

Perspectives on Street Outreach: Three Local Strategies

In the following Q+As, staff from Roca, Inc. (based in Massachusetts and Baltimore, MD), Milwaukee's Benedict Center, and the Springfield, IL Urban League describe the high-touch violence intervention strategies they've tailored to their communities—"relentless" outreach, "housing first" and wraparound services for youth and families.

INTENSIVE OUTREACH: ROCA, INC.

Roca conducts street outreach in 21 communities in Massachusetts and in Baltimore, MD. The organization works with young people who are justice-involved and not employed or in school. Lili Elkins, Roca's chief strategy officer and Joseph Furnari II, director of Roca Chelsea, discussed how they identify young people to work with and how they engage them – and keep them engaged – in the program.

Who are your typical clients?

ELKINS: Our job is to serve young people who will not engage in other programming and are engaged in urban violence. These are young people who have failed out of everything else they've ever done. They have all experienced trauma, so it's about building trust.

We get referrals from our partners and funders. We work with a lot of criminal justice partners, including parole, courts, police, and community organizations. We often get referrals from the school district or police.

They have to fit the model. If you show up to programming every day, you're not a ROCA young person and we send you somewhere else. If you're too low-risk we won't take you. There's no high-end limit of risk. Participants in our programming 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. Part of the early relationship building is getting them to see there's another option. Occasionally it doesn't work, but not very often. There's a relatively small number who fit the model that we can't engage.

How do you convince disengaged young people to participate in the program?

FURNARI: The staff is relentless. They are committed to what they do. If no one answers, they'll leave a business card. We will follow your grandma down the street to find out where you are. It's no joke. Eventually somebody comes to the door.

ELKINS: It takes ten to twelve attempts before a kid will even talk to us. Most of the time, they're denying it's even them at first, ducking out and not engaging. We will continuously show up until they will engage with us. We sort of wear them down.

FURNARI: Once we develop that relationship, it's bringing them into the building, having a class or a meal with them [or meeting virtually or outdoors during the pandemic]. These young guys, they're not ready, willing, and able. We have to work with them and have them believe in us. They've had trauma, they haven't had love. Our youth workers maintaining contact encourages them there is light at the end of the tunnel and we will work with them. When they come in, we've already built the trust with them.

How do you work with police?

ELKINS: We intentionally work with police in our communities. We engage them in restorative justice circles with young people and other partners and community members. We have talked to police departments about brain science and how young adults' brains develop [and trauma] and CBT. We do that on purpose to expose police and young people to each other and to be honest, I think a lot of police have gone through a lot of trauma too.

FURNARI: We had a situation in Lynn recently. A young man was just released and took a downward spiral this past week. He'd been out using. We alerted the police, they found him and alerted us and we picked him up and are working to find him placement.

ELKINS: Police are in the lives of these young people almost more than anyone else. If we are not in communication with them and working with them, it'll never work. I think the only way to get through what we're going through now is to work together. We try to help kids clear warrants and make it so they're not running and can just live their lives. It can't be fun to be ducking every cop you see because you've got a warrant.

Once you get participants in the door, how do you keep them engaged?

ELKINS: 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. They may come in and disappear, relapse, our job is to bring them back in. Everybody relapses when they are making changes. This is no different from a diet, etc. We're asking them to change their lives and they need help to do that. It takes about 18 months to see sustained behavior change.

They are on the police radar because they are causing problems and our job is to engage them and work through a cognitive behavioral intervention on long-term, sustained behavior change. We work through a pretty set intervention model that is focused on using CBT. We're very focused on building young people's emotional regulation and skills to live in the world they live in. We are focused on trying to get them to do something different. We provide a series of tools around CBT, employment and educational programming to help them meet long-term goals to get out of prison, stay alive, and get and keep a job.

We have to have enough of a relationship that when you tell me to go away, I can get you back in and I can work with you on that behavior. The young people we work with are just that: young people. Their brains aren't fully developed and they don't have the skill set to behave the way people want them to. They need help and to do that, you really need this sustained engagement and effort. If you don't continue to go after them, you're never going to get them engaged in programming.

HOUSING FIRST: BENEDICT CENTER

The Benedict Center's Sisters Program runs drop-in centers and a mobile outreach program to provide food and other necessities and support to women involved in the street-based sex trade in Milwaukee, WI. Executive Director Jeanne Geraci and Sisters Program Director Melinda Hughes spoke to us about how housing and other supports are the key to helping women stabilize their lives.

How does the Sisters Program differ from a typical law enforcement approach to the street-based sex trade?

GERACI: One of the key points is that when it comes to the street-based sex trade, we cannot arrest our way out of the problem. What we really need to do is approach it differently. We need a public health approach. Problem-oriented and community policing is what that pre-arrest diversion is. It's a model that can be used for many different issues in the city. Police are asked to respond to some of the most complex issues. It's hopefully serving the community better when we can bring this kind of problem-oriented approach.

We're trying to build a collaboration with Milwaukee Housing because many of the women are homeless and we also bring in service providers. The most sustainable long-term root-cause solution is housing and treatment.

What is it like to work with a population that others in the neighborhood might view as contributing to instability or lack of safety in the community?

GERACI: We've been working with justice-involved women since 1974. Who is the criminal and who is the victim? The justice system sets it up in this dichotomy, and there's much more gray area than that. It's possible they're breaking the law, but they're also victims, and the behavior originates from trauma.

