

Promoting Safety: Lessons Learned from Roca Baltimore



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Introduction

Outreach to individuals deeply embedded in violent crime is a feature of Roca’s program model. In Baltimore, the city with the nation’s second highest rate of gun violence, this presents unique challenges to maintaining the safety and wellbeing of Roca staff and participants. The gun violence landscape in Baltimore has been increasingly exacerbated by the influx of military-grade weapons into the illegal firearms market. Baltimore Police Department seized 1,125 guns and 169 ghost guns in just the first six months of 2024.¹ In addition to having high overall rates of gun violence and violent crime, the nature of violence in Baltimore is somewhat unique compared to other cities; one study found that 70% of gun-related crime was perpetrated by groups of individuals. Accordingly, many participants who are referred to Roca Baltimore were involved in gun violence, and it is not uncommon for young people to have ongoing issues with other participants. These attributes, unique to Baltimore’s environment, emphasize the need for Roca’s programming but also make Roca’s work dangerous. For Roca, prioritizing safety in every action and decision is one of their four core values (see Appendix). Roca operates under the belief that if they keep their team and building safe, they can better engage young people and better ensure their physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing. Accordingly, Roca empowers staff to trust their judgment and mitigate risk in daily programming and outreach work. As evidence of their commitment to their core values, Roca has a strong track record when it comes to keeping their staff and participants safe.

I can say this confidently. There is no other program in Baltimore that takes safety as seriously as we do.

— Roca leadership

About Roca








Roca is a three year-program, initially implemented in Massachusetts, for young people 18–24 at the greatest risk of involvement in violent crime. Roca aims to reduce incarceration, poverty, and racism by engaging young people, police, and other institutions. Roca’s programming centers around developing transformational relationships with young people and teaching cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) skills that allow participants to self-regulate and learn to de-escalate on their own when they encounter conflict. Roca has operated in Baltimore for the past six years.



Roca contracted Abt to conduct an evaluation of their Baltimore program. As part of the initial stages of this evaluation, we conducted a site visit to learn more about the core components of their program implementation. Two key research questions for this site visit related to safety: What safety measures does Roca Baltimore put in place to protect staff and participants? And how are these safety measures tailored to the unique context in Baltimore?

Figure 1. summarizes key safety measures implemented at Roca that are described in detail in this brief.

Figure 1. Key safety elements

Table 1. Key safety elements			
	ELEMENT	DESCRIPTION	REASONING
      	Front desk team member	A team member staffed at the front desk who is trained in CBT skills, Roca values, and de-escalation techniques greets all young people entering and leaving the building and conducts pat downs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ It is not realistic to expect staff to disarm a young person with a gun. ■ Provides additional opportunities to practice and reinforce CBT skills with participants. ■ Allows Roca to identify and remove any weapons.
	Phone lockbox	Young people must leave their cell phones in a lock box at the front entrance of the building.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Prevents participants from texting/calling friends regarding whereabouts of other participants.
	Constant communication among staff	Staff participate in daily check-in and check-out meetings and communicate throughout the day via a group text.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Facilitates real time communication, allowing all staff to know which youth are classified as do not approach and/or banned from the building, and which neighborhoods to avoid. ■ Ensures all staff are in the loop about who is in the building and when.
	Daytime outreach	Roca conducts door knocks and field outreach during daylight hours only.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Due to high rates of gun violence in the city, nighttime outreach places staff at risk.
	Extra attention for off site Transitional Employment Program (TEP) work crews	TEP supervisors maintain unpredictable work site schedules. Other Roca staff check in if they pass a worksite.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Schedule prevents individuals in the neighborhood from planning a confrontation with work crew. ■ Drop-ins from other Roca staff give TEP supervisors a chance to manage any concerns with a more favorable staff to participant ratio.
	Transformational Relationships and CBT skills	Roca staff conduct safety assessments for young people intake, build trust and rapport through transformational relationships, and teach CBT skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Participants share information about who they have conflicts with and what neighborhoods to avoid. ■ CBT skills allow young people to pause before reacting, and self-regulate to prevent escalation during conflict.
	Ongoing communication with Baltimore Police Department BPD	Roca leadership meets monthly with BPD leadership and maintains constant communication with BPD intelligence when there are shooting incidents, concerns about youth participants' safety, and/or uptick in violence in a particular neighborhood or area.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Adapts to emerging safety concerns and prevent placing youth workers in potentially unsafe situations during outreach. ■ Identifies participants that should not be in the building at the same time, or participants they should pause outreach to.

