The Roanoke Times

July 18, 2020

Task force grapples with rash of Roanoke gun violence

By Alicia Petska

The shadow of an uncommonly violent week marked by seven shootings in eight days hovered in the background Friday as Roanoke’s gun violence task force gathered together.

The city appears to be part of a nationwide spike in gun violence unfolding at a time when communities are also grappling with the unbalancing effects of a pandemic and an impassioned debate about policing and safety.

“We are in unprecedented times,” Shakira Williams, chair of the task force, said as the group convened a virtual meeting via Zoom.

Gunfire was reported in the city four times last weekend and twice Wednesday night. Four adults and two teens were wounded but survived.

A seventh shooting that left one man seriously injured was reported Friday afternoon. That altercation happened about 4 p.m. in Washington Park, officials said.

No arrests have been made in any of the cases. In several instances, both witnesses and victims were reluctant to cooperate with detectives.

“Obviously, that makes it difficult for our investigators to thoroughly and accurately get to the bottom of what’s going on,” police Chief Sam Roman said.

Authorities said no information has been found to date to suggest that any of the shootings were linked, but efforts are ongoing to untangle what spurred each event.

This week, the department [**released a clip**](https://twitter.com/rpdsafercity?lang=en) of body camera footage in hopes of generating leads in one dramatic volley of gunfire that broke out downtown over the weekend.

The gunshots, which struck several cars and at least one building, went off about 2 a.m. Sunday in a crowded parking lot filled with an estimated 100 people.

The body camera footage came from one of several officers who were close by patrolling downtown and monitoring the crowd.

The video doesn’t capture the shooting itself but highlights the volume of shots fired. First one gunshot is heard, then another, then a cacophony of firing.

Officers later collected about 50 spent casings from the scene. The casings spanned different calibers, including 9 mm and 7.62 mm rounds.

The footage released by police shows the armed confrontation lasted less than 45 seconds. The officer wearing the camera was on scene swiftly, but people were already scattering. The squeal of car tires fleeing can be heard.

No one was reported injured in the melee.

In releasing the video clip, officials turned to the community for help. Investigators want to not only find the people involved but to understand what set off the confrontation.

What was at the root of the clash? What, if any, new strife could it spur? What can be done to intercede and de-escalate tensions?

That 360-degree view of a situation is crucial to preserving a safe community, Roman said, and is part of the core mission of the city police.

“That is the bigger picture,” he said. “To try to figure out what is causing something and to see how we can have the biggest impact in reducing violence.”

The community is an essential part of that work, he said. Tips can be made anonymously, and officers can help those who might have fears about coming forward.

Mayor Sherman Lea echoed the need for people to report what they know. Speaking to the gun violence task force Friday morning, he noted that the urgency of that group’s work is more evident than ever.

“We’re in a moment now where violence is really striking hard across the country,” he said, alluding to a nationwide trend of rising violence that has emerged in recent months.

“I know we are all concerned,” he said. “Your work is critically important to our community.”

The city’s task force, formed last year, is developing a series of strategies to combat gun violence on multiple fronts using a public health model that deals with both violence and its root causes.

Rapid response interventions, community-building, youth outreach and anti-recidivism measures all number among its subject points.

Friday morning’s meeting was set before the past week’s string of shootings, but the outbreak weighed on the minds of organizers.

“It’s no secret that there has been an increase in violence around our nation and in gun violence specifically, as well as here in Roanoke,” Williams said.

The group resolved to meet again in two weeks as it continues to push to work for change. Some of the task force’s goals, such as creating a new rapid response coordinator post, were slowed by the onset of COVID-19, but work has continued steadily, officials said.

Interviews for the rapid response coordinator, a position funded by a new grant, are expected to take place over the next two weeks.

Roman, who’s in his fourth month as police chief but has a 25-year history with the department, spoke at Friday’s meeting and said afterward he’s a strong supporter of the initiative.

Strengthening partnerships and bringing all parts of the community together to find solutions is crucial, he said.

The Roanoke Times

oct. 11, 2020

Shootings surge: After the gunshots, Roanoke Valley families grieve

By Alicia Petska

Six days. Three shootings. Three deaths.

And a wider community left grappling with loss and grief.

“It’s not fair,” Constance Dunbar said quietly, after burying her high school sweetheart, father of her two young children.

“Not by any means. Not at all,” she said. “My kids got to grow up without their daddy.”

Three people were killed in a spate of shootings in the Roanoke Valley over a week in September — part of a rise in gun violence being seen around the nation.

The circumstances, times and locations all differ widely. But all share a common thread of heartache that now confronts the families and friends left behind.

