



Washtenaw County Sheriff's Office

Sheriff Jerry L. Clayton

Media Release

UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-BASED VIOLENCE INTERVENTION (CVI) – A PATH TO PEACE BY REDUCING VIOLENCE AS AN ANSWER TO CONFLICT

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Recently, several loud voices are pushing back against the concept of community-based peers with lived experience working to save lives through the anti-violence movement. This push back is short-sighted, irresponsible, and contrary to the national emerging best practice strategies for dealing with the epidemic of violent crime.

Larger than the vitriol directed towards one individual, the allegations of impropriety of a particular organization, or even concern over a single county commission decision, this debate is about the fundamental belief in redemption. That is, do we believe formerly justice involved individuals should be restored to the community? And who do we believe should inhabit the space of serving as alternative responders?

If we are sincere in our commitment to prevent and reduce crime, we are in desperate need of individuals with lived experience to step forward to engage in the work of keeping neighborhoods safe, as opposed to an over reliance on police-centered solutions. Unfortunately, these loud voices are intent on denigrating the very idea of grass-roots-led, community-based organizations, run by black men who are or have been justice impacted. Repulsive and hypocritical, this must be exposed for the discriminatory and, ironically, unjust thinking that it is.

Justice-involved community members are just that, members of our community. Relegating them to a second-class status unworthy of providing the same level of service to the communities they come home to only perpetuates the caste-like system that breeds the violence we say we want to eliminate. The Sheriff's Office is committed to restorative justice, the idea that the way to prevent and reduce crime is to heal from the past and move forward in the spirit of community. What better way is there for us to achieve this goal than for those who have wronged the community to be an integral part of its healing.

It is important to recognize that misinformation about and vilification of formerly justice-involved individuals who work in the community also does irreparable harm to others who are currently justice-impacted and returning to our community and doing the right things to redeem themselves by taking care of their families, holding jobs, and being productive members of our community. We want to send a clear message to those who have made mistakes or committed a serious crime but have done their time and changed their lives, that the Washtenaw County community supports you in your efforts; efforts that benefit us all. And that a few loud voices do not represent the masses within our community.



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I share this message from both my perspective as Sheriff, responsible for community wellness, safety, and the preservation of public peace, and as a man who has raised a family in this community. My purpose is not only to express how important community-based, peer work is to violence intervention, but to illuminate the critical role this work and those who do it play in assisting law enforcement in dealing with violent crime and helping to keep our community safe.

At the Sheriff's Office, we estimate 80% to 85% of the shootings we investigate are retaliatory in nature. That is, the victim today is often the suspect tomorrow. Although our case closure rate for homicides is an impressive 87% (*the national average is just over 50%*), we realize it is not enough to merely solve violent crime *after* someone has been harmed. True community wellness and safety demands a multi-faceted approach that also "operates upstream" from a community-based perspective to prevent retaliation from happening in the first place.

Although some may not like it, the fact remains that the most effective messengers, those with the ability to *directly* impact and prevent retaliation, are often individuals who may have been a victim or perpetrator of crime at one time. Just as we pay our social workers, police officers, corrections officers, or administrative staff for their expertise, we must also invest in the trusted community-based messengers who are best positioned to be the anti-violence workforce.

Over my decades of experience as a public safety and justice professional, I've found it to be fundamentally true that crime, and in this case violent crime, is not exclusively a police problem requiring only a law enforcement solution. It is a *community* challenge that must be addressed utilizing deliberate and comprehensive strategies in partnership with the community itself.

Locally, the Community Violence Intervention (CVI) Team, made up of interested and invested community members making recommendations for addressing gun violence in Washtenaw County, speak to this type of balanced approach. They combine accountability and empathy, while blending appropriate enforcement with community investment. Their recommendations are founded in research, emerging best practices, and the lived experiences of community. They include investing in an anti-violence workforce and funding innovative community violence intervention programs. To their credit, these are the recommendations that the Washtenaw County Commissioners followed and invested in.

On the state level, [Governor Gretchen Whitmer invested \\$30million](#) into communities with the highest increases in violent crime. She highlighted a particular focus on community-based violence intervention and prevention (CVI) programs. Her office made a point of holding up the fact that CVI programs utilize **credible messengers** to directly mediate conflicts, intervene before violence occurs, and connect people to needed resources.

On the national level, President Joe Biden has directed millions of dollars into focusing on CVI work involving **credible and trusted messengers**. Additionally, the administration also clarified in a [memo](#) that the American Rescue Plan's \$350 billion in state and local funding can be used to invest in community violence interventions. They went on to say that CVI programs have been shown to reduce violence by



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as much as 60%. They also stated that these programs are effective because they leverage **trusted messengers** who work directly with individuals most likely to commit gun violence, intervene in conflicts, and connect people to social, health, wellness, and economic services to reduce the likelihood of violence as an answer to conflict

Additionally, these **trusted messengers**, working in some of our most challenging communities throughout the country, have suffered their own trauma because of physical attacks, loss of clients they were attempting to save, and loss of the lives of their fellow interventionists from the very violence they were working to prevent. The fact remains that we have seen the positive impact of this work here at the Sheriff's Office. Two of our more recent homicides were brought to closure due to a community violence interventionist facilitating the suspect to turn themselves in. Additionally, one recent survivor who was shot multiple times and left for dead, connected with our CVI program. He not only survived the encounter but today he is thriving, i.e., he is employed, housed, safe, and no longer interested in retaliation. He credits community violence interventionists with changing his life and redirecting his path from retaliation towards peace.

Those who question the decision-making process of an elected body or who debate the merits of a particular strategy, would do well to engage in reasoned discussion with those who made those decisions about their concerns, and not resort to sabotaging and vilifying people who are in the trenches fighting for the lives of our young people and their families. Calling into question the idea of redemption and alternative community-based approaches to violence interruption and discrediting the antiviolence movement is misguided, on the wrong side of history, and actively works against strategies proven to save lives.

Many victims or surviving family members will share that they never want another family to go through what they have endured. The consistent focus of the Sheriff's Office on the full continuum of services and sanctions for offenders has always been rooted in preventing future victimization; not continuing to punish individuals that have already been held accountable for their previous behavior and paid their debt to society. Redemption and justice go hand in hand. They are not mutually exclusive.

It is with these victims in mind that, as your Sheriff and fellow community member, I ask you to consider and support the CVI approach. Isn't an initiative with the proven potential to save lives and restore community peace and wellness worth implementing and supporting?

*For more information contact Derrick Jackson, Director of Community Engagement.
Contact Information (734) 973-4503/Cell Phone (734) 891-2243 or jacksond@ewashtenaw.org*