

## Overview of Gun Violence in Roanoke City

The city of Roanoke is the largest city in southwest Virginia with more than 100,000 residents living within its 42 square miles. The Roanoke metropolitan statistical area has a population greater than 300,000<sup>1</sup>.

Recently named one of the fastest growing economies in Virginia, data shows that in Roanoke, “Over the past 12 months, employment grew by 1,200 jobs or 1.3 percent compared to 0.9 at the state level”. Roanoke also ranks sixth in the state on the cost of living index<sup>2</sup>. Recently named the first city to enter the National Civic League’s Hall of Fame, and one of two cities to receive the All-America City designation seven times, Roanoke is a city that works hard to address her greatest challenges in creative and innovative ways. Evidence of this exists in the successful Star City Reads collaboration helping raise 3rd grade reading levels from near 50% to 75% and working to reduce the school to prison pipeline. The city has also developed a collective response effort to address the opioid epidemic, bringing together over 200 community partners to create a comprehensive harm reduction effort. Along with these successes, the city continues to carry a 23% poverty rate, 30% among children. With this poverty rate comes decreased life expectancy, food insecurity, lack of transportation, and less than full access to health care. Another impact of poverty is an increase in crime.

Over the past decade, Roanoke has dealt with 78 homicides as a result of gun violence. The problem has continued to escalate. In just the first 6 months of 2019, the City of Roanoke experienced 259 acts of violence associated with firearms. This includes homicides, armed robberies, aggravated assaults, and weapon law violations. Most incidents occur in and around

the lower income area neighborhoods popularly referred to as South East and North West of Roanoke.<sup>3</sup>

Gun violence in the City of Roanoke is not just limited to aggressive acts against others, it also includes suicide. In 2017, 51 percent of all gun-related non-fatal injuries in Virginia were due to intentional self-harm; and almost a third of those self-inflicted gun injuries occurred in the southwest region.<sup>4</sup>

As a response to the violence (including self-harm), the Roanoke City Council, through Resolution No. 41454-060319, on June 3, 2019 formed the Task Force to Reduce Gun Violence. The intended purpose of the Task Force to Reduce Gun Violence was to consider current practices within the City of Roanoke to address gun violence, review alternatives that have been utilized in other communities, and make recommendations to City Council to implement tangible, meaningful and transformative actions to reduce gun violence within the City.

### **Recommendation 1**

Therefore, the task force would like to present its first and most important recommendation: 1. to extend the work of the task force past November 4, 2019 in order to continue its work and complete the task of implementing tangible, meaningful, and transformative actions to reduce gun violence within Roanoke City.

### **Recommendations 2-5**

#### **To Build Safer and Healthier Neighborhoods**

The primary purpose of the Task Force to Reduce Gun Violence is to address the root causes that contribute to acts of violence and to create meaningful and transformative efforts

that, with community engagement, will enhance Roanoke's priority of safe and healthy neighborhoods. The recommendations included here are indicative of community-based programs that address prevention, strengthen and sustain relationships, and enhance neighborhood livability.

### **Recommended Actions**

2. Participate in and support a community walk of silence from the MLK Bridge to the City Christmas Tree (Bridging the Community Gap) on December 12, including the sharing of a pledge to end violence in the city and to remember citizens who have been impacted by gun violence.
3. Continuation and expansion of a Kindergarten Reading Project to increase empathy and create kindness using the "Little Blue Truck" by Alice Schertle in libraries and schools.
4. Propose city-wide "Pop Up Potlucks" to build intra-neighborhood relationships and strengthens community engagement.
5. Create positive and effective change in neighborhoods by addressing crime prevention through environmental design (clean-up projects, greening, enhanced lighting, etc.) Areas of priority should include but not be limited to higher crime volume areas; zones most affected by gun violence.

### **Signs of Success**

- A measurable reduction of crime in zones that have previously reported high crime rates
- Community engagement and attendance during outreach events

## **Recommendations 6-7**

### **To Increase Strong Community Partnerships and Education among Students, Parents and Stakeholders**

Community partnerships and teamwork have been a key factor in successful crime reduction strategies nationwide over the past decade. Implementing strong community partnerships and education among students, parents, and stakeholders has the potential to empower different people groups, improve citizen knowledge and problem-solving skills, increase trust in community organizations and local government, and most importantly it has the potential to increase the likelihood that solutions and recommendations will be successful.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Recommended Actions**

