

CJCC PUBLIC MEETING



Violence Interruption in the District— Current Practices: What’s Working, What’s Needed

September 22, 2021

5:30 pm – 7:00 pm

Virtual Event



Background

On September 22, 2021, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC) convened a public meeting webinar entitled “Violence Interruption in the District - Current Practices, What’s Working, What’s Needed.” Gun violence and escalating numbers of homicides across the District (including frequent simultaneous homicides within neighborhoods) are creating fear among residents.

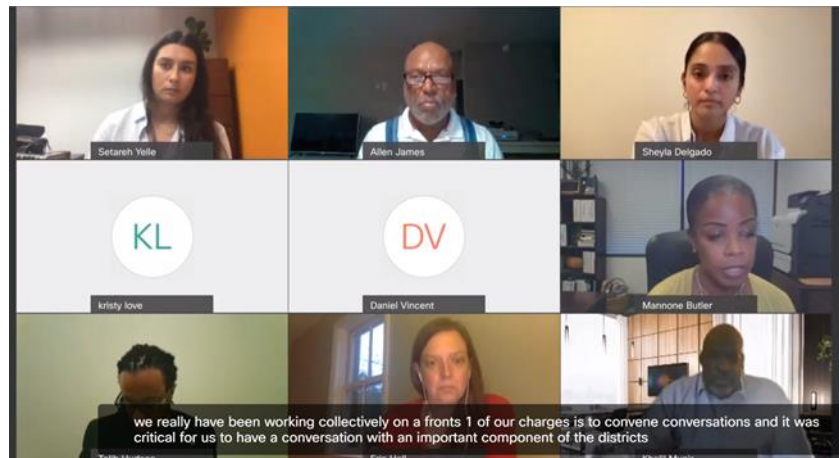
The public meeting webinar was designed to achieve several objectives. The objectives included: facilitating a dialogue among violence interruption (VI) and intervention experts on strategic and focused initiatives currently used to reduce gun violence across the District of Columbia; exploring how organizations and institutions (governmental, non-profit, and academic) are collaborating to identify what programs are working or not; and identifying the type of resources that are being leveraged in support of violence interruption activities. Further, the discussion was designed to identify what measures and approaches are being employed and have proven to be effective among collaborating criminal justice partners, and to discuss current challenges and opportunities to improve the District’s violence interruption efforts.

CJCC Executive Director Mannone Butler commenced the discussion and welcomed the webinar attendees, moderator, and panelists to the program. She emphasized that CJCC partners and community stakeholders are working collaboratively on strategic and focused initiatives to stem the violence and restore safety and stability to communities. Director Butler outlined the discussion framework and introduced the moderator.

Panel Introduction

The moderator, Talib Hudson, New School, Project Director of The New Hood, introduced the panelists:

- Sheyla Delgado, Deputy Director for Analytics, John Jay College
- Dr. Erin Hall, Director, MedStar Washington Hospital Center-Community Violence Intervention Program
- Allen James, Co-Chief of Violence Reduction, Office of the Attorney General (OAG) for the District of Columbia
- Satareh Yelle, Strategy & Innovation Officer, Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (ONSE)

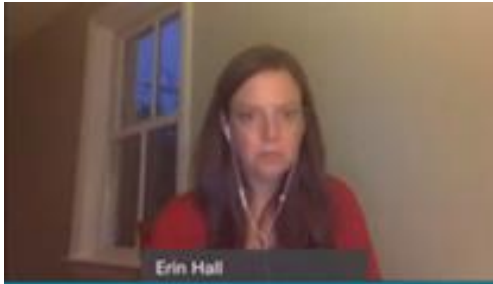


Panel Discussion

VIOLENCE INTERRUPTION APPROACHES AND HOW THEY WORK

Mr. Hudson asked each panelist to explain the nature of their work and organization.

Dr. Hall explained that her work involves responding to victims and families traumatized by violence, including high-risk populations, many of whom are at risk of the reoccurrence of violence-related trauma. Her staff provides therapeutic services, including post-trauma aftercare services. Additionally, her work involves, providing coping skills, and her staff serve as ambassadors to support the needs of their patients.



Dr. Hall's MedStar team engages survivors of violence at their worst moments when they are experiencing trauma and pain. The program utilizes a western medical model and approach to trauma that responds to victims after their traumatic event. The MedStar program focuses on educating patients regarding the value of receiving trauma informed care. MedStar staff members function as liaisons/translators between patients and medical teams and their efforts utilize a patient-centric approach dedicated to delivering a plan of action focused on violence intervention.

The two District government agencies engaged in Violence Interruption (VI), OAG and ONSE, employ different models and approaches.

