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Opinion: Anti-crime initiative uses proven tactics to save lives

Rev. Roderick Burton

and Thomas Abt

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St. Louis North Patrol Sgt. Tanya Rodman introduces a St. Louis police detective to the scene of a homicide on Feb. 2 near the corner of North Vandeventer and Cote Brilliante Avenues.

Christian Gooden, Post-Dispatch



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A proven approach to stopping violence is coming to the St. Louis region. The initiative, called Save Lives Now!, has the **strong support** of elected officials, law enforcement, community and faith-based groups, health workers, and the business community. For the first time in the region's history, every county leader and the mayor of the city of St. Louis had a seat at the table when launching this new approach.

As a pastor addressing gun violence and as a criminologist committed to helping urban areas use proven strategies to stop killings, we believe this type of collective response is highly encouraging.

The strategy begins with close partnerships between law enforcement, local residents, community-based organizations, churches, and social service providers — relationships that are already being strengthened and better coordinated as part of this planning process.

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Together, they confront those who are involved in violent crime with a simple message, “The violence must stop. We know you're involved. If you let us, we'll help you, but if you make us, we'll stop you.”

If individuals are willing to put down the guns and stop shooting, they can receive services to help them get their lives on track. If not, law enforcement works to get them off the street quickly.

The strategy, called focused deterrence, has been proven to work. In Baltimore, it's reduced gun violence by **25% over 18 months**. In Oakland, it cut gun homicides by **31% over five years**. A **rigorous review** of the strategy examined 24 separate tests of the strategy and concluded it showed positive results 22 times.

And it's not just focused deterrence — the new approach also calls for proven supports that reduced shooting and homicide arrests in Chicago by **65% over 20 months**. It further deploys community workers to make sure these essential services reach those who need them the most.

Save Lives Now! aims to reduce homicides and shootings in the St. Louis region by 20% over three years. It's an achievable goal — the equivalent of saving about 120 lives and sparing thousands more from the debilitating trauma of violence.

Think about how many children won't suffer the loss of a parent, sibling, aunt, uncle or friend. Neighborhood residents that won't have to carry the collective burden of someone being gunned down on their block. Schools that won't have to cope with students so devastated by fear and loss that they can't concentrate on their studies.

Think also about the national and international reputation of St. Louis once we can confidently say that the entire region has come together and saved lives. Instead, we can get back to being a region sought after by businesses, young workers, and investors. Think about the potential growth in population once safety is steadily improving.

The strategies to be used by Save Lives Now! aren't new, but the discussion and regional coordination is. Business leaders have taken notice — both Greater St. Louis Inc. and the Regional Business Council have offered early financial support. So has the Municipal League of Metropolitan St. Louis.

Others are also offering their time and advocacy, including pastors, neighborhood groups and physicians dealing with shooting victims. They understand that this is an issue that needs the power of collective action. They recognize the initiative needs to use methods that have been studied and proven to work.

Of course, **not everyone** is excited about the new effort. But we as a region cannot let partisan politics distract us from saving lives. It is critically important to maintain this very promising regional momentum to stop killings and shootings.

The Save Lives Now! initiative has the endorsement of the chiefs of police in St. Louis city, St. Louis County and St. Clair County — the places dealing with the highest rates of regional violence. It is not “soft on crime.” The chiefs recently testified in front of our regional leaders that the strategies in the plan strengthen police work and assist officers as they do their jobs.

The initiative also has the backing of federal and county prosecutors who want to ensure that violent individuals who keep offending are held fully accountable.

That said, the reality is that law enforcement alone can't and shouldn't be solely responsible for getting the job done. Police need partners working alongside them to be successful. We need our community members, faith-based leaders, public health workers, governmental players and the residents who have been most impacted by street violence.

Save Lives Now! welcomes all of them to the table. Together, we can focus on what works and save lives.

Rev. Burton is the senior pastor at New Northside Missionary Baptist Church in north St. Louis and also the Law & Order/Public Safety Committee chair of the St. Louis Metropolitan Clergy Coalitions. Abt is the founding director of the University of Maryland's Center for the Study and Practice of Violence.