

URBAN APPROACHES TO VIOLENCE PREVENTION: THE ATLANTA EXPERIENCE [618]

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Abstract

Recent observations of community violence in the fast-growing urban Metropolitan Atlanta area have revealed an alarming trend in the number of homicide deaths involving shootings, stabbings, and other forms of interpersonal violence. This workshop examines the experiences of participants in the Metropolitan Atlanta Violence Prevention Partnership and highlights approaches that the partners have used to respond to these challenges.

Introduction

The purpose of the Metropolitan Atlanta Violence Prevention Partnership (“MAVPP”) is to work toward creating a resilient violence prevention team of like-minded individuals and organizations across the metropolitan area to promote the health, safety, and well being of all people. This includes victims of violence such as, women, youth, and underserved groups in the Atlanta area. The long-term goal of the partnership is to initiate and sustain tangible, concrete, but coordinated measures that will help Atlanta to become a safer place in which everyone can thrive. Examples may include sharing data and assessment techniques, promoting evidence-based violence prevention technologies, advocating for laws and policies that prevent violence, and disseminating culturally relevant and socially appropriate programs.

Perhaps the most important contribution that the partnership has achieved in the short period that it has been in operation (i.e., since October, 2005) is the positive, genuine, professional working relationships that it has engendered among the participants. For the first time in Atlanta’s history, as far as anyone knows, representatives from community-based and faith-based organizations, academics, media representatives, school officials, and leading government officials have come together around a challenging but common concern: the prevention of violence. This process has already helped to strengthen services to the community by encouraging partners to become better acquainted with each other and to engage in valuable, mutually beneficial dialogue. The purpose of this document is to outline the simple but effective strategy that has allowed the partnership to thrive.

Morehouse School of Medicine faculty and staff from the Violence Prevention Coalition Project have worked as equal partners with various stakeholders around the city to coordinate this violence prevention partnership. While fostering a common vision, the partners expect to explore opportunities for initiating and strengthening violence prevention initiatives. Proposed service areas include interventions designed to improve school climate; to prevent child maltreatment, gang violence, and sexual assault; and to promote positive youth development and empowerment.

Charter participants have represented the following organizations:

- Atlanta Police Department
- Atlanta Public Schools
- Center for School Safety—Georgia State University
- Clark-Atlanta University—Department of Mass Media and Theater Arts
- DeKalb County Schools
- Gwinnett Public Schools
- Georgia Department of Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, and Addictive Disorders
- First Team America
- Fulton County District Attorney’s Office
- Fulton County School System
- Georgia Department of Human Resources, Rape Prevention Education
- Genesis Prevention Coalition
- Iron 2 Iron
- JARE Consulting
- Men Stopping Violence
- Morehouse School of Medicine—Department of Psychiatry
- Morehouse School of Medicine—Department of Community Health and Preventive Medicine
- Morehouse School of Medicine—Surgery
- Regional Council of Churches of Atlanta
- Sacred Space, Inc.
- Visions Unlimited
- Visions@Ben Carson Middle School
- Wholistic Stress Control Institute
- WSB-TV, Channel 2

Examples of direct violence prevention services highlighted here follow. The MAVPP works to support violence prevention activities in service delivery organizations by linking technology, resources, and relationships among its members.

Community Violence Prevention Services

Visions Unlimited and The Center for Neighborhood Enterprise

Visions Unlimited, a member of the MAVPP, is a national violence prevention initiative that provides youth and their families with high quality comprehensive *seamless delivery of services* to meet their individual needs. With a mission to provide exemplary programs and services to meet the mental, spiritual, and bodily needs of youth and their families in an environment of *love and mutual respect*, Visions Unlimited believes the outcomes of these high quality services will be “self-reliant, empowered, and resilient adult citizens armed with determination and advocacy who exhibit through their leadership, character, and integrity—a commitment to making a positive contribution to their communities.”

Visions Unlimited is affiliated with the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise which was founded in 1981 by Robert L. Woodson, Sr. The center’s mission is to empower neighborhood leaders to promote solutions that reduce crime and violence, restore families, revitalize low-income communities, and create economic enterprise. The Violence-Free Zone (“VFZ”) initiative has been adopted in cities throughout the country where the center provides technical assistance and guidance enabling neighborhood-based groups to serve in specific geographic areas with a goal to transform youth, strengthen families, and mobilize communities against violence. Current VFZ sites are located in Atlanta, GA; Baltimore, MD; Dallas, TX; Milwaukee, WI; and Washington, DC. The Center for Neighborhood Enterprise has selected Visions Unlimited (“VU”) to be the lead organization for its Violence-Free Zone initiative in Atlanta, GA.

What is a Violence-Free Zone (“VFZ”)?

A VFZ is a neighborhood-based youth intervention initiative whose purpose is to reduce youth crime, violence, and gang activity within a specific geographic location. A VFZ’s primary emphasis (Phase I—Establishing the Peace) is intervention, or reducing illegal acts committed by the most criminal and violence-prone youth in schools and/or neighborhood areas with above average youth crime rates. Phase II (Achieving Transformation and Furthering Positive Development) focuses on connecting those young people who have been perpetrators of violence and criminal behavior, to opportunities for positive, productive endeavors such as employment, job training, education and community service. During Phase III (Sustaining the Peace and Preventing Reoccurrences) of a VFZ, organizations maintain close contact and follow up with youth served through their programs to ensure continued success and to allow these youth to serve as positive role models for others as a reciprocity requirement for the assistance that was provided to them.

