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TOP STORY

City-backed peer support program to address gun violence moves forward

DEAN MOSIMAN dmosiman@madison.com Aug 2, 2017



Madison police investigate at the scene of a fatal shooting early Friday at 3718 W. Karstens Drive. The homicide was the city's ninth this year and the first to involve a female victim. City officials and a nonprofit have signed a contract to provide peer support to individuals and families affected by violence to help prevent further incidents.

STEVE APPS, STATE JOURNAL

After months of delay and with another homicide Wednesday, the city and a nonprofit have finalized a \$50,000 contract to begin a publicly funded effort to prevent gun violence.

The 24-hour, seven-day-a-week program will have paid responders offering peer support and connections to services aimed at de-escalating possible retaliation and further harm. It's aimed at low-income men between 18 and 40.

The contract calls for about 250 hours of service in response to an estimated 25 to 30 crisis situations.

It seeks to bolster current informal efforts to help by many of those who will now be delivering taxpayer-supported services.

"I think it's really important," city community development director Jim O'Keefe said. "I think everybody is recognizing that. I know it's frustrating for a lot of people that it's taken so long. But when you bring public money to bear, there's a need for accountability, systems and structure."

The City Council last fall approved \$400,000 in this year's budget to fund initial pieces of a 15-point anti-violence plan offered by the Focused Interruption Coalition of community and faith leaders. On June 21, the council approved spending \$50,000 for a short-term peer support program for 2017.

Over recent days, the city and Nehemiah Development Corp. signed the \$50,000 contract for the short-term effort, in which paid responders, preferably those who've gone through similar experiences, are trained to provide the support.

Nehemiah will subcontract with Focused Interruption and has named Anthony Cooper Sr., the coalition's executive director, as director of the peer support program.

"We're implementing everything now," Cooper said, noting there's a natural friction between grassroots efforts that can move quickly and the realities of government. "We need to stay focused and stay together as a community and get the job done."

Michael Johnson, president of the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County, a Focused Interruption member who's been a primary private responder, said his organization has provided counseling for children, moved families from apartments where crime has occurred and provided food, diapers and clothing to children impacted by recent violence.

“Boys & Girls Club will continue to work with the Focused Interruption Coalition, the district attorney’s office, MPD, the mayor’s office and grass-roots leaders to leverage public and/or private resources to support children and families traumatized by violent crimes,” Johnson said.

Meanwhile, Nehemiah and Focused Interruption will coordinate activities with the Mayor’s Rapid Response Team, which includes law enforcement, the Dane County District Attorney’s Office of Victim Services, county Human Services and the city’s Community Development Division, the contract says.

The city has budgeted another \$25,000 for short-term housing, food, clothing and needs of those affected by violence. The Rapid Response Team will create protocols for making those payments.

At the Meadowood Neighborhood Center on Wednesday evening, a group of youths were taking their own approach to recent gun violence.

Members of the Madison Inspirational Youth Choir, a program through Nehemiah, chose “Youth United to Stop the Violence” as the theme of its Aug. 23 performance, said founder and co-director Dr. Jasmine Zapata.

She acknowledged the theme has become more relevant since it was selected in spring.

“It’s just an outlet to talk to the kids about what’s going on,” said Zapata, a pediatrician and preventative health physician.

Martin Lackey, a member of Focused Interruption, spoke to the youths to gauge their thoughts on the most recent homicide and ways to prevent violence, offering two takeaways: “Always stay positive” and “Don’t ever give up on yourselves.”

One of the boys in attendance said a cousin of his was killed by gun violence this summer.

“I just want it to stop,” he said.

Under the contract with Nehemiah, peer support will be provided to those affected by violence or who are likely to be involved in any retaliation. It isn't intended to respond to domestic violence situations.

"It's a prevention program," O'Keefe stressed. "It's not an appropriate response to every homicide or every violent incident. It's for situations that carry a high risk or threat of escalation."

Service requests may come from the police, the Office of Victims Services, the mayor's office, community service agencies, community members or victims. Requests will be referred to a central dispatch person designated by Nehemiah.

After getting a referral, staff will assess the situation to decide if a response is warranted and which, if any, community partners should be notified.

Nehemiah will have a 24-hour, on-call schedule that can deploy up to two responders. It will provide a designated backup supervisor or senior responder to provide guidance and follow-up. Responders will be trained in communication skills, de-escalating and resolving conflicts, connecting participants with services and working with police and others.

Responders will keep an incident report log and be expected to get demographic but not identifying information for those receiving services.

It's expected Nehemiah will use Focused Interruption members and others to perform some aspects of the program.

The city is also moving to solicit proposals from nonprofits to provide long-term peer support — also funded by the \$400,000 — to those caught up in cycles of violence.

The Community Development Division envisions two programs: one to help people exposed to or involved in violence, and another for those returning to the community after release from incarceration. That request for proposals could be released in a week to 10 days, with contracts awarded in October, O'Keefe said.

State Journal reporter Logan Wroge contributed to this report.



City contract with Nehemiah Development Corp.
 DEAN MOSIMAN dmosiman@madison.com, 608-252-6141 Aug 2, 2017

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