representatives that has been shaping the initiatives will continue to meet regularly.

The city will continue to see proposals late this summer to spend the rest of the \$400,000 on two long-term peer support programs — one for those re-entering the community from incarceration and the other resembling rapid response, which is not a police initiative, Reyes said. The contract could be awarded in the fall, community development director Jim O'Keefe has said.

Reyes blamed Johnson for the recent collapse of talks.

“It’s unfortunate we have community members and leaders who refuse to look at the bigger picture,” she said. “It became about Michael Johnson. It became about the Boys & Girls Club. It became about who was going to get funded and not get funded. It’s very unfortunate.”

Johnson said, “I’m not going to dignify that with a response.” The Boys & Girls Club is the fiscal agent for the coalition but was never seeking money for itself, he said. The coalition, he said, will move to raise money from private sources for peer support efforts.

A way forward

The current resolution, authored by Reyes and sponsored by Aids. Maurice Cheeks, Shiva Bidar-Sielaff and Matthew Phair, says that people directly affected by violence often face unanticipated, short-term expenses associated with injury or death, medical treatment, the loss of housing stability, personal safety, transportation or basic household needs.

The city’s direct assistance would help cover victims’ costs and seek to de-escalate conflict, the resolution says.

It made sense to break the resolution in two, moving forward on the \$25,000 and continuing work on the other \$50,000, Phair said.

The city’s Finance Committee will consider the scaled-back resolution on June 12 with a decision by the council on June 20, Reyes said.

Focused Interruption will not support the pared-back resolution, Johnson said, and is frustrated and now reluctant to work with Soglin.

“We won’t accept this,” he said.

A statement from Focused Interruption said a resolution must not include language that could be seen as divisive and must acknowledge the Boys & Girls Club’s role and reference the 15-point plan. Nehemiah and the Boys & Girls Club will draft desired outcomes for the city within 30 days so success can be clearly measured, it says.

Phair said he and other council members are working to craft language acceptable to the coalition to deliver the additional \$50,000 for peer support, with the hope of producing a proposed resolution by the end of the week.

“We still think there’s a way to go forward,” he said.

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