

CRIME PREVENTION

Firearm violence targeted

UTEC to create statewide prevention training center

By Alana Melanson
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LOWELL — UTEC, Inc. was formed 20 years ago to reduce gang violence in the city. Now, it will establish the state's premier training facility aimed at reducing gun violence across Massachusetts.

Thanks to a two-year, \$700,000 grant from the state Department of Public Health, UTEC will oversee the creation of the Gun Violence Prevention Training Center for Excellence, which will seek to address gun violence through a public-health and racial-equity lens.

UTEC CEO Gregg Croteau said it is also a chance to elevate street work as a professional field and provide a career path for advancement. He said the state funding is recognition that youth and street workers are an essential part of the equation in addressing gun violence.

"We're thrilled to be fortunate to launch this center," Croteau said. "It provides an opportunity to do work at the state level and build capacity to expand the scope of this work to the national level."

"Massachusetts' approach to addressing gun violence is a model for the nation, and our administration is proud to support innovative efforts to address gun violence in our most at-risk neighborhoods," Gov. Charlie Baker said in a statement announcing the grant funding. "This new center will help us expand our support for the vital community organizations who are working every day to reduce gun violence among youth and young adults."

Croteau said UTEC was selected through a competitive grant process. He said the effort grows out of the organization's annual New England Streetworker Conference, which is being held Tuesday at Gillette Stadium in Foxboro.

For about five years, the conference has brought together a coalition of street workers from across New England to network and share best practices in addressing issues of violence, Croteau said.

That conference will soon come under the umbrella of the new center, and its scope will be expanded into a year-round effort of sharing, learning and developing

strategies that can be used locally and beyond.

UTEC will take the lead in building a learning collaborative that brings in folks from across the country to "develop a comprehensive approach to address gun violence in a community," Croteau said.

The center will provide technical assistance and training to 10 community organizations around Massachusetts that had already received state funding to create gun violence prevention pilot programs in neighborhoods with higher rates of violence. UTEC's Lawrence arm received \$900,000 of the \$8.1 million awarded.

UTEC will share the \$700,000 for the center with several other organizations and training providers to help carry out the scope of the work, Croteau said. He said a director to lead the center and other employees will also be hired.

Croteau said the center, with assistance from Northeastern University, will conduct a needs assessment to determine what the partner organizations are looking for and what programs are desired across the state. In conjunction with Health Resources in Action and other partners, it will also tailor and deliver a series of training and technical assistance activities to all of the grantees, he said.

Training elements will include street outreach, mentoring, workforce development, comprehensive social needs assessments and referrals, behavioral health services, community engagement and mobilization.

"The goal is for these organizations to work collaboratively, to share lessons learned, and leverage best practices for reducing gun violence among youth and young adults," Public Health Commissioner Monica Bharel said in a statement. "We look forward to hearing their ideas on what works best to reduce firearm-related injury and death at the community level."

Massachusetts may have the lowest firearm death rate in the U.S., but gun violence is the leading cause of death for

those in Massachusetts between 17 and 24 years old.

Of the 245 firearm deaths in Massachusetts in 2016, more than a third were homicides. 55% of all victims of firearm-related injuries are between the ages of 15 and 24, and black youths in the same age range had 32 times the rate of firearm assault-related hospitalizations compared to white youths.

In addition to UTEC, the other organizations that received funding to address disparities in neighborhoods with higher gun violence rates include:

- College Bound (Dorchester): \$1.2 million
- Madison Park Development Corporation (Roxbury): \$751,270
- More Than Words (South End, Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan): \$650,920
- Mothers for Justice and Equality (Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan): \$556,360
- New North Citizens Council (Springfield): \$800,000
- ROCA (Springfield): \$800,000
- NorthStar Learning Centers, Inc. (New Bedford) \$800,000
- Old Colony YMCA (Brockton): \$850,000
- Worcester Youth Center (Worcester): \$800,000.

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