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City has vision for long-term peer support program to address gun violence

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Madison is nearing a contract with nonprofits on a program to provide short-term peer support response to violence and offering a vision for a long-term program.

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As the city readies a short-term, peer support effort to address gun violence this summer, it's also producing a vision for a long-term, better-funded program for the future.

The city is now finalizing a \$50,000 contract with the Nehemiah Community Development Corp., which will subcontract with the Focused Interruption Coalition of community and faith leaders to deliver short-term peer support to individuals and families impacted by violence through the summer and early fall.

That effort also includes an additional \$25,000 in direct aid for short-term housing, food, clothing and other needs of people affected by violence.

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 last year to address racial disparities, violence and recidivism.

The contract with Nehemiah could be completed next week, city community development director Jim O'Keefe said Friday.

The Community Development Division has just completed a draft seven-page draft paper titled "Peer Support Initiative 2017" that details a long-term peer support system.

The division's staff is proposing two separate programs. Crisis-focused peer support would work with people referred for service following their exposure to or involvement in an act of violence, while reentry-focused peer support would work with those returning to the community after release from incarceration.

For both efforts, peer support counseling — in which people, preferably who have gone through similar experiences, are trained to provide support to those involved in incidents of violence or reintegrating into the community — would be the core service offered. But funds may also be used for focused case management and to help defray short-term costs of basic needs such as housing, employment and transportation, the draft paper says.

On Tuesday, Ald. Shiva Bidar-Sielaff, 5th District, will introduce a resolution calling for the City Council to accept the staff paper and use it as the basis of a request for proposals to service providers and authorizing the Community Development Division to begin the process and use funds this year.

The Community Development Division has already used a consultant to lead focus groups in the community that produced feedback on the paper, O'Keefe said. The coming request for proposals will reflect the feedback, such as not relying solely on the health care system

as a point of entry for crisis-focused peer support and focusing on prevention, O’Keefe said.

Crisis-focused peer support would deliver services to those who’ve experienced or been involved in acts of violence and determined, through an evaluation, to be at risk of committing future acts of violence, the paper says.

The goal is to prevent them from further acts of violence and inflicting harm on themselves, potential victims and the community at large.

“The premise of this is not to necessarily provide immediate comfort and support at the time of the incident,” O’Keefe said. “A lot of it is about trying to deescalate the situation that has the potential to intensify.”

But one of the challenges of the short- and long-term programs is determining exactly what sort of situations benefit from a response, he said. “There’s not an easy answer to it,” he said.

The program would offer 24-hour emergency access to a peer support specialist after contact with the health care system and other settings connected to a traumatic violent or criminal event. It would offer opportunities for individualized mentoring from a certified peer support specialist, a needs assessment and personalized plan, support for anger management and other life skills, information on community resources, access to resources for short-term needs and more.

The effort is not designed to assist people involved in incidents of domestic violence or sexual abuse because there are specialized services already offered in the community.

Reentry-focused peer support would provide services to those previously incarcerated and deemed at greater risk of re-offending or engaging in behaviors that could lead to re-incarceration.

Participants could connect with a peer support specialist before release from incarceration and then be eligible for the same sort of support services as provided with crisis-focused peer support.

The goal for each effort is to work with at least 50 people, with a priority on young adults between the ages of 16 and 35.

The draft paper also lays out desired components of proposals from agencies seeking funds, including a clear description of a program that cooperates with established agencies, staff capacity, training, case management and more.

Michael Johnson, a coalition member and president of the Boys and Girls Club of Dane County, said he “didn’t want to be too critical” of the Community Development Division’s paper because it was a draft, which he said shows that the council is willing to improve it.

“What’s missing is the prevention aspect,” Johnson said. “I don’t think there’s enough prevention in there for this to be a slam dunk.”

The request for proposals could be released as soon as Aug. 2 with service contracts awarded in early October and the long-term effort running through 2018, O’Keefe said.

City policy makers this fall will determine if the long-term peer support program will go beyond 2018, he said.

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