HUGHES: We're very client-first, housing-first, trauma-informed. And because we are being of help in a compassionate, non-judgmental way by referring to our drop-in centers, that sort of relationship building continues when clients come into the drop-in centers. Case management and counseling are available.

It's always what the client wants to be doing. It's not on our agenda; it's on their agenda. The integrity of the agency is what keeps that door open. It makes things interesting with the police sometimes. We have been asked to be part of operations when they go do stings, and we have pretty steadfastly resisted. We don't want to be associated with police as part of the operations end, but as a trusted resource in the community that police can also use.

GERACI: This is a harm reduction program and we don't want to pressure women to do what we think they need to do. We believe women often know what they need. It's just really a matter of trust and whether services are available and accessible. We know it's important to the community to know whether women ever leave the street. There's no baseline [for success], even nationally. In first year, 19 percent of women in the program were able to leave street for a month or more, and then it went up to 21 percent.

How does the kind of support needed differ for a woman who is ready to leave the street versus someone who wants to drop in to the center for an evening?

GERACI: The thing a lot of people might not realize is that there is not enough housing or treatment readily available. We might have someone come and say “I’m ready,” so we do an assessment for treatment and find out it’s a two- to three-month wait for residential placement. There’s an 800-person waiting list for a shelter bed, which requires following certain rules you may not be able to comply with. So one of the things we are working on is making sure systemic solutions like housing, services, and treatment are available. We think the more those are available, the better outcomes will be and the faster women will be able to achieve them. Change takes time but it also takes resources.

Change might not be in the order we would think, but unless you’re in that person’s shoes, we might not understand. Housing is the number one thing most of the women wanted to start with after getting some basic trust. 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. Housing first really allows people to build on that foundation of stability. It’s a basic human need and you really can’t improve a lot of other things in your life unless you have it.

WRAPAROUND FAMILY SERVICES: SPRINGFIELD URBAN LEAGUE

The Springfield Urban League runs violence interruption programs with high school students in Springfield, Illinois, a community that has experienced high rates of gun violence. The Urban League has also expanded some violence prevention programming to middle school in recent years, alongside its existing mentorship, homework help, and other supports. It provides wraparound supports to children and their families, to address the root causes of violence such as poverty and instability. Quality Assurance Officer Marcus Johnson talked about building trust so Springfield Urban League can help young people and their families.

How do you serve students through the school-based setting?

Our program is designed to help mitigate the effects of violence as well as provide choice and opportunities for those impacted by violence in community. How do we impact the quality of education and help them understand the consequence of their

choices as they get older? We show them the variety of things they can be involved in.

We are really focused on the earliest intervention possible. We know in high school is when youth begin to feel the pressure to start making those decisions that can determine the direction of their lives. Our participant age is typically 18, but recently we’ve made more strides to target freshmen as early as 13 with opportunities to learn about the impacts of violence and focus on social determinants around violence.

We have had a lot of requests from schools to do some intervention work within our middle school programming. We have worked in the community and in our summer programming, adding violence education and disruption and opportunities for youth to increase their relationship with police officers and focus on some of the challenges that are going on in the world today. For example, we talk about what to do if you are outside playing and a police officer approaches you.

How do you extend the work you do with students in schools to impact students’ families?

The positive about the relationships we have is that we do have a visible presence in the school. Those individuals who are in the school serving on behalf of the Urban League have to be seen in the schools as a presence of support. It’s really important that we understand what the students’ needs are so our program really addresses the social determinants.

The blessing is that Urban League has supports built in to be able to provide supports for students, like emergency assistance programs for rent and utilities and food. We have grants and funding for families that are struggling to be successful and find jobs. Students don’t always know what Urban League can offer the whole family. When children come to us with concerns, we listen, empathize and provide immediate supports to get through the day, then follow up and see how we can provide support for the family without the child feeling like the listening ear is putting the family in danger.

Outside the school, we can call on our partners. That’s the power of partnerships. A child may present a variety of needs and it is challenging to not be able to provide them what they need. We have to create intentional partnerships where we are being clear about what we need from other service providers and we can provide a warm handoff for a family or a child.

How has the pandemic affected your work with students?

We transferred all our programming over to digital activities. As soon as we were able to do some small group activities, we

made sure to provide those supports as well. We have families with digital access challenges. We try to provide opportunities as much as we can for the use of hotspots or tablets that will allow them to participate in school, and in programming from our other partners.

Because we have been there throughout the year, we have families and kids who feel comfortable reaching out to us when dealing with home stresses. A lot of it is those predictive factors. Contributing factors to violence are health, jobs, justice issues. The majority of issues stem from lack of finances. How do we create stability so violence is not an option? We are sharing opportunities for the children to work with a case worker. Getting back into the school year, we continue to provide tutoring and mentorship remotely and provide that level of care and concern and just get a chance to meet with them.

Talk about role of trust-building in your outreach work with students and families.

Youth may not always feel comfortable providing information about what's going on at home. It takes time for us to develop that relationship so they feel comfortable opening up. We have to monitor how their knowledge, behavior and attitudes are changing as a result of our programming, and then start to incorporate service provision.

It's not as simple as being in the right place at the right time. It's not just about being there to intervene. It's about being the case manager. It's about being there before a decision is made, providing choices and options, and sharing the unconditional love you have for those who see violence as their only way out

The work starts from the beginning. You have to be seen, heard, and advocate for and with those whose lives you are seeking to change. Be intentional. Be knowledgeable about the community, show interest. Do actionable things that show you are not just here for your own interests. That way, deeper relationships will be developed and people will see you as an option and an opportunity. ■

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