6. Create a city-wide, family educational program that increases child and youth self-awareness, confidence, love, and empathy in the value of human life, while incorporating non-violent and peer-mediation based practices, through utilization of community partnerships.
7. Increase parental and family support of the RCPS gun safety pledge and current community locked gun safety programs to help raise awareness of suicide and accidental loss of life due to children's access to guns. Increase stakeholder participation in the project child safe initiatives (free gun locks)

#### **Signs of Success**

- A reduction in the number of lethal episodes (intentional and unintentional)
- Increased parent and student participation with gun safety and pledges

## **Recommendations 8-14**

### **To Reduce Gang Activity, Violence and Recidivism**

The 2018 FBI Uniform Crime Report indicated that while Virginia had the 4th lowest level of violent crime in the nation, Roanoke had the 4th highest rate in the state. Roanoke has already experienced 14 homicides in 2019 and is on track to have a higher murder rate than 2018.<sup>6</sup> Local and national law enforcement indicate an increase in organized gang activity with recruitment starting as early as late elementary school. The Task Force believes that a focus on educating the community on the realities of gang activity and violence, along with addressing recidivism for returning citizens who are experiencing transformation, are two essential keys to reducing violent activity in our neighborhoods and city.

### **Recommended Actions**

8. Encourage greater collaboration between the task force, Roanoke Police Department and community partners to increase community education and awareness on location, structure, and activities of Roanoke City gangs
9. Affirm the efforts of the Roanoke C.A.R.E. initiative and request that two members of the task force be appointed to serve on the C.A.R.E. Team.
10. Identify transformative best practices on reducing gang violence by sending key members of the task force and community to observe municipalities experiencing a reduction in gang violence and learn about their models of practice.

11. Work with the Roanoke City Jail to improve access to programs, education, counseling and spiritual guidance to improve the odds of reducing recidivism (with priority given to those with a history of gun violence).

12. Work with the Roanoke City Jail to ensure that returning citizens, upon exit from jail/prison, have direct access to employment opportunities, peer to peer counseling, and housing opportunities while being matched with care coordinators (or community navigators) or professionals and programs who reduce recidivism (with priority given to those with a history of gun violence).

13. A. Propose legislation for an initial review and/or reduction of child support during incarceration. B. Work with the General Assembly and judicial system to create an incentive-based, alternative program designed to empower incarcerated persons (through more family engagement, community navigator training, and personal development skills) to return to society with reduced child support debt and the ability to support their family system and reduce recidivism (with priority given to those with a history of gun violence).

14. Create additional community navigator career positions and first-year wrap around resources for returning citizens (previously incarcerated) to ensure successful re-entry into society.

### **Signs of Success**

- Increased community awareness, education and engagement by community in reducing gang activity and violence

- Increased opportunities for returning citizens to participate in transformative efforts to reduce gun violence
- Lower rates of recidivism
- Reduced street and gang violence
- Reduction of arrests for gun theft

### **Recommendations 15-18**

#### **To Increase Coordination of City Services and Planning**

To fully increase city-wide engagement in reducing gun violence, an evidence-based, best practice model is needed. The task force has decided to adopt the Cure Violence public health model to guide the planning and implementation of a RAPID response and crisis intervention center. The Cure Violence model approaches violence with the understanding that violence is an epidemic process that can be stopped using the same public health strategies employed to fight all other epidemics.<sup>7</sup> We believe that by providing persons' in crisis with an immediate confidant trained to listen, de-escalate, connect with healthy resources, we can address simple hurts before they become major crises. This strategy will require the collaboration, cooperation, and coordination of all city services across the board.

#### **Recommended Actions**

15. Recommend a 24-hour RAPID response team and crisis intervention center with live and text-based hotline for immediate response, anonymous tips, and conflict resolution utilizing the Cure Violence public health model and locally trained volunteers and mentors.

16. Recommend complete collaboration with local hospital, law enforcement systems and community partners
17. Recommend that the newly funded RESET grant position and team work directly with the Task Force to collaborate on gun violence reduction efforts
18. Recommend that existing organizations and efforts (i.e., FEDUP) working to reduce gun violence be assisted in becoming 501 © 3 non-profit entities to aid in the Rapid Response after care efforts

### **Signs of Success**

- Increased access to restorative models of conflict resolution
- Utilization of crisis intervention center services
- Reduced street violence
- Reduced juvenile arrests for gun thefts
- Reduced incidents of gun violence city-wide
- Reduced incidents of suicide

### **Recommendation 19-22**

#### **To Increase Stakeholder Engagement and Media Partnerships**

Communicating effective messages is paramount for community buy-in and positive community participation. Not only does communication need to be broad and comprehensive, it must be accurate, honest and proportionate. Likewise, changing attitudes towards gun violence is a long-term strategy that is most effective when programing, public perception and aspirations



are in alignment. Therefore, we recommend the development and implementation of a comprehensive communication and marketing campaign designed to support the work of the task force and its partners to reduce gun violence in the city.

