

DJJ NEWS



Newport News CSU and Nonprofit Join Forces to Reduce Gun Violence

The Newport News YouthBuild program provides hands-on vocational training, leadership development, gun violence prevention and intervention supports and career coaching. (Photo courtesy of Volunteers of America Chesapeake & Carolinas)

Selected youth served by the 7th District Court Service Unit in Newport News have been taking part in an innovative gun violence prevention and intervention program developed in partnership with a community-based organization.

The collaboration with Volunteers of America Chesapeake & Carolinas' (VOACC) Newport News YouthBuild Peacekeepers program kicked off last fall with a pilot group of six juveniles who met at the CSU's downtown office. A second cohort met in January and February. CSU Director Kelly Rummel said juvenile judges in Newport News had requested that an educational program be developed for youth charged with weapons offenses.

The five-week program includes presentations and discussions facilitated by representatives from various city agencies and community stakeholders addressing topics relating to gun violence such as its impact on society, mental health, support systems, the legal consequences, and pursuing positive alternatives.

The VOACC team works with participants to establish one-, three- and five-year development goals for them to achieve. Participants take part in a variety of exercises, including the creation of personal vision boards to explore what the world looks like from their perspective and their goals. VOACC facilitates various hands-on activities to foster assertive communication and problem-solving skills. The program also addresses conflict resolution and stress management skills.

Guest speakers include members of law enforcement, individuals who served time in prison, mental health agencies, nonprofit programs, community recovery agencies, mentoring programs, and mothers who lost children to gun violence. The program provides intensive case management services by providing community resources for participants such as mentoring, intensive-in home services, and mental health support services. The program also assists participants with employment goals by providing workforce development programs in the community.

Participants are ordered by the court or referred by their probation officers to attend the program.

“I’m really excited we’re able to partner with them to provide this service,” Rummel said. “I’m hopeful it’s going to have an impact.”

In August 2022, the city of Newport News developed the Gun Violence Intervention Program (GVIP) Community-Based Grant program to support the implementation of strategies to reduce gun violence in the community, focusing on interrupting the cycle of violence among individuals at the highest risk of perpetrating or being a victim of gun violence.

Newport News YouthBuild – a program facilitated by VOACC in partnership with Newport News, the U.S. Department of Labor and a network of training and employment partners – provides young adults paid opportunities to acquire vocational skills needed to obtain employment in the construction trades. YouthBuild was among 15 community-based organizations awarded monetary grants by Newport News totaling \$1.4 million in fiscal year 2024 to address gun violence. This is the second year the city has awarded a GVIP grant to YouthBuild Peacekeepers. To learn more about Newport News YouthBuild and YouthBuild Peacekeepers, visit www.voachesapeake.org/youthbuild.

VOACC is a faith-based, nonprofit organization whose mission is to inspire self-reliance, dignity, and hope through housing, health and human services. The organization has been helping to create “Healthy Communities for All” for over 128 years by aligning housing, health and human services. YouthBuild Peacekeepers and Newport News YouthBuild are two of the organization’s more than 49 programs supporting vulnerable individuals and families across Virginia, Maryland, the District of Columbia and the Carolinas. By offering integrated housing and care, VOACC addresses the underlying social issues, also known as social determinants, that impact long-term stability for those in need.

VOACC has over 900 staff members and more than 2,000 volunteers. The organization helps over 11,700 individuals and families every year. For more information on VOACC, visit www.voachesapeake.org.