



ERIE COUNTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE
NEWS RELEASE
DISTRICT ATTORNEY JOHN J. FLYNN

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**HIGH-RISK YOUTH TEAM ESTABLISHES INTERVENTION PROGRAM
FOR TEENS IMPACTED BY GUN VIOLENCE**

The program aims to reduce harm and prevent future gun violence by addressing the needs of youth at risk of becoming the victim or perpetrator of a shooting

BUFFALO – Today, Erie County District Attorney John J. Flynn was joined by **Chief Danielle D'Abate of the office's Community Prosecution & Training Bureau, Captain Tommy Champion and Lt. Kelly Craig of the Buffalo Police Department, Paula Kovanic Spiro of ECMC's B.R.A.V.E., Dina Thompson of Erie County Restorative Justice, Dr. Tonja Williams of Buffalo Public School District and Darryl Scott of SNUG** to announce the High-Risk Youth Team, a multi-faceted intervention program for teenagers who are considered at risk of being directly impacted by gun violence in the City of Buffalo.

The program is a non-punitive, resource focused deterrence strategy to combat the rise in shootings and reduce the growing number of adolescents involved in these violent crimes. This new, proactive approach is a collaborative effort by the Erie County District Attorney's Office, Buffalo Rising Against Violence (B.R.A.V.E.) at ECMC, Buffalo Police Department, Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition, Buffalo Public School District, and SNUG that utilizes the principles of restorative justice, harm reduction and trauma-informed care.

The members of the High-Risk Youth Team have identified eight adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 who are at risk of becoming the victim and/or the perpetrator of a shooting to participate in the pilot program, which launched in July. Most of the current participants have been the victim of a shooting. The program aims to reduce harm by providing immediate intervention through a trauma-informed approach to proactively address underlying issues affecting these teenagers who could potentially become involved in future shootings.

The team will develop a service plan based on the individual needs of each participant, which may include restorative justice, mental health services, street outreach, trauma informed care, educational services, mentorship, and job readiness assistance. The participants have a voice in the process and are actively involved in the creation of their service plan. Services plans can also be created for family members of participants.

In addition to addressing the specific needs of the adolescent, the program aims to increase their understanding of the consequences of criminal activity, build trust with law enforcement, encourage positive behavior changes to set the adolescent on a path for a productive future in our community, and reduce their likelihood of involvement in future gun violence. The team will monitor the progress of each participant for one year.

“We are seeing too many young people directly involved in gun violence in Buffalo. Even worse, we have teenage shooting victims who later become a shooter and vice versa. Whenever possible, I want to give a second chance to teens who are on the wrong path or who have made a bad choice. This program provides immediate intervention and an opportunity for that teen, who may be at-risk of being shot on our streets or becoming involved in the criminal justice system, a chance to get some guidance and turn their life around before it’s too late,” said **Erie County District Attorney John J. Flynn**.

“The Buffalo Police Department Community Policing liaison, under the command of Captain Champion, and the Buffalo Police School Resource Unit, under the command of Chief Young, has collaborated with our community partners in an effort to provide resources and support to our youth who have been or potentially could be victims of gun violence. The Buffalo Police Department has a School Resource unit, dedicated to working alongside our youth within the schools as well as with parents and guardians in the community to provide assistance and resources. The Buffalo Police Department understands that the needs of our youth and their parents are often complex and require a different approach based on those needs. We proudly work with our community partners to help address those needs. We use an individual approach based off the relationships that our community police officers and school resource officers have built with the youth as well as the resources and expertise provided through the High-Risk Youth Team. Our youth and their parents/guardians face compounding challenges within the community, the goal of the school resource officers and community police officers in this collaboration is to reduce the harm that gun violence has on our youth and their families. We do this through teaching, coaching, mentoring, community services, social work outreach, and personal development. This allows us to build the character of our youth so that they understand decision making, consequences for those decisions, accountability, resiliency, and integrity. The end goal is to use our relationships with our youth and collaboration with the High-Risk Youth Team to aid our youth in becoming successful productive leaders in our community,” said **Lt. Kelly Craig of the Buffalo Police Department**.

“Violence is a public health epidemic that has impacted our youth in devastating ways. By collaborating and building on local capacity our goal is to connect these adolescents with resources for school success, job readiness, health and most importantly address the individual’s trauma,” said **Paula Kovanic Spiro, Program Coordinator of B.R.A.V.E. at ECMC**.

“We cannot examine the upsurge of violence among our youth today without looking at its root causes. We face an increase in local and national traumatic events, exposure to violence on TV and social media, the social economic stress of poverty, unemployment, loss of family and community members and lack of community programming. Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition is at the table to centralize the voice of the challenged youth. We convene safe spaces for youth to identify and communicate what they need to address these root causes. Whether those needs are for community connection, safety, shelter, competency building, or health support, we work to connect them with resources to meet those needs,” said from **Dina Thompson, Executive Director of Erie County Restorative Justice**.

“Addressing the social, emotional, and physical well-being and mental health needs of youth exposed to gun violence is a complex issue that requires proper identification of those exposed. In addition, it requires, evidence-based, and trauma-informed interventions which will work to concurrently understand the multi-layered, often generational concerns. The unique and collaborative effort of the High-Risk Youth Team will be actively working

to reduce violence and improve the well-being of BPS students facing giant obstacles, but who possess potential for greatness,” said **Dr. Tonja Williams of the Buffalo Public School District.**

“We are honored to be a part of this collaboration. Gun violence is finally being recognized as a pandemic throughout the country. This initiative is an opportunity to work with youth and their families through a more proactive approach. With gun violence affecting communities at alarming rate this group aims to place supports into every aspect of the lives of these youth in an effort to give continuous support toward a successful path,” said **Darryl Scott of SNUG.**

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