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Preventing youth violence in Denver with jobs, hospital visits — and quesadillas

Denver Youth Program takes an all-sides approach to stopping shootings in metro area



From top left, Isieha Goshon, 17, Josiah Guerrero, 16, and Jesus Rosales, 15, discuss teenage pregnancy with Felipe Perez, foreground, of the Gang Rescue and Support Project (GRASP), at Tramway Nonprofit Center in Denver on Tuesday, July 22, 2025. GRASP is a life skills and character education class that's part of the Denver Youth Program's violence prevention work. (Photo by Hyoung Chang/The Denver Post)

By **MEG WINGERTER** | mwingarter@denverpost.com | The Denver Post

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The regular grillmaster's pager buzzed: Someone was in a metro Denver hospital with an injury caused by violence, and that meant handing off responsibility for the grilled cheese and quesadillas.

Jerry Morgan stepped in to work the grill in front of the Denver Youth Program's location on Welton Street on Thursday afternoon, while Felipe Perez headed to talk with the trauma patient. Next time, they'll switch roles. Both do outreach with young people at risk of becoming victims or perpetrators of violence.

The connection between a cheesy lunch special and preventing violence might not be obvious to everyone, but in a neighborhood where food insecurity is common, a free meal can start a conversation that leads a young person to a positive path, such as the [Denver Youth Program's](#) outdoor recreation group or its health care career shadowing option, Morgan said.

"We have to be able to get people the services they need," he said.



Julie Ralston, right, and Jerry Morgan make quesadillas for youth at Denver Youth Program's REACH Clinic in Denver on Thursday, July 24, 2025. (Photo by Hyoungh Chang/The Denver Post)

[Murders are trending down in Denver](#), with about 45% fewer people killed by

Preventing violence doesn't happen without addressing the full picture of someone's life, said Johnnie Williams, executive director of the Denver Youth Program. If young men can't get a job to help their families buy food or keep the electricity on, they turn to illicit opportunities, he said.

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"Some people deal with that by selling drugs. Some people deal with it by joining gangs," he said.

At the Denver Youth Program, they can meet some of those needs through programs such as healing circles for young people recovering from trauma and a T-shirt shop that offers a paycheck and job training, Williams said. They also help youth and their families navigate the health care and social services systems.

"It's everybody's job" to help steer young people away from violence, he said.

The organization also attempts to deescalate disputes before they end in gunfire, and to intervene after shootings to prevent retaliation. The [At-Risk Intervention and Mentoring](#), or AIM, program [sends "credible messengers"](#) to Denver Health, University of Colorado Hospital and other metro hospitals that see significant numbers of patients who survived a gunshot wound.

Credible messengers are community members who build trust with those most likely to be either victims or perpetrators of gun violence, who are disproportionately young men of color. Typically, they were previously involved in violence, and some have spent time in prison.

Perez, who was an AIM client as a young man and now works there as a responder, said seeing someone with similar experiences who isn't judging them is powerful at a vulnerable moment. It can open people up to receiving mental health care and other help they need to avoid getting hurt again, or harming someone else, he said.

"They see someone that resembles them and they feel safe," he said.

Studies seem to back up the idea that the days after someone sustains a bullet or stab wound are an effective time to change their direction. A [hospital intervention program in Indianapolis](#) found that over eight years, only about 4% of the 328 people who received services went on to commit a violent crime, and fewer than 2% had another violent injury.

In the second quarter of the year, AIM met with two people injured in community violence — one who had been stabbed and one whom a driver had hit intentionally — and one person with a self-inflicted bullet wound, according to a report it filed as part of a [grant from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment](#). Data from the summer months isn't yet available.

Colorado hasn't set up the grants to prove that a particular group's efforts averted a certain number of injuries or deaths, but models that worked in other major cities should be helpful in the Denver area, said Dr. Ned Calonge, the state health department's chief medical officer.

[Studies from other cities](#) have estimated that violence-interrupting efforts led to about 18% to 56% fewer killings, depending on the neighborhood.

About 90% of the funding for the violence-prevention grants comes from the federal government, so the state may have to get creative to continue them, Calonge said. No single strategy will solve a problem as complex as gun violence, but combining approaches such as credible messenger meetings with interventions like offering trigger locks to parents will lead to progress, he said.

"Making headway is something that's going to take a lot of time," he said. "I think we're making starts in the right direction."

Repeated violent injuries are common enough that doctors can think of trauma as a “chronic disease,” said Dr. Shevie Kassai, a trauma surgeon at [HCA HealthOne Aurora](#), formerly known as Medical Center of Aurora. The hospital started working with AIM to connect survivors of shootings and stabbings to behavioral health treatment and other resources, in the hope that they won’t be back, she said.



Dai'syan Takor, 17, along with a group of young people, discuss teenage pregnancy with Felipe Perez, right, with the Gang Rescue and Support Project at Tramway Nonprofit Center in Denver on Tuesday, July 22, 2025. (Photo by Hyoungh Chang/The Denver Post)

Kassai estimated between half and 60% of her patients who survive “penetrating injuries” — mainly wounds from shootings or stabbings — return with similar injuries. Statewide, only about 2% of people hospitalized with a bullet or knife wound from 2020 to 2024 had a similar injury before, according to the state’s trauma registry. It may have missed people with less-severe injuries, though, because the registry only includes hospitals that can treat more severe trauma.

“All we can do is give patients, give all human beings, the tools to take care of themselves the best they can,” she said.

The only way that any of the efforts work is if people in the community know that someone truly cares about them and is in it for the long haul, said

Services like free lunches and clothing distribution are a vital part of making young people feel they can seek help before a situation escalates, he said.

“It just shows that we’re a positive force in our community and we’re in tune with our community,” he said. “Trust is a rare and priceless jewel.”

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