

Archive | Archive Portal PKG: Mpls Violence Interrupters (moini) 01GAP1KWCMGRW5FZH2D16AKB14

SPEAKER 1: Shootings in Minneapolis are at a five-year high and city officials hope a new team of violence interrupters can help stop some conflicts from escalating to further violence. Nina Moini spent a recent evening walking with the city's newest violence prevention group.

NINA MOINI: On a warm Friday night in downtown, a group of 20 people wearing orange T-shirts round the corner onto Hennepin Avenue where they often begin their shift.

YULONDA ROYSTER: And when I'm off at 4:00, I'm down here at 5:00. I'm tired of it. Every day, there's some young Black boy being killed, being shot. All of this gang violence, it can be prevented.

NINA MOINI: That's the kind of passion you'll hear from any one of the violence interrupters. The group consists mostly of Black men. Yolanda Royster is one of few women in the group. She says one of her three sons was active in gangs, shot and incarcerated when her family was living in North Minneapolis.

YULONDA ROYSTER: My son comes from a good home, but still I didn't have that village, that support while I was out working one job always full time, sometimes two and being in school. He was out on the streets a lot of times.

NINA MOINI: The violence interrupters focus a lot of energy on young people across the city.

SPEAKER 2: How are you doing, man? You all right? All right?

NINA MOINI: Walking the streets most nights into the early morning hours, showing their presence, and helping put a stop to any retaliation involving gunfire. Royster says she's especially concerned about the impact of the pandemic.

YULONDA ROYSTER: A lot of these kids, they literally have nowhere to go and nothing to do. When we stop and we talk to them on the streets, they say, OK, well, what else should we be doing? And quite frankly, we don't have a direct answer for them at this moment. We need some of these centers open. We need people like us in those centers redirecting them, and that energy that they have directing them to something positive.

NINA MOINI: Many of the interrupters live in the communities they now serve. Muhammad Abdul-Ahad leads the south side team of 20 on most nights.

MUHAMMAD ABDUL-AHAD: We just go off instincts from our experience and our training.

NINA MOINI: Abdul-Ahad says his group and another group on the north side have been at this work for nearly a month with some successes and a lot of support from people in the neighborhood.

MUHAMMAD ABDUL-AHAD: And that I think gives us that motivation that we need to keep going and doing what we're doing. About to start moving towards Bloomington, everybody.

NINA MOINI: Plenty of people stopped to say thank you and honked their horns as the group traveled down Lake Street in South Minneapolis later in the night.

SPEAKER 3: We just closed the door right now.

MUHAMMAD ABDUL-AHAD: Yeah, you just closed it right now?

NINA MOINI: The group checked on business owners who are still recovering from looting and rioting in May.

SPEAKER 3: OK.

MUHAMMAD All right.

ABDUL-AHAD:

SPEAKER 3: Thank you.

MUHAMMAD OK, thank you.

ABDUL-AHAD:

YULONDA No trouble today?

ROYSTER:

SPEAKER 3: No, no trouble.

YULONDA Good. Glad to hear. Thank you. Thank you

ROYSTER:

NINA MOINI: Abdul-Ahad's team has been able to approach tense situations because of personal connections they already have with the community. But he says the group isn't here to replace police officers.

MUHAMMAD They respond to emergency situations, gunshots, and stab wounds. And we're there to prevent things like that
ABDUL-AHAD: from happening so they won't have to get called.

NINA MOINI: The Minneapolis Police Department says about 100 officers left the agency this year, double the number of departures in most years. The force has been under scrutiny after the killing of George Floyd and the Minneapolis City Council's conversations about dismantling the department. The violence interrupters are paid employees of the city's Office of Violence Prevention, not the police department. City officials modeled the group after similar efforts in New York City and Philadelphia. But the Minneapolis violence interrupters group still has to work to gain the trust of the people they encounter.

SPEAKER 4: It's a little suspicious. And we just don't know who you are. We don't know what you're here for. It looks like you guys--

NINA MOINI: It wasn't a warm reception from a group the violence interrupters approached later in the evening in a parking lot along Lake Street. The problem began a couple of nights earlier when the violence interrupters linked arms and tried to literally put themselves between protesters and police. That was the night people learned that Derek Chauvin, the former cop who kneeled on George Floyd's neck for about nine minutes, had been released after posting bond. Violence interrupters pleaded with the protesters to listen to law enforcement orders to go home.

SPEAKER 5: So a lot of people got arrested. They all got out.

NINA MOINI: The violence interrupters were detained and eventually let go after authorities heard from Office of Violence Prevention director Sasha Cotton who says she reached out to police.

SASHA And that was a miscommunication between outside law enforcement, our state troopers, and our law
COTTON: enforcement locally who know the role of interrupters and would not have engaged in that way. But they are doing a job. And when they're on the job, doing their work the way that they're supposed to, they shouldn't be detained.

NINA MOINI: Muhammad Abdul-Ahad says many of the violence interrupters have had negative experiences with law enforcement themselves and they aim to serve the community at large.

MUHAMMAD ABDUL-AHAD: I'm feeling hopeful still because our hearts are in it. This is where we need to be because the children are our future.

NINA MOINI: The question though, is will this form of violence prevention work? After we parted ways, three people were shot downtown within just a few blocks from where the interrupters first gathered earlier in the night. Nina Moini, MPR News, Minneapolis.

SPEAKER 1: And to see photos of the violence interrupters taken by our photojournalist Christine Nguyen, visit our website at mprnews.org.