The OAG approach is based on the Cure Violence model, which identifies and engages high-risk persons in selected communities where violence is prevalent and utilizes violence interrupters (VIs) whose efforts are designed to deter violent activity. The VIs have past experiences with violence, and they are recruited to work in neighborhood hot spots where they try to establish trusting relationships and defuse conflicts. Once they have established credibility, the VIs embed themselves in communities and neighborhoods and work to obtain information from community members about brewing conflicts, or previous acts of violence that may inspire retaliation. A standard procedural protocol employed involves convening community gatherings within 72 hours after a shooting. The gatherings are intended to calm residents, raise awareness, and generate community support. VIs perform community building and conflict mediation, and caseworkers are employed to perform outreach activities.

Allen James offered that Cure Violence VIs originate from the neighborhoods where the violence occurs and some of them were ex-shooters and offenders and therefore have credibility in their neighborhoods. He remarked that many times they know who the shooters are and try to encourage them to change their mindsets and to participate in healthy non-violent activities. VIs attend sporting events and attempt to build relationships with at-risk persons while serving as credible messengers.



ONSE employs a hybrid approach that takes elements from the Cure Violence Model. The ONSE model employs a public health approach to violence prevention and contracts community-based organizations

to administer violence prevention and intervention programs. It also provides continuum of services as well as administering the Pathways Program for previously justice-involved persons who, upon completion of the program, have the opportunity to work as VIs and engage in conflict negotiation and mediation activities. Intervention activities focus on three distinct groups: at-risk individuals, groups/crews, and communities. The office employs community-based measures and initiatives that occur simultaneously across the different groups. Similar to the Cure Violence model, a primary goal of ONSE intervention efforts involves establishing trusting relationships and providing resource support for program clients engaged in workforce development and job readiness activities. Ms. Yelle cited the value of ensuring strong service connections for persons who present a multitude of needs, including identification, housing, and emergency housing relocation. She also highlighted the value of providing trauma-informed care for clients as well.

Ms. Delgado explained that her work involves researching and evaluating programs that fall under the category of community-based intervention or balanced reduction non-police activities. Generally, the partnership occurs after the strategy/program has been implemented. Ms. Delgado performs research and evaluation work designed to understand the effects and results of programs in New York, and across the country. Ms. Delgado emphasized that her research and evaluations rely on outcome data such as shootings and hospital admissions.

TYPES OF DATA COLLECTED FOR VIOLENCE INTERRUPTION WORK

Dr. Hall stressed that information and data are key to developing tailored responses for the care of victims in her hospital intervention program. Demographic information is gathered, and past history of being a shooting victim is also a useful data point, primarily because survivors of violence face a high probability of experiencing future victimization.

Ms. Delgado explained that her work is driven by information collected by anyone regarding day-to-day encounters, including community activity experienced by frontline workers. She emphasized that the data used for her research is collected systematically and uniformly. Further, the information collected includes incidents such as shootings/injuries, that extend over a specific period of time.

The representatives from OAG and ONSE agreed that data collection has evolved during the course of the pandemic. Based on data collected, their agencies have adjusted ensure continuity of services. For both agencies, data is used to provide accountability regarding their program approaches. Each of the representatives agreed that it is useful to measure the quantity and quality of caseload work, as well as identifying successes and challenges and helping to tell the “story” of violence interruption. Additionally, data can be valuable when it is used as a tool to support building out infrastructure. However, it was noted that some information tracking efforts do not lend themselves to systematic data collection. For example, it is easier to collect data on processes measures as opposed to outcomes generated from work performed by VIs. Both agency representatives agreed that outcome data takes more time to compile, and that the most reliable data involve police crime data, which is readily available.



Talib Hudson addressed a question he believed the attending audience was interested in: How can data be used to make sense of and connect the dots related to ongoing and ever-increasing shootings.

The panelists explained that data tells a story about VI efforts and in some instances associated results. For instance, ONSE tracks violent crimes and incidents in high-risk neighborhoods. In turn, that data is useful in providing situational awareness within various service area boundaries where VI efforts are being conducted. An important point and caveat noted is that although national data can inform VI efforts broadly, that data should not be used to drive District efforts because District neighborhoods vary and there are a host of factors/influences that differ across Wards, neighborhoods, groups, and individual actors, whereas national data cannot account for those factors.

HOW DATA IS USED TO INFORM VIOLENCE INTERRUPTION STRATEGIES

The moderator asked about the relevance of data, where it originates, and how it is used.

The panelists agreed it is important to employ data to determine how to measure and assess the success of VI efforts. They also acknowledged the value and importance of obtaining input from VIs regarding how they think their work should be judged. Their rationale is based on the premise that average citizens are interested in the number of shootings taking place. Therefore, it is important and useful to provide data that illustrates what type of work VIs perform, even if it is impossible to know when intervention efforts resulted in reduced or no violent activity. The Cure Violence Model uses front-end data, i.e., housing, census, unemployment, etc., to determine whether their efforts are delivering measurable results. Further the model relies on the fundamental assumption that only a small number of persons concentrated in a confined area commit the lion's share of shootings. To inform their work, the organization relies on web-based (national/international) datapoints to guide their efforts.



