

Amid rise in murders, South Florida city starts campaign to find causes, solutions



Lauderhill Commissioner Melissa Dunn surrounded by Mayor Ken Thurston, left, and Vice Mayor Lawrence "Jabbow" Martin, during a press conference to announce the city's "Peace 365," campaign, a plan to encourage the community to stop violence and cultivate a culture of peace and kindness throughout the community (Carline Jean/South Florida Sun Sentinel)

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As multiple cities in Broward County struggle with a recent rise in gun violence, Lauderhill is starting a months-long initiative that aims to find through research the "root cause" of violence in the city and implement solutions.

One of the faces of the city's "Peace365" initiative is someone who has lived the gun violence that police, the government and residents want to curb.

Mancito Telfort, 33, has been a Lauderhill resident since boyhood, marked by a tumultuous home life and trauma that gave way to him finding the acceptance and camaraderie that he was missing in the other boys who, like him, turned to street crime, he told the South Florida Sun Sentinel.

By age 14, Telfort had purchased

his first gun, a two-shot handgun, from someone in the community he viewed as a role model, he said. The lifestyle led to him later serving two prison sentences for burglary and

gun- and drug-related charges. Since his release in 2018, Telfort now makes rap music with a positive message and is one of the residents working with Lauderhill's "Peace365" campaign.

Amid a rise in murders, the city's initiative kicked off this week, encouraging residents and business owners to take a "peace pledge" and offering educational workshops on conflict resolution and other topics, Commissioner Melissa Dunn said at a news conference.

Joanette Brookes-George, adjunct criminal justice professor at St. Thomas University in Miami, is leading the research part of the campaign. Those who attended the news conference Monday completed an initial survey of 30 questions about their "personal interactions" with and "personal perspectives" on violence and gun violence in Lauderhill and demographic information, Brookes-George told the Sun Sentinel.

Residents who completed the first survey will be followed up with beginning in May, and in-depth focus groups will meet throughout the summer to discuss in more detail and pinpoint ZIP codes within the city that may be hotspots for violence, she said.

Those who signed up to become ambassadors for the campaign will recruit people in the community to complete the survey and to attend the later focus groups, Dunn said.

The results of the research are intended to inform policy changes that could alleviate some of the issues, Brookes-George said.

"Every city, every block has its own specific type of violence, and we know that Lauderhill has challenges where we have pockets of violence, and we want to kind of verify what are these specific types of violence that exist within Lauderhill so we can target policy, strategically move towards fixing those issues," Brookes-George said. Brookes-George said the analysis of the research will begin about September.

Like Lauderhill, Pompano Beach is looking for its own gun violence solutions after two recent separate shootings that killed a 16-year-old boy and injured a 10-year-old boy.

Lauderhill Police Department Deputy Chief Allen Siegel said at the conference that between 2021 and 2023, the department has seen a "steady reduction" in murders.

Between January 2018 and November 2020, there were 34 murders in Lauderhill, according to a 2021 community needs assessment. Between January and June 2021, there were 12 murders in the city.

So far in 2024, there have been seven murders in Lauderhill, Chief Constance Stanley said in a video statement. Mayor Ken Thurston told the Sun Sentinel that is two murders more than the same time period in 2023, and while crimes being committed involving guns, like robberies, have decreased, the number of people who have been killed by gun violence has increased.

The majority of murders in the city are between people who know each other, Siegel said. The department has increased its enforcement in recent months in areas "that are known to be prolific with people hanging out or some either known or undocumented people who want to be gang members," in addition to working with state and federal task forces that are "bringing resources to the city that we haven't had in years past," he said.