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Turning tragedy into ‘a blessing’: Roca helps Baltimore’s young shooting survivors



Roca’s “after-shooting protocol” seeks to reach each 16-to-24-year-old nonfatal shooting victim in Baltimore. (Lloyd Fox/Staff)



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He remembers the gun pointed at his face, close enough to tell it was a .40 caliber, then turning to run past his house.

“Call my mother,” he said to his sister, who was at the screen door, as he ran by.

He remembers feeling desperately thirsty as he waited for an ambulance, his white Under Armour sneakers turning pink with blood. Maybe more clearly than that, he remembers feeling confused about life after surviving a shooting — trying to make sense of why he didn’t die.

“When people think about somebody being a victim of gun violence — but not dying — everybody think about a bullet just hitting somebody,” the 25-year-old man said. “They don’t think about the aftermath.”

That’s where Roca steps in.

The anti-violence intervention organization, which has [operated in Baltimore since 2018](#), has now begun reaching out as quickly as possible to boys and men between ages 16 and 24 who’ve survived shootings. Roca typically focuses its efforts on those at high risk; its new effort recognizes being shot as a significant risk factor.

That population of shooting survivors could be targeted again, or considering retaliating. In a city that suffers hundreds of gunshot victims per year, the impact of preventing a single shooting goes beyond one person. Plus, the wounded teens and young men are already battling trauma, new physical challenges and unforeseen expenses.

“It’s a tragedy that you only can get access to resources and this type of help if you get shot,” said Le’Var Mullen, who spearheads Roca’s “after-shooting protocol” strategy. “I try to use that to be a blessing.”

Under the protocol, whether the shooting survivor was engaged in risky behaviors or just in the wrong place at the wrong time, they are eligible for Roca services for 90 days. Survivors are offered mental health treatment and connected to job and education opportunities. They can get help securing basic documents, such as state IDs, and even be relocated with their families.



Y.S. who is taking part in Roca's after-shooting program shows the wounds from a bullet that was fired at him. Roca attempts to contact each of the city's nonfatal shooting victims, to see what services they can connect them with and what else they might need. (Lloyd Fox/Staff)

Y.S., the young man who survived being shot last April, and other program participants talked last year with The Baltimore Sun on condition of anonymity due to safety concerns..

When he was shot, Y.S. already had his documents and was taking community college courses. Roca connected him with a commercial driver's license program — a step toward securing such a license — and a network of staff eager to help and to listen.

Of getting involved with Roca, “it was almost like family,” he said. “Like they adopt you as like their nephew or something — cousin. It's a place where you can be yourself and express exactly what you went through.”

Born from tragedy

The after-shooting protocol was born from tragedy.

Roca paused taking referrals of new participants from outside agencies during the start of the coronavirus pandemic. In 2020, as Roca ramped back up, the group's Maryland vice president, Kurt Palermo, began pulling a few names from a list of shooting victims compiled by police as possible candidates for help. One name led to a knock on a door and confirmed interest from the young man there.

A youth worker who went back to his home a day or two later was greeted by police tape across the block. Palermo told her to try again tomorrow. But the next day, the young man's name was on the shooting list again. He was killed on the exact spot he'd been shot days earlier, Palermo recalled.

Something clicked then, Palermo said: "We have to be the bridge between when those young people are released and what happens next. We are that thing that happens next."

The new protocol began in fall 2022. A three-person team led by Mullen was tapped to focus on the population of shooting survivors.

In the first year, Roca said it served 94 of 124 shooting survivors. Nearly 40 accepted a mental health assessment. Sixteen earned driver's licenses or permits, and 16 got help with documents such as birth certificates or Social Security cards. Also, Roca helped move 11 shooting victims and their families to new homes.

The organization as a whole is funded by government grants and donations, as well as roughly \$940,000 annually from the city of Baltimore. That amount primarily goes toward Roca's role in the city's Group Violence Reduction Strategy, but also helps cover some of its general work, according to the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement. The after-shooting protocol is funded by federal and private dollars, according to Roca.

Hospitals are key to connection, Roca's Anisha Thomas said, because they have the most current contact information for shooting survivors and offer the chance for a face-to-face connection with the young people seeking medical treatment. Many have staff who ask victims for consent to share their contact information with Roca, Thomas said.

"The hospital staff are at the same place we're at, which is: We've got to get the work

done,” Thomas said. “We can’t wait. People are dying.”

