

The Team Up Project is a collaboration among Catholic Charities USA, Habitat for Humanity International, Interfaith America, and the YMCA of the USA that represents a commitment to deepen and expand bridgebuilding activities within their expansive national networks. The Walmart Foundation and Einhorn Collaborative Trust supported the inaugural year of the Team Up Project.

Local Organization: Catholic Charities Archdiocese of Baltimore

Project Name: Team Up Catholic Charities Safe Streets Baltimore

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Issue Addressed Through Bridgebuilding



[Safe Streets Baltimore](#) is a public health initiative to reduce shootings and homicides in ten neighborhoods with higher rates of gun violence, making up about 2.9 percent of the square footage of Baltimore City. Catholic Charities of Baltimore operates small teams running the program in four of these neighborhoods: Brooklyn, Cherry Hill, Penn North, and Sandtown-Winchester. Put simply, our project aimed to reduce violence in these neighborhoods.

It is crucial to note that we were only able to safely and responsibly attempt this type of project due to our team's preexisting expertise and prolonged investment in the community.

Where We Started

Each month, the Violence Prevention Coordinator (VPC) for each team in the Safe Streets program organizes a Community Meeting (among other community events) for the local neighborhood. The goal of these meetings is to further the message of Safe Streets among community partners: reducing shootings and homicides, as well as changing norms surrounding violence.

We began to wonder about using these community meetings to help further mission of Safe Streets through bridgebuilding. What if we could encourage those at high risk for committing gun violence against each other to participate?

Necessary Conditions

This project necessitated several factors to move ahead with safety and effectiveness

- Prolonged communal investment from our staff and program to develop trust. We did not just show up, but the Safe Streets staff have been present and active in this neighborhood since 2020.
- Our staff are trained in community violence intervention (CVI) and conflict mediation. In addition, they can identify relevant and appropriate candidates for the project.
- Relevant storytelling plays an important part in recruitment and meeting leadership, and as such, credible messengers who can connect with attendees and participants through their experiences are central for leadership in the project.

How We Executed The Project

Participants

The target group for preventive action and relationships with our staff in Safe Streets are youth aged 14-25, and individuals deemed "high-risk" to commit or be victims of gun violence. A standard monthly Community Meeting is, of course, open to high-risk individuals like other neighbors who are interested in attending, but an environment with community and business partners, plus neighbors with other concerns, may not feel like the most inviting forum. Moreover, high-risk individuals in a neighborhood may be in conflict with each other. For



example, they may belong to rival gangs, occupy rival territory for drug selling, or be in conflict for a social or relational reason.

Monthly Meetings

In Safe Streets Penn North, our staff, led by a Violence Prevention Coordinator, explored running a monthly Community Meeting just for our high-risk individuals in the neighborhood, starting in 2024. The effort has been to create a conflict-neutral time and space where people who might be at odds on the street can sit together at a table and share food and conversation.

Thus, each month in 2024, our VPC has organized and led monthly meetings with coworkers for a cohort of 15-20 local young men (deemed “high-risk” for gun violence by our staff) in the Penn North neighborhood. These meeting participants were recruited from an array of situations which may place them in a variety of disconnected but related situations around the neighborhood that heighten risks for violence: occupying a corner selling drugs, drifting between hangout spots as someone experiencing homelessness, just back from incarceration and struggling to find a job, and other experiences that heighten senses of stress and marginalization.

With the overall goals to change norms surrounding violence and prevent gun violence itself, creating a space for people to learn each other’s names and share conversations is a primary tactic of these monthly meetings. Any agenda is short and usually consists of a testimonial exhortation and follow-up on needs and thoughts. As such, the ingredients for a meeting are fairly simple: 1) a hearty welcome and introduction, 2) a 10-15 minute message from a credible messenger about the benefits of nonviolence tied to a personal story and including an invitation for feedback, and 3) 10–20 minutes to discuss what’s on the participants’ minds or follow up from a past meeting. Afterward, there is a soft transition to food, beverages, and hanging out. We also gave away items for basic needs. Ultimately, we believe the following three aspects are key to encouraging attendance and participation.

Hospitality

Each meeting offers a meal. Whatever the recruitment message or agenda topic, food plays an important role. Interest in topics and conversations may have to compete with other happenings, but if you know you’re going to get fed, that takes care of one human necessity, so a meal is not only welcoming but also helps participants save money and budget their time. Being able to plan this about one’s day is good information for participants ranging from those experiencing homelessness and dire lack of resources to those needing to give up significant business by coming off the street corner where they might be otherwise selling something to attend the meeting.

The larger challenge is that our attendees are often in positions of economic marginalization, which may not be obviously visible, like homelessness, lack of employment trajectory, and/or overwhelming financial commitments. As such, our staff also always give away free hygiene items, clothes, and other food at each meeting.



Moreover, staff are briefed with resource connections with community partners for referrals for any attendees looking for workforce development, housing resources, and substance use disorder and behavioral health treatment.