“It hurts,” said Brittany Richardson, whose cousin, whom she considered a brother, was shot Sept. 12 in the street near a sports lounge in Norwich in Southwest Roanoke.

Friends said Derrick Bostick, 35, had tried to intercede in a fight when someone opened fire. He was struck at least twice as people began screaming and scattering.

He died two days later at the hospital.

“It’s surreal, still,” Richardson said days later. Bostick, who went by Bruce, was remembered by family and friends as someone who was always in their corner.

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When Richardson wanted to turn her talent for home cooking into a business, B&M’s Grill, he was her biggest cheerleader.

When Kehana James’s mother got sick this year, he was there every day, helping shoulder her troubles.

He was someone who created family, not just friends but those deeper connections, around him, said Courtney Bonds, a friend of Bostick’s since childhood.

“He was my brother,” she said. “I’m going to miss him. I’m going to miss his smile. I used to tell him everything.”

The stunning loss of that friend, that brother, has been difficult to process, she added.

“I just want to know why,” Bonds said. “Why? Why did a person feel the need to take someone else’s life?”

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These are the other victims of violence. The mothers, fathers, children and friends who must find a way to go on and rebuild around loss.

The trajectory of that grief can take years to navigate as loved ones work to heal. Not forgetting — never forgetting. But learning to negotiate the new terrain placed before them.

“It’s with you for life. I’m a witness to that,” said Rita Joyce of Roanoke, who lost her son to gunfire in 2004 and for years afterward banded together with other mothers to reach out to families bereaved by violence.

“What happens with these crimes is not just the now,” she said. “It’s the later. The impact.”

The later has been among the many things weighing on Constance Dunbar’s mind. When her children — a daughter just shy of her second birthday and a son who just reached 1 month — are older how will she explain what happened to their father?

She’s not sure she can find the right words. She’s still working to understand it herself.

“I go to bed every night thinking he’s going to be there in the morning,” she said.

Dontae Taylor, 22, used to wake up in the morning as a bundle of energy, dancing in the living room with little D’Layah, their daughter, she said.

He’d do anything to coax a smile out of someone. “You’d end up smiling just seeing him smile,” said William Dudley, one of his closest friends.

When he found out he was going to be a dad, he got a job in retail and walked miles each day to get to it. He called up Dudley and wanted to repay $20 he had borrowed months earlier. A family man needed to take care of his debts, he reasoned.

“I told him I don’t want your money,” he said. “But most people wouldn’t even have brought it up. … He was such a good dude.”

“When I heard what happened,” Dudley said, “my heart just shattered. Everything in me shattered.”

On the afternoon of Sept. 11, a Friday, Taylor was walking to a store with a friend by his home in Southeast Roanoke when a gunshot rang out, striking him in the head.

The shot was so sudden his friend would later tell Dunbar he couldn’t process what was happening as Taylor fell to the ground.

Witnesses reported seeing someone fleeing afterward, according to a search warrant. Dunbar believes Taylor, who died at the hospital the following Sunday, wasn’t the intended target of the gunfire.

“He never did anything to nobody,” she said.

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The process of grieving follows no set path. Its bends and turns affect those navigating it differently.

To grieve is both normal and abnormal. It is both painful and a part of healing.

In the days after she lost her brother, LaCresha Brown felt like she was moving through a fog. She busied herself with helping with plans for his memorial and organizing a candlelight vigil that would bring dozens out to a neighborhood park.

But the weight of what had happened had not yet reached her.

“I definitely feel numb,” she said at the time. “It’s a lot to take in.”

Carlos Jones, 29, was shot and killed Sept. 16 outside an apartment complex in Vinton where he sometimes lived, relatives said.

Vinton police have released few details about the circumstances of the shooting. Persons of interest have been identified and interviewed, officials said, but the investigation remains ongoing. Jones’ family is waiting to learn more.

In the twilight hours of a weekend evening shortly after the shooting, family and friends came together to remember Jones.

They listened to recordings of the music he’d left behind, hip hop tracks he’d crafted, something he hoped to one day use to forge a career.

They released balloons hued in green and black, his favorite colors. They watched over his two young sons, age 5. They shared their pain that Jones, nicknamed Los, was not with them.

“I’m trying to be strong,” said his mother, Monica Quarles. “As the days go, it gets harder and harder.”

Brown handed out buttons bearing images from family photos of Jones. She helped carefully arrange dozens of tealight candles set out for the vigil.

It’s hard in these early days to see what lies ahead, she said, how his loss will change her, will change her family.

But that it will change them all seems certain.

“We loved him,” she said. “This is going to forever be in the back of my mind.”

