

## **Times Union: Capital Region police target gun violence with open dialogue**

Parolee call-in program helps decrease gun crime

By Keshia Clukey

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Ray Stroud spent 15 years in prison for beating a man to death.

"The minute it was over I knew I was a different person," Stroud said of the killing. "I regretted what I did."

Now 52, the Troy man has a full-time job, custody of his grandchildren and is involved in the community.

But after a particularly violent 2014 in Troy with eight homicides, including a shooting that became an important part of his grandchildren's summer, Stroud said he knew something had to change. So he began reaching out to those most at-risk for gun violence, including offenders recently released from prison.

"How we going to protect our kids if we can't protect ourselves?" Stroud asked a panel of parolees last month. "There has to be a change within for us to spread it out."

In October, Troy began monthly call-ins through the state-funded Gun Involved Violence Elimination initiative as part of a deterrence strategy.

The state Department of Corrections and Community Supervision selects high-risk individuals for the program, including those with a history of gun and gang violence. The parolees who attend the hourlong sessions interact with law enforcement officials as well as reformed criminals like Stroud, who participates as a member of Re-entry Opportunities and Orientations Towards Success, also known as ROOTS, which assists people emerging from prisons.

The panel includes representatives from county employment agencies, the Rensselaer County district attorney's office, police forces and the U.S. Attorney's office. They speak with men and women re-entering the community after serving time, about the consequences of re-offending as well as education and job opportunities.

"I'm willing to try anything to abate the violence," Troy police Chief John Tedesco said.

"Last year as far as I'm concerned was a blip on the radar. This year we're going to respond much more aggressively."

The call-in program, though new to Troy, has been part of the same strategy Albany and Schenectady have used to combat gun violence since 2012 when they were selected to pilot the program along with three New York City sites.

The program has since expanded and become an option through GIVE to 17 counties across the state, said state Division of Criminal Justice Services Executive Deputy Commissioner Michael C. Green. Each site is given grant money for the call-in as part of the total \$13.2 million GIVE initiative.

"The message is: We want you to succeed." Green said. "It's been shown that sitting people down and saying, 'We as a community are not going to tolerate this,' has been very successful."

Statewide data is not yet available, but communities that have implemented the program have seen a significant reduction in parole violations, Green said.

The Schenectady call-in program has had 255 participants in the monthly forums since December 2012, and only one participant is facing gun-related charges, said police Chief Brian Kilcullen. Others have been arrested, but mainly for misdemeanors, he said. "The fact that only one is facing possible weapons charges speaks volumes."

The Albany panel usually includes a parent of a victim of gun violence and a convicted offender. "It's a good way to get through to people," Albany acting police Chief Brendan Cox said. Of the 32 Albany forums since July 2012, the majority of the 400 participants have not committed violent offenses, he said. Exact figures were not available. Albany has also signed on for an updated call-in program, which will focus on those on probation as well as parole, said DCJS spokesman Walter McClure.

For re-offenders it's not just shooting a gun that could land them in federal prison, it could be a violation as simple as having a bullet in their pocket, said Assistant U.S. Attorney Daniel Hanlon.

Addressing the April panel of parolees in Troy, Hanlon described how buying drugs from an informant and having a gun, even if it's not used, would result in a mandatory five-year prison sentence on top of the drug charges. The second time it's 25 years as a mandatory minimum, he said.

"I'm rooting for you. I'm telling you so you don't step foot in a court," Hanlon said. "You have this advantage, now share this information."

One of the biggest issues causing parolees to re-offend is gang association, said Bob Thayer, a state parole officer in Troy. "We have a lot of outreach and a whole bunch of different organizations to try to alleviate the issues that caused last year's problems," Thayer said.

ROOTS Co-Founder Andre Morris told the group of Troy parolees that he was tired of seeing kids walking down the street wearing RIP T-shirts in memory of their friends.

"Some of ya'll may be contemplating going back on the block. We have an outlet where you don't have to do these things anymore," he said.

"It's tough to break the barrier, us against them," Morris said, gesturing toward law enforcement members of the panel. "I know some of you walked in thinking this might be a setup. No, it's not a setup, it's a heads up."