Dr. Katherine Hoops of the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions and Johns Hopkins Medicine said the period after someone suffers a traumatic event is known in medicine as a “teachable” or “partnership” moment. That’s an opportunity to develop a relationship and help someone with their mental and physical recovery

Multiple studies, Hoops said, have shown a person’s risk of death doubles with each subsequent firearm injury. A regional study also found exposure to violence, whether as a victim, witness or perpetrator, doubles the risk of that person perpetrating violence within two years.

Overall, she said, someone who goes to a hospital after suffering an assault has a roughly 15% to 25% chance of returning for the same thing. That rate drops steeply when a person receives robust, wraparound interventions, such as violence intervention programs from a hospital or Roca, Hoops said.

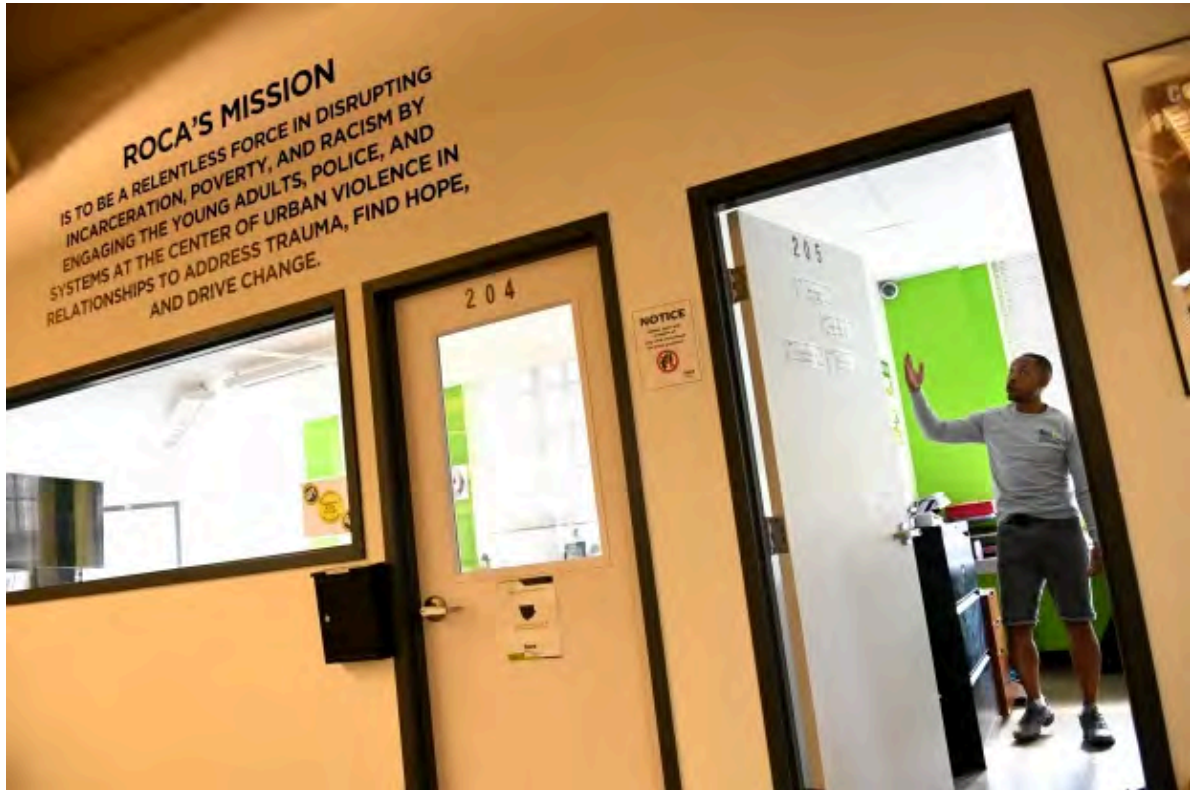
“These kinds of programs really see that teachable or partnership moment where they can intervene,” Hoops said. “[Roca] provides really crucial services, and are such an important, integral member of the violence prevention ecosystem.”

Start with the basics

Mullen is often the first Roca face that potential participants see.

He doesn’t ask what brought them to the hospital — they’re likely traumatized, he said, and fielding questions from police. Instead, he focuses first on basic needs. Do they have food and fresh clothes? Is their BGE bill paid up?

“We can’t have a young person that’s healing from a gunshot wound stuck in the house with no lights. Same thing with back rent and things of that nature,” Mullen said. “It’s hard for a young person to focus on doing the right things, making the right adjustments, if they’re still in survival mode.”



Le'Var Mullen, who runs Roca's after-shooting protocol. Mullen attempts to contact each of the city's nonfatal shooting victims, to see what services he can connect them with and what else they might need. (Lloyd Fox/Staff)

Some young people and their families readily agree to participate. Others take convincing.

