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GUEST COLUMN

Big 'snaps' to Lowell's leadership

By Gregg Croteau

It was recently reported that crime in Lowell fell by 10 percent in 2016 compared to the prior year. In fact, Chief Justice Ralph Gants of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court praised the efforts of local officials for such continued decrease in gang and criminal activity during his recent visit to Lowell. This deserving recognition is a direct result of the city's collective leadership that helps make collaboration the norm in our city.

Since UTEC's founding in 1999, powered by an initial city grant, our partnership with various city departments has grown thanks to the city's leadership over the years, including the current team led by City Manager Murphy, Mayor Kennedy, and the Lowell City Council. At the state level, Sen. Eileen Donoghue and Reps. Tom Golden, Rady Mom, and Dave Nangle have been instrumental in supporting key legislation and fighting for critical funding for so many nonprofits. The commitment of our public officials has regularly yielded state investment in youth violence prevention efforts, including Shannon grants and funding through the Safe and Successful Youth Initiative.

As UTEC has focused our work to reduce the likelihood of young adults with existing criminal backgrounds to re-offend, our collaboration with law enforcement and the justice system has expanded.

Our partnership with Police Superintendent William Taylor and the Lowell police has been integral to our work, from partnering on outreach and intervention to their proactive collaboration on funding opportunities.

District Attorney Marian Ryan is a close collaborator, particularly through her office's work on family safety and the opioid crisis.

Sheriff Peter Koutoujian and the Middlesex Sheriff's Office are essential to UTEC Streetworkers' ability to visit young adults who are incarcerated as a first step toward a new pathway post-release.

And judges, probation officers, public defenders, the Department of Youth Services, and the Department of Correction all contribute to the strong communication and referral systems that best serve our young adults.

In large part because of these collaborations

that power our work, just 11 percent of young people served by UTEC and our partners were re-arrested last year (compared with the statewide average of 51 percent of young adults who are charged with a new crime within 12 months of being released from incarceration). Still, given the young adults we serve, a small percentage of our young people may engage in activity that runs counter to UTEC's mission. Similarly, at any given time, our community always faces the risk of an act of violence that threatens our core values. But our community leaders sustain Lowell's interconnected efforts to ensure that such acts of violence are never accepted as normal here.

Lowell has a unique community network that includes talented business and philanthropic leaders along with its vital nonprofit organizations. UTEC's ability to help our young people is strengthened by the fact that

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we can make referrals to the Boys & Girls Club, access key services from the Lowell Community Health Center, Community Teamwork, or Mental Health Association of Greater Lowell; provide educational offerings through Lowell Adult Education Center and Middlesex Community College; or conduct research with UMass Lowell. And these are just a sampling of our nonprofit collaborators.

At UTEC, we have learned a lot from all of these allies. While we've made our fair share of stumbles along the way, we learned from them too, and today we are a better organization as a result of the feedback, counsel, and continued friendship from so many.

Successful public safety efforts are always a delicate situation. Even consistently positive results can be threatened by any given incident, at any given time. That's the risk and reality. However, the data tell a clear story. A consistent decrease in crime is the product of Lowell's leadership that continually embraces collaboration, and continually strengthens the urgency that our city never accepts acts of violence as normal. Today we give big "snaps," as we say at UTEC, to all the leaders who have fostered the foundation for successful public safety efforts.

Gregg Croteau of Lowell is executive director of the United Teen Equality Center.