

Safeguarding Communities by Reaching Out—Relentlessly



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The LISC Institute spoke with three street outreach organizations in diverse communities about how they do their work and what makes this approach to violence prevention so effective—Roca, Inc., serving 21 Massachusetts communities and Baltimore, MD, the Benedict Center in Milwaukee, WI and the Springfield Urban League in Springfield, IL.

“You wouldn’t go away.”

That’s what young people often tell Lili Elkins, chief strategy officer for Roca, when she asks why they participate in Roca’s Young Men’s program. Roca Youth Workers make “relentless” contact with young people in communities throughout Massachusetts, eventually building trusting relationships and persuading them to enter a program that will help them leave gangs, find employment, and stabilize their lives.

Joseph Furnari II, director of Roca Chelsea, explains how these young people have all experienced trauma and are not inclined to trust anyone. “We’re asking them to change their lives and they need help to do that. We have hard conversations. They tell us to drop dead and our job is to bring them back as many times as it takes until they stop telling us to go away.” Building trust through consistent contact is the key to street outreach, an effective approach to violence interruption and harm reduction many communities have adopted over the past 20 years. LISC supports street outreach efforts in Chelsea and other communities as a training and technical assistance provider for the U.S. Department of Justice Byrne Criminal Justice Innovations program.

A DETERRENT TO OVER-POLICING

Our country is beginning to reckon with the impacts of over-policing and over-enforcement in communities of color. Aggressive law enforcement tactics rooted in racist policies mean that people living in communities of color experience higher rates of police violence, arrest, and incarceration. As the killings of Black people at the hands of police spark national attention and outrage, people are calling for alternatives to traditional policing. One of these alternatives is to hand over some of the duties of police to trusted

community members who are trained to de-escalate tense situations. This is the role of street outreach workers.

Street outreach helps address the impacts of systemic disinvestment and unjust policing strategies in Black and brown neighborhoods that have for too long seen limited opportunities and seemingly unlimited enforcement. Most street outreach programs work with local law enforcement to identify and serve people who may be vulnerable to violence in the community. They may form agreements with law enforcement to provide counseling and supportive services as an alternative to arrest and detention, or they may respond alongside police when incidents occur to help defuse tensions and reduce the likelihood of violence or police use of force. Addressing the root causes of violence and enlisting police in providing alternatives to arrest can reduce the overall presence of police in a community and prevent over-policing and the use of aggressive tactics.

HOW DOES STREET OUTREACH WORK?

In street outreach, workers form personal connections with vulnerable people in their communities, especially those who may have a history of violence or gang-involvement, and intervene to stop cycles of harm and violence. Furnari says of Roca’s clients, “these are kids in the middle of gang activity, they’re carrying guns, they’re doing a lot of things our communities would prefer they not do, and they do not see another way.” Street outreach workers function as mentors, counseling people to build healthier social and emotional skills over the long term while working in the short term to prevent retaliation following incidents of violence. They ultimately help individuals change their lives by connecting them with education and employment opportunities that offer an alternative drugs or gangs.

Cure Violence, founded in Chicago in 2000 under the name “CeaseFire,” is one of the best-known programs and many outreach initiatives follow its basic principles. Approaching violence as a public health issue, Cure Violence posits that violence is contagious in much the same way as an infectious disease, but prevention efforts can stop its spread. An Everytown for Gun Safety report supports this idea, noting that people who have been harmed by gun violence become more likely to use guns and cause harm themselves. Cure Violence outreach workers are called “violence interrupters” and that is often literally what they do.

Street outreach is not always about violence. There are outreach programs that target homeless youth, sex workers, substance abusers, and other vulnerable populations, but face-to-face connections and trust building are essential to the success of all of these efforts. Such relationships have proven vital during the pandemic, allowing street outreach workers to pivot to helping community members navigate information about the virus and access resources including medical care, food assistance, and technology to support learning. As Arnold Ventures notes, street outreach personnel are essential workers.

Research shows that this highly personalized intervention model works to decrease violence, protect communities, and change lives. We talked to three street outreach organizations about how they do their work and what makes this approach so effective.