R.M., 22, thought Mullen was a police officer when he first knocked at the door. He'd left the hospital days earlier saying police had kicked nurses out of his room, "more worried about questioning me" than his medical condition, R.M. said.

He was talking to no one.

"I don't even care if you my father," he said.

But, speaking with Mullen through his Ring doorbell, he agreed to check out Roca.

In a separate case, Mullen contacted a woman days after her 22-year-old son was shot. She thought he might be trying to lock up her son. Monique, who The Sun is not identifying by last name because of safety concerns, remained skeptical through a handful of conversations. Then Roca offered to help her family move and Mullen

delivered a check for almost \$5,000. That's when, she said, she realized Mullen "wasn't playing."

Housing is one of the most pressing issues for young shooting survivors, Thomas said, including problems such as overdue rent, a need to move for safety reasons and homes that now need ramps to make them accessible. Some people need help with energy bills and getting equipment like wheelchairs. Other challenges can be hard to anticipate. In one case, Thomas said, Roca took care of a pet rabbit for someone who didn't have a home. It bit a staff member.

"It's easy for someone to say, 'You're a young person, you're homeless, you don't have any money. Why are you keeping a rabbit?'" Thomas said. "But it's like, because the rabbit is the only thing you have. People have to see things the other way."

Monique is convinced of the value of the program, which helped her son secure his records and expunge past convictions. He worked at Roca as he sought a permanent job. Her son, she said, needs Mullen's influence and the influence of the program's other Black staffers, particularly men.

"Can't nobody understand what these young men going through," she said. "Those people do."

'No reset button'

At a meeting of protocol participants, the young men sat in a circle of chairs, watching Mullen.

He'd taken them through an exercise in recognizing peer pressure's influences on their lives — in drinking alcohol or smoking weed, in romantic relationships, in Baltimore's gun violence. Now, he was urging them to dare to be different.

"Don't give a f— about what people think about you and how you are gonna live your life. You only get one. It ain't no reset button," Mullen said. "It ain't no, 'When you get tired, man, when things start going south, you can hit the reset button and start over. ... You only get one shot at this, bro.'"

A feature of **Roca's traditional program**, such healing circles offer a space to vent, to

learn and to connect. Multiple times each year, shooting victims — and possibly, perpetrators — come together peacefully from across the city.

Mullen told this group that loyalty doesn't exist on the streets. He told them about attending the sentencing for the man convicted of killing his son, Le'Var Mullen Jr., in 2019. That day, when the man needed all the support possible, just one person spoke on his behalf. It was Mullen himself.

“Because,” he told the group, “I understand y'all.”



Roca's after-shooting protocol, which seeks to reach each 16-to-24-year-old nonfatal shooting victim in Baltimore. The “healing circle” is where participants in the program come together to discuss their experiences and heal together. (Lloyd Fox/Staff)

What services are most useful to Roca participants varies. Several cited the importance of their relationships with Roca staff. Like Mullen, who's been shot, been incarcerated and lost a son to gun violence, many staffers draw on their experiences and desire to repay Baltimore by mentoring its youth.

R.M. described calling Roca frequently during periods of frustration or indecision, talking with his youth worker as well as a staffer he didn't know who was working at

Roca's front desk.

In one instance, while he worked as a cashier, a woman lashed out at him after he told her some cookies weren't on sale. He called Roca while feeling "heated," he said, and spoke to someone — he doesn't know who — who encouraged him to relax and consider that she might be going through something herself.

"Dude downstairs, that's my mans. I don't even know his name," R.M. said. "I just call him up, I say, like, 'I'm ready to do this ... but my mind telling me to do this.' Man be like, 'Nah, just stick on your steady grind. Don't switch your route. You done already made so many changes, so why switch up what you're doing?'"

For Y.S., the program helped him realize that, too often in Baltimore, young people aren't living, they're just surviving. Whether someone is a business owner or out on a corner selling drugs, he said, they can become a target.

His April shooting left him with two bullet holes in his thigh, an inch from an artery. The bullet grazed three fingers on his right hand, then smashed his phone into his leg, leaving an imprint from its camera lenses.

Surviving that, and connecting with Roca, helped him to realize: He wants to truly live. Roca, he said, is "like that second chance that people was never given, or didn't have the opportunity to even see.

"You see something more for yourself."



A young man who is taking part in Roca's after-shooting protocol at the Roca offices in Baltimore. Roca attempts to contact each of the city's nonfatal shooting victims, to see what services they can connect them with and what else they might need. (Lloyd Fox/Staff)