

## Why Chicago's violence interrupters need their own training academy

By: VAUGHN BRYANT AND CHRIS PATTERSON June 21, 2018

*In 2017, Chicago suffered 3,550 shootings and 650 homicides, an improvement on the previous year, but still a tragic and unacceptable level of violence that destroys lives and harms communities. As summer begins—historically when the city sees a spike in violence—Crain's and the Partnership for Safe & Peaceful Communities, a coalition of more than 30 Chicago funders and foundations, including MacArthur, Joyce, Polk Bros. and McCormick, examine in a six-part series some proven and promising approaches to reducing gun violence.*



Social workers train for their jobs. So do teachers, ministers, medics and police officers. That training—and the respect that comes with it—is what we want for the men and women who counter violence every day through street outreach.

What is street outreach? Also known as violence interruption, it is high-stakes mediation in some of Chicago's poorest neighborhoods to diffuse dangerous situations, or head off retaliation when violence occurs. The work was highlighted in the **2011 documentary "The Interrupters."** Many who do it belonged to gangs earlier in their lives. They are consummate mediators who build trusting relationships with perpetrators and victims, as well as their families, friends and broader community. Their work is indispensable for keeping peace in the city.

Yet police and outreach workers sometimes **have clashed** because of fundamental misunderstandings about the role—and who fills it. Outreach workers can't function unless all parties see them as honest brokers, not police informants. Their impact and even their safety depends on it. But that need for distance means individual officers sometimes see outreach workers as the criminal they once were, not the skilled worker they are. Gang member in hiding, some think, just drawing a paycheck.

That friction hampers the potential effectiveness of street outreach and prevents it from scaling up. To help shift that dynamic, in January **an umbrella group led by Metropolitan Family Services** launched the Metropolitan Peace Academy: a 144-hour training program designed to professionalize the field of street outreach.

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The shape of the program was influenced by the Urban Peace Institute in Los Angeles and eight respected Chicago nonprofits. The curriculum covers hyper-local community collaboration, professional standards and roles, public health, trauma-informed care, nonviolence outreach approaches, crisis and non-crisis protocols, communication skills, legal issues, restorative justice, self-care and working with police.

Many of the 24 participants in this first class are outreach veterans who have known each other for years and respect each other and the work of their organizations, as they have the pulse of their communities. All came in with their own ideas of what works. But there has been a merging of views, like how restorative justice techniques can be combined with nonviolence approaches, which also can work with trauma-informed/public health practices.

This month the first class will graduate from the academy, and 25 new members will start this fall. We want to raise the bar so high that outreach workers are valued as professionals to be reckoned with when it comes to violence prevention in Chicago. By establishing standards for how workers intervene in crime situations, we will

promote safety while continuing to respect police authority. But that professionalism also is good for the outreach workers themselves, since it improves their own job prospects and mobility.

We hope this new approach will shift biased minds that think "once a criminal, always a criminal." Just as many of us in outreach have changed our lives, we believe that those we work with can change too.

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