Systematic seamless service delivery makes Visions Unlimited unique:

- Through establishment of satellite offices in the community, students and their families participate in activities designed to address their individual needs.
- Services are delivered by highly qualified staff in an environment that recognizes the value and worth of each individual.
- Services are available 24/7 to youth and their families.
- Youth and their families collaborate with program staff in program planning and decision making to ensure that services are delivered according to needs.
- Collaboration between community organizations ensures the success of the program.

Current public and private partnerships will be maintained and new alliances developed to ensure and monitor program success. Service providers will be asked to participate in program planning to ensure optimal delivery of services to students and their families. Visions Unlimited is also a member of the MAVPP. Coalition memberships result in collaborations that enhance the effectiveness of program service delivery within and across community-based organizations, government agencies, and nongovernmental and faith-based organizations. The key to forming and maintaining these partnerships is the implementation of an intra-organizational intervention focusing on enhancing the quality of relationships among the partners.

MAVPP Organizational Development Intervention

The MAVPP serves partner organizations by establishing partnership functioning on the following premise: Working with community organizations to promote the well being of the community is a futile endeavor unless the partners themselves adhere to a healthy standard for relating to each other. Consequently, the partners adopted a set of working norms that they emphasize, monitor, and reinforce continuously. Tolerance, understanding and self-policing on each partner’s part is a vital element of the organizational development process in which the MAVPP members participate. The purposes of MAVPP that the organization encompasses include the following:

Build a broad-based, functional partnership to—

- Facilitate the coordination of a coalition of like-minded individuals, community leaders, and organizations across the metropolitan Atlanta area and, as appropriate, throughout the state of Georgia to promote the health, safety, and physical and mental well being of all people, especially the victims of violence—women and youth and the underserved in the Atlanta area;
- Come together as equals to combat violence with a common goal to make a positive, meaningful impact on the quality of life for all Georgians;

- Advocate for the implementation of violence prevention laws, policies, and programs that are culturally relevant and socially appropriate;
- Support prevention services that counteract violence across various settings: home, school, family, and community;
- Involve various stakeholders, especially those most affected by violence, in the formulation of action-oriented measures against physical and mental harm toward others;
- Explore opportunities for initiating and strengthening violence prevention initiatives through areas, such as positive youth development, gang violence prevention, improvement of school climate, and youth empowerment;
- Help to set priorities for violence prevention services for youth, families, schools, and communities; and
- Work together in a way that exemplifies genuine, healthy, positive working relationships and promotes norms against violence.

In addition, a core aspect of the process for promoting the MAVPP is to adopt and review the following set of working norms. These behavioral standards are the essential ingredient that allows members to interact smoothly and efficiently without competing self interests getting in the way. They strive to enforce these norms by incorporating them into a memorandum of agreement (“MOA”) that the partners sign. Essentially the MOA serves as a behavioral contract.

Working Norms

Our work is guided by the following set of working norms and values that serve as a framework upon which to build the MAVPP and to strengthen current relationships as we work toward realizing our shared vision for the Metropolitan Atlanta region. We are committed to:

- Respect and consideration for and toward others
- Openness and honesty in all interactions
- Working together as a team
- Sacrificing our personal interests to the interests of the people whom we serve
- Practicing active listening in all of our deliberations and interactions
- Always engaging in strategic thinking and strategic planning
- Using science-based and best practice models and interventions
- Using the consensus model in all decision making
- Practicing principle-centered leadership at all times—walking the walk we talk about
- Honoring commitments, being responsible, and celebrating accomplishments
- Aligning with our vision, mission, and objectives

Then the partner signs the document with the following statement: “I agree to the purposes and working norms presented in this agreement and pledge to work together to promote the aims of this partnership accordingly.”

The exercise of a partnership approach results in a variety of benefits for all stakeholders involved. For example, the partnership enabled Georgia State University’s Center for School Safety to submit successfully a proposal to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The initiative is designed to implement violence prevention services for program participants in the English Avenue area, an inner-city neighborhood of Atlanta with significant violence prevention challenges. Further, a partnership with the Genesis Coalition allowed Visions Unlimited access to organizations that connect the agency, its staff, and customers to services that are not provided at Visions.

Through this shared membership surrounding a common issue, violence prevention, Visions Unlimited has unprecedented access to resources not previously available when functioning as an individual entity. In addition, investment and active participation in the MAVPP, Visions Unlimited supports the coalition, ensuring the strength, direction, and achievement of its mutual goals.

Some specific, and very important beneficial outcomes resulting from the formation of the partnership include the sharing of resources, expertise, and opportunities. For example, approximately 20 partners received a compendium of violence prevention survey instruments through the MVAPP, vital information that they can use in grant preparation and program evaluation. Other partners, like Vision Unlimited and Georgia State University’s Center for School Safety, formed new working relationships with organizations that they did not know previously. When the partner submitted the grant proposal mentioned earlier, the letter of support contained an impressive list of 20 or more participants from the MVAPP. This approach let the funding organization know that the grant proposal had community support. The members expect more examples of this kind of collaboration.

Once the strategic planning process is final and the MAVPP members have completed a citywide action plan, they will generate a coordinated initiative that addresses the violence prevention needs for the entire city. The resulting action plan will focus on tangible, meaningful changes that are intended to beneficially affect the lives of all of Atlanta’s citizens. This is a critical step in that the formation of the MAVPP could lead to the funding of a formal entity that supports various violence prevention endeavors in a variety of critical areas affecting the vitality of the city as a whole and well into the 21st Century. The MAVPP members will benefit, in all likelihood, via subcontracts and proposals through the MAVPP. The future looks bright for the MAVPP because of these developments.

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