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Office of Gun Violence Prevention Highlights Progress Despite Rising Homicide Numbers

Director Antonio Emanuel reports successes in youth outreach, violence intervention, and festival peacekeeping, while calling for greater collaboration and funding to sustain efforts

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Two years since its formal operationalization, the leadership of the Office of Gun Violence Prevention said on Monday that they are making steady strides in reducing homicides and other violent crimes alongside the V.I. Police Department.

That was the testimony of the Office's director, Antonio Emmanuel, despite the steady stream of news about shootings in the community, with 37 homicides registered for 2024 so far.

Providing an update before the Committee on Government Operations, Veterans Affairs, and Consumer Protection, Mr. Emanuel reminded the committee that the office is intended to be an “outreach agency focused on coordinating efforts that keep our young people safe, free and alive,” thus most of their efforts align with this mandate, he argued. The Office of Gun Violence Prevention continues to approach gun violence as a “health epidemic,” he said, noting that the office has “no law enforcement responsibility or capability.”

Per Mr. Emanuel, the office’s six team members continue to implement strategies “that have helped curb some of the violence occurring in our communities.” That includes working collaboratively with government departments including the Department of Education, VIPD, nonprofit organizations, faith-based groups, and private businesses. Their teamwork, he told the committee, has resulted in a significant decrease in homicides since 2019.

To target impressionable youth, the Office continues to work with the Department of Education on “anti-violence and anti-bullying focused presentations” that have been received by over 5,000 students. VIDE has connected the Office with “high-risk students”, and the team has subsequently held “intense and direct engagements to help change mindsets by arming them with tools that help them self-regulate personal behavior, avoid conflict and improve communication skills.”

An after-school program complements that work, as the Office is working with eighty young Virgin Islanders from two public housing communities. “Of approximately 80 youth we serve, only four would find themselves involved in incidents that warranted law enforcement attention,” reported Mr. Emanuel. Outside of immediate youth engagement, the Office’s violence interrupters have been working in the community. Mr. Emanuel testified that one person in particular has “intervened in over 15 incidents where there [was] serious conflict and death was imminent.”

A focus on promoting peace during the territory's festivals has led to the first year in three years where there have been no homicides during Carnival on St. Thomas, he said. On St. Croix, 2023 was the second year in the same timeframe where there were no homicides during the Christmas festival, Mr. Emanuel made known.

The update was well received by committee chair Senator Carla Joseph, who encouraged Mr. Emanuel and his team to continue the collaborative approach to crime prevention. “We operate within our own silos,” she lamented.

The need for collaboration was indeed highlighted in Mr. Emanuel's testimony. He was acutely aware of data that suggest that “jurisdictions that experience significant decreases in crime usually creep back up.” A recent spate of suicides and uptick in homicides is of great concern to the office, but Mr. Emanuel remains resolute that “we still have more to improve on and more people to reach out.”

The collaborative approach that Ms. Joseph called for may be hampered by a need for increased financing, said Mr. Emanuel. “It must be an all-hands-on-deck approach,” he said, calling for government support for nonprofits who are attempting to do similar work to prevent crime.

Mr. Emanuel noted that crime had many factors at play. “We have issues at schools, we have issues in the people that aren't working, people that claim they have to rob somebody to make food on their table,” Mr. Emanuel expressed. “These kinds of systemic issues go way beyond just fixing it with a stroke of a pen or making a law. It takes effort. We didn't get here overnight,” he pointed out.

Taking the long view is what has guided the office's strategy of youth outreach, according to the director. He said talking to young men about conflict, violence interrupters, and trying "to get them to see that to kill somebody because they owe you money or stole your drugs is certainly not the way to handle conflict," Mr. Emanuel explained.

He has pledged his office's commitment to continuing their work, despite being "spread a little thin" with only six staff across the entire territory.

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