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New messages still sometimes pop into Dontae Taylor’s social media. Words of love and remembrance from people trying to reach out across the ether and let him know he is not forgotten.

Dunbar takes in the notifications but doesn’t open the messages. She worries it’d be a painful surprise for people to get an alert that Taylor read their tributes.

But there is a comfort to just knowing that they’re there. And Dudley said he believes Taylor does know when people think of him.

“He’ll always be able to hear us,” he said.

Memories, community, connection. Those are guideposts many cited as they work to find a way forward.

For Rita Joyce, her faith and her family helped her process her sorrow, as did the deep support she was able to find and to share through the advocacy group, FEDUP, that she would co-found to help other families victimized by violence.

There were still hard days. Four years after losing her son, she sought grief counseling, realizing she needed to add to her network of support.

Up until then, she said, she had kept herself so busy, always on the move. “I wasn’t feeling what I needed to feel. Then, wham, one day I started feeling it and feeling that pain was just overwhelming.”

“I look back on it all now and think how in the world did I get through it. I go back to my faith and my belief.”

There are moments still when the loss of her son can feel fresh. His birthday. His children’s graduations. The birth of his first grandchild.

Milestones he should have been able to share in. Moments that were taken from him and those around.

“Families are left without a loved one because of these crimes,” Joyce said. “If people could really see the impact of what they do, in the now and the later, maybe that would make them think, you know, we’ve got to stop this. Because this is crazy.”

In the days after Bruce Bostick was killed, his cousin’s restaurant, B&M’s Grill, sat dark as the family focused on supporting one another.

And the first time it reopened its doors it was for family and for friends who gathered together to break bread after Bostick’s memorial service. They shared stories. They shared laughter and sorrow. They called for an end to the rising violence.

“It’s got to stop,” said William Wright, a close friend of Bostick’s since their teen years. “People are getting hurt over nothing.”

That hurt was shared by all those gathered that day. Bostick leaves behind his mother, a young daughter who was soon turning 4 and a host of other family and friends.

A 51-year-old Roanoke man has been arrested and charged with first-degree murder in his death. The cases of Taylor and Jones remain under investigation.

Looking over her restaurant that day, Richardson, Bostick’s cousin, said she was comforted to be with others, celebrating Bostick and what he had brought to each of their lives.

He would have been happy to see them all together, she said. And together, they’ll make it through what comes next.

“That’s what he would want,” she said. “He was always right there for us, supporting us, in everything we did.”

The Roanoke Times

DEC. 14, 2020

As gun crimes mount, Roanoke anti-violence efforts spread into the community

By Alicia Petska

The gathering was smaller this year by necessity.

Pandemic precautions meant scaling back the scope of Roanoke’s annual anti-violence vigil last week and limiting attendance to just a few.

A livestream was instead set up to invite in the wider community virtually. There had been talk of deferring the program altogether for the year but that prospect didn’t sit well with anyone.

Things were harder this year to be sure — in so many different ways.

But still, the work continued. And still, the message mattered.

“We remain undeterred,” said the Rev. Tim Harvey, who co-delivered the service’s prayer and is part of the city’s task force working to confront the deeper, root causes of violence.

“We pray for the day when this work will no longer be needed,” he said. “Until then, we will seek out the last, the lost and the least.

“We’ve created this space tonight to pause, to listen to stories and to build relationships.”

Community building is a common thread weaving through the work of advocates whose mission is to tackle the complex array of factors that feed into violence.

The importance of such work is an often-underappreciated part of crime reduction, according to one study by New York University, which drew a link between long-term crime rates and the number of community groups at work to create stronger neighborhoods.

In Roanoke, the [gun violence task force](https://roanoke.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/task-force-grapples-with-rash-of-roanoke-gun-violence/article_8ac7d6be-0846-5cc2-8244-a74d154ec46e.html), formed last year, is working toward plans that range from a pilot program for youth outreach to vocational training support to a virtual platform that can bring together neighborhood association leaders until in-person gatherings are safe again.

The significance of the group’s directive has been underscored this year by rising gun violence levels seen both locally and nationwide amid an extraordinary confluence of disruptions and stressors.local stats?

“I think we can all agree this year has tested us in more ways than one,” said Shakira Williams, chair of the task force.

The group’s vision is a sustained, long-term effort to prevent and reduce violence through mentoring, family support, neighborhood outreach and other approaches.

One new initiative getting underway now is the formation of a [rapid response team](https://roanoke.com/news/local/roanoke-hires-first-ever-rapid-response-coordinator-in-efforts-to-combat-violence/article_63078eae-371e-5ec4-8f68-b826ce422072.html) that can be activated to offer support and resources to families and neighborhoods affected by violent crime.

