

With homicides, shootings at historic levels Milwaukee, collaborative effort tackles root causes of violence

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One morning in May, 30 people from about 20 organizations logged on to a virtual call to discuss the previous two weeks of violence in Milwaukee.

Of particular interest was the fatal shooting of a teenager days earlier. The teen had been riding around in a car with a group of friends. After pulling into a gas station, there came gunshots. They fled the area and later realized the boy was shot.

But this wasn't a conversation about chasing leads and making arrests. This was about healing and stopping any violence that could come next.

The conversation started with a violence prevention official asking if anyone had reached out to the boy's family.

Another answered that a county-run mentorship program made contact with his sister, also a teen, who was present during the shooting.

A school psychologist needed to make sure the school district had also been in touch with her. He asked for her name. A police captain provided it.

A victim and witness advocate with the district attorney's office said they contacted the rest of the family and discussed funeral expenses.

That made another violence prevention official wonder if there were any safety concerns about the funeral.

Given the ages of those involved, it probably wouldn't be a bad idea to keep an eye on that, the witness advocate answered. Police didn't have information on the services, but someone from the medical examiner's office gave them the name of the funeral home.

An assistant police chief then said he would ensure officers would be present for the ceremony.

This is the work of a relatively new, federally supported conglomeration of law enforcement, emergency responders, community groups, victim and witness advocates, health care providers, corrections officials and many others to reduce the harm of gun violence at a time when it has never been worse in Milwaukee.

In an era when officials across the board are stressing collaboration more than ever, the Violence Response – Public Health and Safety Team, otherwise known as VR-PHAST, is perhaps the best example.

It seems all but certain Milwaukee will break its homicide record for the third year running, with 156 reported as of Sept. 2, compared with 122 as of the same point in 2021, according to police. Nonfatal shootings, which number in the hundreds, have continued at the same pace as last year, when such incidents jumped 14% from 2020.

Database: Tracking Milwaukee homicides

The U.S. has experienced elevated levels of homicides since a historic increase in 2020, with the rate peaking in July of that year. The downward trend since then continued with a 2% decline in the first half of 2022, according to a report from the Council on Criminal Justice, which looked at homicides in 23 cities.

But the homicide rate in those cities still sat 39% higher compared with the first half of 2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The report also identified Milwaukee as one of eight cities with an increase in homicides during the first six months of 2022, but it had the largest percentage increase of them all from the year before — 39%.

The year in Milwaukee has been marred by a mass shooting of six people in January, the killing of 15 minors and a recent upturn in fatal domestic violence. Law enforcement, public health experts and elected officials have continued to blame a mixture of easy access to guns, poor conflict resolution skills, the ripple effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and uncertain economic stability.

The basic mission of VR-PHAST is to coordinate an efficient response to violence across every agency. That means finding victims and their families the support they need — be it mentoring, health care, or stable housing — and breaking up retaliatory violence before it happens.

“Pain and trauma that is not transformed is transferred. If we want to address gun violence... we have to also understand that that violence is rooted in pain,” said Reggie Moore, the director of violence prevention policy for the Medical College of Wisconsin. “That pain may not just be inflicted physically, but also structurally and systemically. Those are all factors that we are discussing more heavily.

“Centering public health and healing in this work is critically important and unprecedented in this city.”

Modeled after response to pandemic

In late 2020, a collective effort began to form VR-PHAST after public safety officials saw the broad range of organizations and government entities joining forces to limit the spread of COVID-19.

By the following spring, the team started meeting regularly. By the following winter, it received a three-year, \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Justice.

Local officials have occasionally made passing references to the team at speaking events, but have not previously spotlighted it with any detail.

The team focuses on incidents that occur within a focus area on Milwaukee’s north side that includes at least parts of more than 15 neighborhoods that have historically experienced disproportionate levels of violence.

In a city that is almost 97 square miles large, the focus area is roughly four miles long and two miles wide. During the first six months of 2022, the focus area was the scene of 36% of the city’s homicides and 28% of nonfatal shootings, according to a report.

There are well over 30 organizations involved overall, including everything from community groups to hospitals to social services agencies to federal law enforcement. They are split between around a half-dozen action teams that focus on, and coordinate the response for, things such as housing, trauma response and violence prevention.

Twice monthly, everyone gathers for an online meeting to share information, spot trends, provide updates on various projects, plan police security or mediation services for public events and coordinate care for victims and their families. The latter is often as simple as someone saying, “This family needs ‘XYZ.’ Who can provide it?”

The kind of work the team is doing appears to fill a number of recommendations put forth by two reports this year by [Johns Hopkins University’s Center for Gun Violence Solutions](#) and the [Council on Criminal Justice’s Violent Crime Working Group](#), which is made up of academics and law enforcement professionals across the country.

Violence tends to concentrate among a relatively small collection of people, groups and places, and so many of the recommendations made by the two reports stress the need for different agencies to work together on engaging all of them and extending them wraparound support services.

Constance Kostelac, the director of MCW’s Division of Data Surveillance and Informatics, said the goal is to be “nimble and responsive” to all the needs of victims and their families, which has forced the team to identify and fill in Milwaukee’s service gaps.

Perhaps the most important one is related to housing.

Stabilizing the vulnerable

Since 2015, Milwaukee County has run the Housing First program, which reduced the area’s unsheltered population by 92% in the first six years, [according to the county](#).

But that program has largely focused on the most familiar forms of homelessness: those who are living in shelters, abandoned buildings, or on the streets.

It has not focused on forms of housing insecurity that local officials say overlaps more with violence: youth who have run away from home, those who are couch-surfing, those who are threatened by eviction and those who cannot return home because of threats of violence.

David Muhammad, the deputy director of the county Department of Health and Human Services, called housing instability a “major predictor of gun violence.”

“Housing instability and youth in precarious situations, couch surfing, are not necessarily the most visible aspects (of homelessness) to certain people, but for us who work in community settings, we see it frequently,” Muhammad said.

“When you lay over the maps of housing insecurity with firearm incidents, you see the connection.”

Muhammad described a situation in which the family of a man who was in a detention facility was targeted in a retaliatory shooting. Their home was no longer safe, and the mother of the family was forced to just drive around the city with three or four other family members.

It presented a situation that the county’s supportive housing infrastructure hasn’t been designed for: reacting to an urgent housing crisis as it unfolds. Muhammad noted it was difficult navigating all kinds of bureaucracy to help the family.

“There has to be some flexibility in the process and red tape has to be moved aside,” said Eric Collins-Dyke, a housing administrator for Milwaukee County.

To do that, the VR-PHAST team is creating and funding a new “housing navigator” position that will provide various family services and housing vouchers for those caught in these situations. And already, housing officials are taking referrals from violence interruption professionals, Collins-Dyke said.

The combination of new housing, messaging from prevention advocates and outreach for other services is something officials are hoping will lead to lasting change from family to family, person to person.

“If we can stabilize the family, perhaps we can use that as leverage for behavioral change,” Muhammad said.

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