### **Recommended Actions**

19. Hire a communications/marketing partner through competitive RFP to assist the taskforce and strategic partners to develop and roll out a branded public influence campaign. The goal is to influence the public perception of firearms and must include (but is not limited to) the following:

- a. Significant, reoccurring and diverse public input into the development of the RFP and the selection of the communications/marketing partner;
- b. Comprehensive, multi-year plan complete with annual budget estimates for planning purposes;
- c. Consist of no less than a three-year commitment;
- d. A recognizable Brand/Logo;
- e. Multi-channel and multimedia advertising targeted particularly at communities at risk for violence and/or victimization;
- f. Ensure that the marketing/advertising is evidence-based and matches the audiences, their cultural norms and is appropriately edgy, unfiltered and raw in order to get their attention and deliver the intended message (e.g. past anti-smoking campaigns; vaping advertisement).

## Signs of Success

- Increased traffic to social media websites measures by likes, posts shared, site views, and click through rates
- Number of persons who the campaign has reached

## Additional Recommendations:

20. Recommend the Task Force develop a comprehensive action and capacity building plan based on these recommendations over the next 3-6 six months.
21. Recommend the Task Force host a community stakeholders' event in early 2020 to more fully develop community engagement and partnerships regarding these recommendations.
22. Recommend the Task Force report to City Council every six months on progress to date.

## Budget

**Safer & Healthier Neighborhoods:** Sponsorship of Bridging the Community Gap Walk - \$1,000; Little Blue Truck Reading Project (with multi-lingual options) - \$5,000; Pop Up Potlucks - \$2500; Environmental Design (seek grant funding options); Total: \$8,500

**Community Partnerships and Education:** Development of city-wide educational curriculum - \$10,000. Total: \$10,000

**Reduce Gang Activity, Violence and Recidivism:** Team Visits to Municipalities Identifying Best Practices in Reducing Gang Activity/Violence \$15,000. Total: \$15,000

**Coordinated City Services and Planning:** RESET Grant - \$75,000 (active through 6/30/2021); Cure Violence Model Assessment - \$7,500; Rapid Response Team Training - \$10,000; Crisis Intervention Centers (staff, volunteer training, locations) - \$150,000 (leveraged by in-kind and partner investments). Total: \$167,500 (RESET Grant not included)

**Communications Campaign:** Investment of \$75,000 would be required for year 1 (Budget year 2020-21), with the expectation that the communications partner will leverage the investment. This amount does not include any in-kind contributions. Budget outlay for Years 2 and 3, would be determined by the initiatives. Total: \$75,000

### **Conclusion**

The task force recognizes the urgent need for action and understands that community-based violence intervention and interruption programs have the potential to deter high risk individuals from engaging in violent acts involving firearms, 2) help to resolve potentially violent and/or deadly disputes before they occur, and 3) connect them to education, employment, mental health, social, housing, and family services. Community based violence intervention programs work and the task force is ready to translate the above recommendations into actions.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Wikipedia. Roanoke, Virginia. Wikipedia. October 2019. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roanoke,\\_Virginia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roanoke,_Virginia). Retrieved 10/25/19.
- <sup>2</sup> Roanoke Regional Partnership. Roanoke Region Job Growth Outpacing the State. Roanoke Regional Partnership. October 2019. <https://roanoke.org/2019/10/17/roanoke-region-job-growth-outpacing-the-state/>. Retrieved 10/29/19
- <sup>3</sup> Chief Tim Jones. Task Force Presentation. August 2019.
- <sup>4</sup> Virginia Department of Health. Gun Violence in Virginia. VDH. 2018.
- <sup>5</sup> Bieler S, Kijakazi K, La Vigne N, et al. Engaging Communities in Reducing Gun Violence. Urban Institute. April 2016.  
<https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/80061/2000760-engaging-communities-in-reducing-gun-violence-a-road-map-for-safer-communities.pdf>.
- <sup>6</sup> Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Investigation. 2018 Crime in the United States. FBI UCR. <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2018/crime-in-the-u.s.-2018/topic-pages/tables/table-6>
- <sup>7</sup> Cure Violence Global. What We Do. CVG. Cvg.org.
- <sup>8</sup> Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence. Funding Community-Based Violence Intervention Programs in Virginia. EFSGV. July 2019.