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TOP STORY

Homicide sparks new round of finger-pointing between city, private organizations

ED TRELEVEN and DEAN MOSIMAN Wisconsin State Journal Jul 25, 2017



Mayor Paul Soglin last fall unveiled an operating budget for 2017 that included \$400,000 for the first year of a 15-point plan by the 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. -- applauded the proposed investment, which was approved by the City Council. Johnson on Tuesday voiced frustration over the pace of the response to continuing gun violence.

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DEAN MOSIMAN, STATE JOURNAL

As Madison police hunted for clues Tuesday in the city's eighth homicide this year, Boys & Girls Club of Dane County president Michael Johnson said the organization was pulling out of a publicly funded anti-violence effort, citing what he called the city's slow pace at addressing the problem.

Johnson and others have been privately responding after shooting incidents to help victims and work to prevent retaliatory strikes, and the Boys & Girls Club was poised to be part of a short-term peer support program scheduled to kick off this summer.

But hours after Mayor Paul Soglin announced a new program intended to build community leadership within neighborhoods that he said could help stem violence, Johnson said he was out.

"The summer is almost over and as of today there is no contract signed to empower and hire people from the streets to do this work," Johnson said. "I am convinced we are not ready to address this issue, and I don't want to be associated with the funding as it stands. Boys & Girls Club will continue to work with the victims ... when called with private support."

Soglin's announcement followed a shooting early Tuesday that left a 29-year-old man dead. The announcement was intended to "jump-start" a plan that had been in the works, the mayor said.

"The leadership in an instance like this has to come from the neighborhood," Soglin said at a hastily arranged news conference Tuesday morning. "There has to be zero tolerance for gangsters and murderers carrying guns. There has to be zero tolerance when somebody is shot and killed and people are aware of who was present and they will not discuss it."

The City Council last fall approved \$400,000 in this year's budget to fund initial pieces of a 15-point anti-violence plan, with the money initially to cover a \$50,000 contract with the Nehemiah Community Development Corp. and \$25,000 more in direct aid for short-term housing, food, clothing and needs of those affected by violence.

Nehemiah plans to subcontract with the Focused Interruption Coalition of community and faith leaders to deliver short-term peer support, in which people, preferably those who have gone through similar experiences, are trained to provide support to those involved in incidents of violence or reintegrating into the community. The Boys & Girls Club was to serve as the coalition's fiscal agent.

The contract was sent to Nehemiah for a signature on Tuesday, city Community Development director Jim O'Keefe said. The city expects Nehemiah to sign it, but it's unclear if Johnson's comments will delay the signing or have other impacts, he said. Johnson, a strong voice for action amid the gun violence, often speaks for the Focused Interruption Coalition.

The contract can move forward through Nehemiah pastor Rev. Alex Gee, Johnson said, adding, "The contract is with them and they can pay all parties directly."

Gee could not be reached.

On Tuesday, Soglin wrote to agency managers that he's seeking accelerated consideration of a project that would provide training and technical assistance aimed at building consistent leadership within neighborhoods.

The one-time training, he said, would help establish permanent neighborhood leadership, which he said is critical to solving the violence that's plagued some neighborhoods in recent months.

Soglin wrote that about two weeks ago, he met with Fred Kent, president of New York-based Project for Public Spaces, and Marshall Ganz, senior lecturer in public policy at Harvard University, to talk about "how to strengthen communities and the role of placemaking in community organizing."

Last week, Soglin said, he asked the organization for a proposal to improve placemaking in Madison. He said he intended to have city staff review the proposal on Friday and make recommendations to the council, but recent violence prompted him to forward the proposal now.

“The problem is not so much how long someone has lived in a neighborhood, the problem is not necessarily the values,” Soglin said. “The problem is whether there are people who are prepared to speak up and fight. We can support those efforts, but we cannot be a substitute for neighborhood leadership.”

Anything that comes out of the recommendations would be funded by the \$400,000 set aside in the 2017 budget for the anti-violence initiatives, he said.

Johnson questioned Soglin’s announcement and other city initiatives. Community faith and nonprofit leaders came up with the 15-point anti-violence plan, but Soglin is talking about empowering neighborhood leaders through someone from another state, said Johnson, who is frustrated by the time it has taken the city to implement the first phases of the plan and to produce a coordinated long-term effort.

The mayor’s \$1,000 bounty program for tips leading to guns used to commit crimes in Madison, announced two weeks ago, has scant details and such programs have no real evidence of success elsewhere. Johnson said. Soglin on Tuesday said his office has received no tips so far.

“I am confused by all this activity and it’s not being vetted by city officials and community partners,” Johnson said.

Johnson applauded Ald. Barbara Harrington-McKinney’s recently proposed “Operation Clean Sweep” to address quality-of-life concerns in neighborhoods by doing tasks such as picking up trash or offering help fixing up homes but criticized the lack of funding.

“All these initiatives do not tie into a broader violence prevention plan that is comprehensive with funding strategies attached to measurable goals,” Johnson said.

As the city tries short-term moves, it’s also moving to solicit proposals from nonprofits to provide long-term peer support to people caught up in cycles of violence.

The Community Development Division has suggested two programs: Crisis-focused peer support for people after their exposure to or involvement in an act of violence, and reentry-focused peer support to work with those returning to the community after release from incarceration.

The request for proposals could be released as soon as Aug. 2 ,with contracts awarded in early October, O'Keefe said.

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