ROCA: THE YOUNG MEN PROGRAM

Roca works in 21 Massachusetts communities and Baltimore, MD, with young people who are members of gangs or involved in the justice system and who are not engaged with school, employment, or other programming. Roca’s Intervention Model specifically works with young people at the highest risk of violence or criminal activity, providing positive relationships and tailored programming to help them transform their lives. Roca receives referrals for the program from the police, parole officers, courts, community organizations and the school district or police.

Building trust through consistent contact is the key to street outreach.

The cornerstone to Roca’s approach is persistence and persuasion. “Our job is to serve young people who will not engage in other programming and are engaged in urban violence,” says Elkins. Roca deliberately does not serve young people who willingly show up to programming every day, instead referring those who are already willing to access services to other agencies. This makes Roca’s job more challenging at the outset. “Because we work with disengaged young people who won’t show up for programming, outreach is part of the program design. We go knock on doors 20 or 30 times until a kid is willing to talk to us and we keep knocking until they agree to engage in programming.”

Roca’s workers spend four to six months developing trusting relationships with their clients and convincing them to come in for services. “These young guys, they’re not ready, willing and able. They’ve had trauma, they haven’t had love,” says Furnari. Part of the early relationship building is getting them to see there are genuine alternatives to the way they’ve been living. Once clients are on board, Roca implements a two-year program based on cognitive behavioral therapy, a practical, problem-solving approach to change patterns of that influence people’s actions and decisions. Roca also provides employment and educational programming to help clients meet their long-term goals to avoid involvement in the justice system, stay safe, and get and keep a job. “We’re very focused on building young people’s emotional regulation and skills to live in the world they live in,” says Elkins.

Violence and harm do not occur in a vacuum. Housing stability, economic opportunity, and individual health and well-being are all among the social determinants of safety.

BENEDICT CENTER: THE SISTERS PROGRAM

The Sisters Program at Milwaukee's Benedict Center works with women involved in street-based sex trade, including sex trafficking, many of whom are experiencing homelessness and using substances, and almost all of whom are victims of trauma. Whereas Roca's workers seek out the individuals they work with, Benedict Center workers know their population needs a different approach. With two drop-in locations and a van for mobile outreach, they let the women come to them. Sisters Program outreach specialists and case managers introduce themselves to women during regular visits to areas known for high rates of street-based sex trade, distributing food, toiletries, and condoms, and ask the women what they need. "We do our street outreach by being low barrier access in the neighborhood so we're very accessible," says Benedict Center Executive Director Jeanne Geraci. Using a harm reduction and housing first approach, Benedict Center works to connect women to resources including housing and treatment. Frequently, women need housing in order to contemplate drug treatment or other goals.

The Sisters Program has worked with the Milwaukee Police Department. In 2011, police in District 3 were trying to address street prostitution. An officer and an Assistant District Attorney asked Benedict Center if they could bring women to Benedict Center's drop-in site in lieu of arrest or citation and the organization entered into partnership with the police department to create a pre-arrest diversion program. Police participation in the diversion program has ebbed and flowed at times depending on departmental priorities.

At its heart, however, the work of the Sisters Program is harm reduction. "When it comes to the street-based sex trade, we cannot arrest our way out of the problem," says Geraci. "What we really need to do is approach it differently. We need a public health approach." Problem-oriented solutions and community policing are fundamental components of any public health approach to neighborhood safety, benefiting both the women and the community. This year, the organization received a

Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) funding contract from the state for its work. "It's a huge paradigm shift to understand that the women in our program are far more likely to be victimized [than to harm others] and that we're seeing the results of poverty and trauma in women's lives," Geraci notes.

A grant from the Advancing a Healthier Wisconsin Endowment with the Medical College of Wisconsin helped Benedict Center grow its program from a weekly drop-in center in a church to a full-time program and evaluate the outcomes of the pre-arrest diversion pilot. The pilot program asked participants to be involved with Benedict Center programming for six months, but most of the women who engaged in the program stayed beyond six months. In the first year, 19 percent of women in the program were able to leave the street for a month or more and that figure rose to 21 percent in subsequent years. Geraci cautions, however, that available housing and treatment options are insufficient to meet the needs of women in the program. A woman ready to leave the streets may find she will have to wait months for residential placement or shelter. "It's important to understand this is incredible success considering how limited the resources are," she says.

