

Years after CDC report, money remains an obstacle to reforms

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Even in a city that had become almost numb to gun violence, Wilmington's record-setting 154 shootings in 2013 proved to be a tipping point.

Desperate [city](#) leaders reached out to the federal government for help ending the cycle of violence, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention agreed to investigate. It was a rare move for an agency more typically known for studying disease outbreaks or causes of obesity.

Two years later, the CDC published what remains its only report about [gun violence](#) in a single American city, warning it was at "epidemic levels" and recommending a long list of steps for Wilmington and the state to follow. The former governor created a 25-member council charged with developing a plan to implement the recommendations.

Despite that early momentum, most of the CDC recommendations remain unfulfilled even as gun violence continues to plague the city and claim young lives.

The main culprit, according to state and city leaders, is lack of money.

The CDC called on local and state officials to use data such as truancy records, emergency room visits, domestic abuse allegations and even a parent's filing for unemployment benefits to identify at-risk children, and then intervene in the elementary- and middle-school years. It also

said Delaware should provide at-risk kids with mentorships and other programs to serve as a foundation for a more stable life.

Mayor Mike Purzycki and Gov. John Carney said they supported the CDC plan. Still, neither the city nor the state has put any money into the data collection that is key to following the agency's roadmap.

Carney said he wants a review of how money already being funneled to Wilmington is being spent but also said he is limited by budget constraints. The state just closed a \$400 million budget gap through cuts and tax increases. The mayor, meanwhile, has focused on revitalizing beaten-down neighborhoods.

The 25-member governor's panel, led by Wilmington City Council President Hanifa Shabazz, spent almost a year reviewing the CDC's recommendations and compiling its own 51-page "Call to Action" report, focused primarily on services to reduce youth violence.

The report agreed that the city should gather data about at-risk children. What it did not include were details about where it would find the money, staff or software to make it happen.

Shabazz said her strategy is to "re-appropriate dollars" from treatment programs to jump-start the CDC recommendations. She believes shifting money to programs geared toward younger children who have yet to be exposed to trauma would be more successful than trying to change the lives of adults who already have a long history with the criminal justice system.

She would not specify which treatment programs she would cut, and the plan remains in limbo.

Others on the CDC advisory council created a plan to link four city

schools with community health and social services in New Castle County, which includes Wilmington. The [program](#) would use software to create a profile for each student so the child can continue to receive services even if they transfer between schools and districts.

It could have begun as soon as this fall, but was awarded no state funding.

Other projects in the works include a youth wellness center modeled after a city re-entry program, and an alternative school suspension program. Yet many of these efforts require money, which has yet to be secured.

As the bloodshed continues, state and city leaders are offering glimmers of hope.

The state health department hopes to start the data collection recommended by the CDC within two years—if it can find the \$1 million to \$2 million a year needed.

The council formed in the wake of the CDC report launched the "Summer for Success Campaign," which included extended hours at safe haven community centers. The campaign also endorsed summer learning programs for low-income kids, and trained community center staff how to recognize the signs of children experiencing trauma.

The city also renewed its program to hire 450 youths for summer jobs at day camps, landscaping businesses and office buildings.

Shabazz, the council president, said the city, state and nonprofits are working together to devise lasting solutions, but that answers will not come overnight.

"We need to ensure that what we are healing in this epidemic does not come back again," she says, "that we not create another toxic environment where our children cannot grow and thrive."

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