Credibility

To encourage attendees and participants, the message of the event is carried largely by the credibility of its messengers (especially the initial recruitment). Our VPC and his co-organizers core message was “we want to hear you.” After 38 years in prison, our VPC would often look around the room after sharing his story and remind participants: their decisions matter, their mental health matters, and to not be afraid to ask for help. See Appendix 1 and 2 for more information on VPC and his story.

To get initial attendees, our VPC called the Maryland State Attorney’s Office and enlisted the help of others released from life sentences. They used their relationships to reach out to young high-risk individuals to invite them to be part of the monthly community meeting. The 15-20 regular attendees in the cohort were recruited because our staff identified them as benefiting from this type of meeting and sought out relational connections.

Safe Streets as a program has operated in the Penn North neighborhood since 2020, reflecting months and months of canvassing, community events, and messaging the Safe Streets motto: Stop Shooting, Start Living. Our staff have gone door-to-door, spent many evenings on street corners getting to know people, and mediated many conflicts that might have ended in violence. Following a 2023 study by Johns Hopkins University of the effectiveness of the ten Safe Streets sites, “Penn North’s site was associated with a statistically significant 53% reduction in homicides” (Webster et al, p. 11). In March 2024 we were able to celebrate over 365 days without a homicide in the Penn North catchment zone. Moreover, our Violence Interrupters are neighborhood locals, and our staff are often noted as “credible” because they themselves have often been perpetrators or victims of gun violence. The program has been implemented and works hyper-locally.

The main lesson is that flyers can’t simply be drafted, printed, and handed out. It matters *who* hands them out, *who* stands at the door to greet arrivals, and *who* leads the meeting. Most of the recruitment work was not done by the flyers (see Appendix 3) but by conversations based on sharing the recruiters’ personal story or testimony of some sort.

Solidarity

Stressors, conflicts, and allegiances can cause people to reach for their weapons when encountering each other on the street. A monthly community meeting for high-risk individuals is not focused on overriding their allegiances but encouraging new connections and generating new resources to manage stressors and conflicts. Sitting around the table, participants find a lot of commonalities in the issues they face, a starting place for empathy, often as residents of the same neighborhood or city: racism, homelessness, interactions with the criminal justice system and police (sometimes as children), family with behavioral health and substance use disorder issues, and so on. The meeting is a place to learn what movement forward is available to you and how you can articulate your thoughts and feelings to those around you.

In addition to our VPC and Safe Streets coworkers, other occasional attending “credible messengers” in the form of former life-sentence servers and representatives from other



community organizations can help motivate the discussions. The sense that not only people from across the neighborhood are experiencing the same issues but that people across generations can offer guidance through their experience is an important part in building empathy. We're hoping to explore an informal mentorship program at this stage of development with non-Safe Streets staff.

Costs and Staffing

For each event, we spent approximately \$247.46 in food for 15-20 attendees, 3 staff, and 2-4 volunteers. The amount of food was always enough for participants to take leftovers.

Primary planning and leadership came from one staff person (4-6 hours/month), with support at the event (1 hour) from 1-2 staff. Support from volunteers (2+) who represent other credible messenger stories and community resources are welcome.

Hygiene items and clothing for give-away were purchased each month with available budget funds (\$1000+) but can also be raised as in-kind donations.

Takeaways

Meeting participants, having connected in our space, are less likely to reach for their weapons when interacting in the street. This is the premise of creating the meeting time and space itself. A monthly meeting to break bread and converse is a way to build bridges between people who might otherwise be hostile and might even be baby-steps towards building community.

A key lesson for the whole agency is the necessity of being patient and waiting for trust to develop with the appropriate CVI program staff and participants. Furthermore, the organization must elevate and train people with a credible background for storytelling about healing, reconciliation, and nonviolence. These leaders need to be able to share relatable experience and restoration, such as interactions with the criminal justice system or gun violence. The lesson for the agency is not new, but it is powerful.

Moving Forward

For the future, we can explore implementing this program in our three other Safe Streets catchment zones. Moreover, while the project remains in a stage of learning and development focused on the needs of the participants, we can continue to improve:

- At this point referral connections depend on the ones our Penn North team utilize in their most frequent referrals, and this is an area for development. We are currently working on creating a more centralized referral resource and mechanism, both within Catholic Charities of Baltimore for our own programs but also across the Community Violence Intervention programs of Baltimore City. Ideally, we could have extremely close referral hand-offs—e.g. an employer considers and hires a workforce development candidate on the spot, rather than a flyer for a career fair being handed to a candidate with them expected to go and be considered. There are too many barriers in the environment in which they exist day-to-day, and the likelihood of the resource being connected falls



sharply; the hand-off should be direct.

- Inviting even more credible messengers as volunteers to connect with participants;
- Cultivating sources of in-kind donations to meet the needs of attendees (e.g. clothing and hygiene items);
- Taking the cohort on additional trips (our VPC took them to an NBA game and we would love to do more things like this).

Appendices

Appendix 1. [“Clean Slate Initiative” Justice is Not Just Us](#)”

Appendix 2. [“Wayne & Aaron, Then & Now”](#)

Appendix 3. [Community Meeting Flyer](#)

Appendix 4. [Safe Streets area goes more than a year with no homicides, officials say](#)