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Office of Gun Violence Says It's Seeing Results in Youth Outreach Efforts, But Entrenched Problems Persist

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The tiny Office of Gun Violence Prevention (OGVP) says it is having an impact when it comes to turning young Virgin Islanders away from violent behavior.

“Our outreach has been phenomenal,” Bruce Flamon , Outreach Coordinator at OVGP told lawmakers on the Senate Committee on Homeland Security, Justice and Public Safety on Wednesday. Violence prevention, Mr. Flamon said, has been as straightforward as creating activities that young people can participate in, thereby reducing the underlying causes and risk factors that lead to violence.

OVGP's presence in the youth community gives young people a focal point when adult help is needed.

"We went to a simple car show [that] was attended by maybe four of five hundred youth and that next day, just to show you that we were in the right place, we had a homicide of one of the drivers," Mr. Flamon explained. That tragedy, he said, sparked a relationship where young people have reached out to the Office of Gun Violence for assistance in putting on future activities.

OGVP Director Antonio Emmanuel delivered a message of hope in restorative justice by utilizing the office's Gun Violence Reduction approach. With a team of just three people, the agency is already reporting some level of influence on young people, discouraging them from taking up firearms and engaging in violent behavior.

What makes the job challenging, Mr. Emmanuel said, is that "our young people have become desensitized to violence....It's mostly personal. The data we collected, the experience that we got, if you look at the amount of cases that we've had, they are targeted events," he said.

But every effort helps, including those by citizens who can save someone by learning how to preserve a life by taking the initiative. "It's as simple as me applying direct pressure on a wound ...that's something we can teach anybody."

"Most of those people that got transported to the hospital and died, some of them might have lived if somebody had just done direct pressure instead of throwing them in the back seat and saying hold on, we're gonna make it," Mr. Emmanuel explained.

For those who survive long enough to begin receiving treatment at the hospital, costs begin to mount. "The average ambulance ride is anywhere from about \$1,500 to \$1,800; the average stay in the hospital is about \$3,000 a day; the emergency room visits are about \$2,000 and that's if you're just in and out," he said.

Additional costs may come from having to do surgery, or therapy, or rehab, Mr. Emmanuel noted, adding that costs to the wider economy if the victim is a skilled worker or owns a business had not yet been included in the discussion.

Meanwhile, society pays on the other side of the issue as well. Samuel Joseph, the territory's chief public defender, said on average it takes about \$20,000 for a public defender to represent someone in a murder case. The majority of the 800 cases that the office is currently managing are for felony crimes, with between 40 and 50 percent of defendants being repeat offenders according to Mr. Joseph, who described the pool of offenders as a small concentrated group of people.

Likewise, Mr. Emmanuel said that most incidents of gun violence are tightly concentrated among a small number of "very high-risk young adults" who share a common set of risk factors, including involvement in street crews, significant history of involvement with the criminal justice system, often prior victimization, and a connection to a recent shooting – usually within the past 12 months.

"While the vast majority of people involved in shootings, as victim or suspect, are members or associates of street groups or gangs, the motive for the shooting may not be typical of a traditional gang war. Often shootings are precipitated by a petty conflict, misunderstanding, a simple argument, relationship issues or the now ubiquitous social media slight. The social media slight sometimes becomes a social media incited shooting," Mr. Emmanuel said.

The hiring of a violence interrupter for St. Croix has been a key part of the OGVP's territory-wide Gun Violence Reduction Strategy. Damien Long's job is to go into communities, engaging with high-risk individuals in an effort to reduce the potential for new or continued conflicts, thereby helping to foster peace.

Despite the OGVP representatives' optimistic testimony, senators wanted more to work with. Committee Chair Senator Kenneth Gittens said that he and his colleagues needed the Office to produce more data-driven results that the government could later use to make policy decisions.

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