SPRINGFIELD URBAN LEAGUE: FOCUSED DETERRENCE

Springfield Urban League began working in 2016 with 11 other organizations – including the local police, the state's attorney, and the school system – to understand and address the determinants of safety in Springfield and Sangamon county. The city was experiencing high rates of violent crime and incarceration and was home one of the most violent census tracts in the country, according to Marcus Johnson, Quality Assurance Officer for the Springfield Urban League. The Urban League decided its best role in the community-based intervention and violence interruption program was to work through the schools. Working primarily with youth age 18 and older, the organization placed workers within a high school (since expanded to two high schools) to reach out to students

identified as high risk for violence or gang involvement, intervene when a crisis arises during the school day, and connect students and their families with services. They operate summer and after-school programs to help youth recapture course credits toward graduation and gain work experience.

The workers in Springfield Urban League’s youth programs are not just trying to convince students not to commit violence, they are trying to uncover and solve the root causes of violence in the community, including deeply entrenched economic inequality. That means providing basic services for families, education assistance, employment training and connections to jobs. When a child approaches a Springfield Urban League worker with a problem, “we listen, empathize, and provide immediate supports to get through the day. Then we follow up and see how we can provide support for the family” without the child feeling like his or her confidence has been broken. This may include what Johnson calls a “warm handoff” to another partner that can provide essential services including trauma-informed care.

The Urban League is focused on intervening as early as possible to steer youth away from violence. “We know in high school is when you begin to feel the pressure to start making those decisions that can determine the direction of your life,” Johnson says. While the program started by working with youth at age 18, the Urban League has recently begun engaging freshmen as young as 13 to share the impacts and causes of violence. The school system and community have asked the Springfield Urban League to work with even younger students, so their summer and afterschool program for the impressionable middle school years now include violence education and disruption, lessons on personal responsibility, and conversations about the role of police.

Key lessons

Trust is the single most important ingredient for success in street outreach. Outreach workers must establish trusting relationships with their clients in order to help them. “If you have one or two clients you have started helping, they will definitely be letting everyone else know,” explains Sisters Program Director Melinda Hughes, “but if you burn trust, that spreads like wildfire also.” Roca, Benedict Center, and Springfield Urban League told us about the practices that help effective street outreach programs build trust.



Be consistent

Whether they’re knocking on doors, distributing food on a street corner, or walking the halls of a school, outreach workers are present day in and day out. The steady presence of the same faces and the same patient approach over time is part of what enables them to establish connections and build trust. Forming relationships is just the beginning, however. The real work of street outreach takes place over the long term, in providing case management and unconditional support for the people they’re serving. In Roca’s experience, it can take 18 months of this work to see sustained behavior change.

Use credible messengers

The best street outreach teams originate from entities that are in and of the neighborhood where they work. Further, the most credible messengers for street outreach are those who have their own lived experience in the environment where they are working. Street outreach workers are often people with their own history of justice or gang involvement. Benedict Center has had success hiring graduates of the Sisters Program to perform street outreach. Workers with lived experience understand the pressures their clients are facing and the challenges of changing their lives. In Springfield, the Urban League encourages its workers not only to reach out to individuals, but to be part of the life of the community, attending neighborhood association meetings, churches, sporting events, and school board meetings. “Those opportunities of being seen and heard in the community create the deeper connections that build trust,” says Johnson.

Trust people to know what they need

Any organization interested in providing street outreach should listen closely to the people it's hoping to serve. "Let them be the teachers of what they need, how they want to be approached, and how they want to be supported." Geraci advises, "Our philosophy to approach the people that you seek to support with respect and without judgement. Every single person has a story, has dignity and worth, and every person should be given agency and choice because they're the experts on themselves." The services people choose to receive might not be the ones outreach workers consider a top priority, says Geraci, "but unless you're in that person's shoes, you might not understand." Johnson agrees: "We have to be flexible enough to realize what we may see as a need may not be what they really need right now." He believes building trust by meeting the more immediate needs can eventually provide

the Springfield Urban League an avenue to work with families on larger issues like housing and employment.