Ms. Delgado provided an additional perspective on the application and use of data. She explained that data is used to measure program performance and for shaping violence intervention policy. For example, data can be used to illustrate what is occurring in a community, but the data does not explain whether VI strategies are working and delivering expected results. Further, the data does not provide context related to VI work in theory and practice, which is

designed to improve health outcomes, i.e., save lives and minimize violence. Ms. Delgado stressed the importance of differentiating a strategy (a plan of action or policy) versus a model (a system or thing used as an example to follow) when discussing VI. It was noted that organizations and VI partners use different data. Consequently, the data derived from VI caseloads may not explain or quantify what they do, how much effort is involved, and how effective their efforts are. However, it was noted that data collected can be used to provide context to funders regarding the nature, type, and scope of VI activities.

Ms. Yelle indicated that it is difficult if not impossible to use data to correlate VI efforts with reduced homicides. Mr. James offered that the Cure Violence Model relies on front-end crime data to calculate where to dedicate their efforts in specific neighborhoods. Ultimately, the goal is to use data to inform decision-making relative to formulating policies and strategies that may be positively impactful. Ms. Delgado made a critical point regarding data; sometimes existing literature (data) does not coincide with the lived experiences of Vis and their work, and it is important to apply and use data in proper context.



As the discussion concluded, the moderator inquired how do we know whether current efforts work. According to Ms. Delgado, the Cure Violence Model is rooted in changing social norms and it is hard to quantify whether norms change and what motivates the change. Mr. James offered that gathering data on norm change requires considerable funding and research, which is time and resource intensive and he noted that in the absence of definitive research data, crime and hospital data must suffice and can provide useful perspective.

Questions and Answers

PANELISTS' RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS POSED BY AUDIENCE MEMBERS

ENHANCED FUNDING FOR VIOLENCE INTERRUPTION

Ms. Yelle (ONSE) indicated that the recently passed FY22 Council budget includes enhanced funding for VI efforts. She also mentioned that capacity-building is occurring within ONSE and consequently more neighborhoods will be supported as staffing levels increase.

EXPLANATIONS FOR INCREASED VIOLENCE AND HOMICIDES

Allen James (OAG) stated that a cultural shift is occurring and that in many instances, traumatized individuals are responsible for perpetuating violent acts. Further, he cited his opinion on the influence of social media and the glorification of violence in the entertainment industry. Mr. James elaborated and commented that hurt persons often inflict hurt onto others, and that for some community members, their response involves a fight (violence) or flight response. Finally, he emphasized that families and children need to be taught how to manage conflict that occurs in their lives.

INTER-AGENCY COLLABORATION

Ms. Yelle and Mr. James stated that ONSE and Cure Violence collaborate and communicate routinely. Their interactions have evolved, sometimes align, and have actually improved. Some of their work overlaps within similar boundaries. Fundamentally, each of them utilizes predictable protocols and they mutually strive to harmonize their efforts.

LENIENCY EXTENDED TO VIOLENT OFFENDERS

In response to a question raised about juvenile offenders being “coddled” and not held accountable, Mr. James stated that from his perspectives young violent offenders are not “coddled.” He commented that hard core offenders and their behaviors must be sanctioned. He also highlighted that offenders receive

services and attention that compliant and well-behaved persons do not. Mr. James suggested that the needs of socially conforming but at-risk youth need to be addressed as well.

Talib Hudson offered that prevailing literature does not validate the practice or effectiveness of imposing harsh sentences for violent offenders, commenting that the “scared straight” method does not work. Rather, swift, and fair sanctions generate more positive results, combined with offering college study opportunities in prison, which in turn deliver better educated and informed persons when they return to society. Finally, he stated that most violent offenders age out of this behavior in their late 20’s and early 30’s.

UNIFIED VIOLENCE INTERRUPTION ACTIVITY

In response to a question about the possibility of merging VI efforts under one agency, Mr. James opined that VI efforts do not need to be housed under any one entity. Instead, more front-end prevention activities should be dedicated toward at-risk populations. And community-based organizations should be empowered with more resources and technical assistance.

CONCLUSION

Director Butler thanked the panelists, CJCC staff, and attendees for participating in the webinar and indicated that the work on violence interruption would continue via continued collaboration with other stakeholders and agencies. She affirmed that the overarching goal is to make communities safer and to maximize the effectiveness of available resources, in addition to employing sound and effective violence intervention strategies.