Volunteers for the team are being vetted and coordinator Lloyd Merchant hopes to be ready to start responding to incidents next month, although recruiting will continue beyond that. Volunteers and service providers willing to partner with the team are both being sought.

The goal is to mobilize outreach within 24 to 48 hours of an incident.

“We want to build up neighborhoods,” said Merchant, who was hired in October to form the team, a project made possible by support from a grant.

That work, he added, includes connecting people in need with services and letting them know that their community — from city leaders to citizen volunteers — is there for them.

“I believe in change,” Merchant said in an interview. “And I feel that we can effect change when we all do it together. That’s my main goal.”

Support and caring were at the heart of the message shared by keynote speaker Rita Joyce during Thursday’s anti-violence vigil, held downtown against the backdrop of the city’s Christmas tree, where an ornament of a dove was hung to symbolize the future hope for peace.

Joyce [lost her son to gun violence](https://roanoke.com/archive/victims-parents-ask-to-end-violence-shooter-gets-prison/article_b402913c-81ae-5abb-88ca-ca53f35d2ac6.html) in 2004 when someone opened fire outside a gas station. He was a victim caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.

But too often, Joyce said, victims and their families are met with judgment instead of empathy as others look for a way to blame them for what happened and to reassure themselves that such a terrible thing would never befall their own households.

“This can happen to anyone,” Joyce said ardently. “We need more compassion for victims of gun violence.”

Joyce herself worked for years via an outreach group that she co-founded, FEDUP, to support other families navigating the grief of a violent loss. The trauma is complex and can extend for generations, she noted.

Her son’s death left behind four young children who were forced to grow up without their father. “The impact is so much more deeper than we see,” Joyce said. “They were impacted by a violence they had no control over.”

Merchant, as part of his organizing work, has been trying to anticipate the needs families might face and build a network of resources around them. Supports and referrals so far range from grief counseling to broader aid, such as a pediatrician who recently agreed to consult with the rapid response team.

Police Chief Sam Roman said he felt optimistic heading into the new year as he discussed the many fronts on which the city is working to respond to violence.

The police department has taken several steps in recent months, including creating a new five-officer gang unit and partnering with federal authorities on an arrest dragnet. It has also supported the task force’s community-based work and ramped up its own efforts to strengthen relationships in the city’s neighborhoods.

“Neighborhood building, we think that is definitely the crucial piece to reducing crime,” Roman said in an interview. “Making sure we have strong neighborhoods, making sure there is a collaborative experience … making sure there are resources available and alternatives available.

“Anything we can do to be a part of that,” he said, “we’re all in.”

Since this fall, the police department has undertaken an early version of the rapid response team, with the chief and other command staff heading out into neighborhoods after a shooting occurs to talk with residents.

They knock on doors and let people know they understand how disturbing such altercations are. They ask if people need anything. They ask if they can help.

The requests they’ve heard back can run the gamut. They’ve helped neighbors get debris cleared away from their block. They’ve had requests just to sit and talk awhile with someone.

Roman said he hopes to continue the outreach even after the rapid response initiative is up and running.

The police department itself is just one piece of the puzzle in the effort to reduce crime, he said. Lasting change requires working with the community, building bridges and helping one another.

“I think our chances are really good,” he said when asked for his forecast of what these many efforts will yield. “We’re not just addressing short-term problems but we’re seeking long-term solutions as a collective.

“In my nearly 28 years of experience in law enforcement, I can’t think of a time when there was an earnest, collective effort, where everyone comes to the table with a common goal in mind, that we did not achieve success.”

The city’s annual anti-violence vigil — co-sponsored this year by the task force along with TAP and neighborhood groups — carries the name Bridging the Community Gap.

Vice Mayor Joe Cobb said he hoped all those who heard the message would be inspired to become bridges, connectors, of healing and hope in the community.

The downsized event, livestreamed on the city’s social media, had only about a dozen people in attendance by design.

All around it, the usual traffic of downtown buzzed by, albeit also curtailed by the pandemic.

As speakers attested to the power of community, determination and love, a woman and her young son walking by stopped to listen.

Hope Crawford and 7-year-old Dustin, both decked out in holiday sweaters, were just returning from a stop at the library when the sight of people around the tree caught their attention.

Crawford initially drew a bit closer just to understand what the event was. But what she heard moved her.

She and her son stayed and joined in the candlelight vigil. Two additional points of light in the night.

“It seemed very peaceful, especially with everything we have going on right now,” Crawford, 25, said of the event.

“It was really uplifting,” she said.