In addition, Hughes cautions against providing conditional assistance. "The way a lot of services are set up, you have to quit drugs and get a job before you can be housed. You can't do that when you're on the street." Benedict Center focuses instead on housing-first, trauma-informed assistance to create a basic foundation of stability that women can build from to tackle the hard work of substance recovery and finding employment.

Provide resources and deliver on promises

Violence and harm do not occur in a vacuum. Housing stability, economic opportunity, and individual health and well-being are all among the social determinants of safety. The organizations

we interviewed all see a connection between violence and the societal conditions that systematically exclude people from the opportunity to thrive. Relationship building is the first and most critical step, but street outreach programs ultimately are in the business of changing lives and finding ways to help people who feel that they don't have options. That commitment creates high expectations, so the programs must be able to deliver on the life-stabilizing supports that make success possible. One of the most important principles for Johnson, therefore, is "being true to our word. If we say we are going to do something, as an organization or as individuals, we have to make sure that we follow through and provide them what they expect to get from our programming." Jagger Anderson, who works with youth in the Springfield Urban League's 21st Century Community Learning Centers, says he often starts off by asking kids to tell him something they would like to have. Often the answer is a field trip or a special experience, "and I do my best to get that done so we build trust," Anderson says.



A CALL TO ACTION

Street outreach reduces violence and protects communities and their residents from harm in several ways: by teaching alternative problem-solving skills, building life skills, and intervening in times of crisis, as Roca does; by providing early intervention to help youth avoid paths that lead to violence, as Springfield Urban League does; and by empowering people to escape situations in which they are likely to be victims of a crime, as Benedict Center does. In a testament to their effectiveness, street outreach programs continue to grow.

Perhaps because each model is tailored to local conditions and needs, there is no central clearinghouse for street outreach programs and best practices, although organizations such as the Nonviolence Institute and the Health Alliance for Violence Intervention offer useful information. LISC Safety & Justice has supported street outreach work in dozens of cities and is committed to expanding its support to even more places. CDFIs and intermediaries like LISC have a significant role to play in creating local ecosystems for street outreach in the following ways.

- **Accessing flexible funding:** Community organizations need funding to pay the salaries of outreach workers and hire coordinators to gain buy-in and manage cross-sector partnerships with police, schools, health centers, social service organizations, and other community-based partners. CDFIs can help assemble public, philanthropic and corporate dollars to support these positions.
- **Expansion of the services and programs:** There must be sufficient capacity in housing, education, and job training programs to accommodate demand as street outreach workers connect the people they work with to life-changing opportunities. CDFIs often invest in the community-based organizations that provide these services. Helping them expand their services and connect directly to the populations that need them is a valuable role for intermediaries and CDFIs to play.
- **Connections to peers:** With no formal curriculum or criteria for street outreach, practitioners need opportunities to learn from others who are doing this work. CDFIs that have regional and national networks are well-positioned to connect organizations doing street outreach to one

another and facilitate the exchange of knowledge and best practices.

- **Professional development:** Street outreach work is critically important for individuals and communities and skill and sensitivity are required to do it well. Outreach workers need skill building and options for career advancement in the field. Intermediaries that offer training and capacity building can help organizations address recruitment and advancement for these professionals.
- **Identification and capacity building of trusted community organizations:** Street outreach should always come from credible messengers that are in and of the community. Often, however, public and philanthropic dollars are awarded to a local organization the funders already know, rather than to a truly trusted, grassroots organization in a given community. The latter may lack experience managing large grants, but may still be best conduit for reaching vulnerable community members. An intermediary that works with myriad community partners knows the players on the ground and can help connect funding agencies to the right organization to lead outreach efforts. Through grants and technical assistance, CDFIs can also build the smaller organizations' capacity to manage grant funds or help arrange fiscal agency arrangements and partnerships when necessary.
- **Advocacy:** With a voice in regional or national conversations around community development, CDFIs and intermediaries are well-positioned to lead calls for greater funding to address the social determinants of safety.

Developing strong local ecosystems to support street outreach will send a powerful message to residents in communities affected by harm and violence that people are there to help, and like Roca's Youth Workers, they won't be going away. ■



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