SITUATIONAL AWARENESS

| Safety measures at Roca's Baltimore site

Situational awareness

Roca staff reported that the work they do is inherently dangerous as they are often in spaces where violent crime is likely to occur. For example, one outreach worker described: **"We understand in this field, with this population, one wrong move can cost you your life."** Because of the recognition of the safety risks inherent in their job, Roca leadership and staff emphasized the importance of being aware of the environment that staff are entering. As one youth worker noted: **"I don't feel unsafe because I use my common sense. If I see 20 dudes standing somewhere and I know it's hot, I'm not sitting on that corner talking about it. I'm going to stay right here."**

Several Roca staff described situational awareness as innate and intuitive and noted it included staying "vigilant," listening to your "gut feeling," and using "common sense." If something feels off, staff are encouraged to listen to that intuition and respond accordingly.

Examples of actions that Roca staff took when they had a feeling that something was off:

- Conducting a pat-down of a young person coming into the building who had already been pat down (and finding a weapon).
- Leaving a work site early with the TEP crew.
- Calling for another staff member to come join them at their location.

In prioritizing situational awareness, Roca staff understand that no matter how engaged a Roca participant may be, their environment, or the environment they are in during outreach, poses numerous risks. One youth worker clarified:

***Just be aware of what you're getting into and don't [be] naive and reckless.
Don't put yourself in a position that you don't have to be in.***

Roca tries to assess potential youth workers' situational awareness and general comfort with Roca's outreach work during the hiring process. Roca has interviewees join ride-alongs to observe how they respond to being in the field (i.e., their body language). This step is critical to hiring and onboarding as youth workers expressed that having the right "energy" or body language in the field can make a critical difference when entering an unknown situation where others might perceive them as an outsider.

Safety protocols

Roca's safety protocols at the Baltimore site are continually refined based on staff's observation of young people's behavior and their recommendations, ensuring that protocols remain responsive to changing needs, consistently prioritizing the safety of participants and staff.

Staff described seven key security measures related to safety protocols in our interviews:

1) a front desk team member, 2) a phone lockbox, 3) constant communication among staff, 4) daytime outreach, 5) extra attention for offsite TEP work crews, 6) transformational relationships and CBT skills, and 7) ongoing communication with BPD. We describe each of these in detail below.

1. Team member at the front desk



Shortly after opening the Baltimore program, Roca staff realized that despite their no-weapons policy, young people were bringing guns into the building. Roca leadership acknowledged that there is nothing staff can do if a situation escalates and someone has a firearm, and therefore made the decision to staff someone at the building's entrance to implement security screenings. As one leadership member said:

“Transformational relationships are critical, they're game-changing. But a guy will bring a gun in the building if he has an issue with somebody or he feels scared.” Another Roca team member said: **“You can't be proactive for somebody shooting at you. That's one thing. Let's be realistic about that. But we can know how to identify certain safety protocols.”** The decision to staff a front desk person and implement pat-downs was unique to Baltimore at its inception; none of the Roca Massachusetts sites had a security person.

Roca Baltimore's decision to staff a front desk person was considered controversial by other organizations and even by some Roca employees. Critics said that a front desk person who implements pat downs would make Roca feel like a prison and make participants more reluctant to come into the building. Roca's leadership, however, fully supported the idea and moved forward with it, citing concerns for the safety of staff and young people above anything else. One Roca staff person told us about the pushback around staffing a front desk person:

I'm a proponent, and I get it, emotional safety is so important. You're building trust, you're building emotional safety, vulnerability, having conversations, very, very hard conversations. But if you don't at least have a foundation of physical safety for staff and young people, you can't do any of that.

The team member staffing the front desk conducts manual pat-downs rather than using a wand, primarily due to the high rate of ghost guns (guns 3D printed using plastic) in Baltimore. The absence of metal detectors or security wands also lends to a more welcoming environment.

Importantly, the front desk person at Roca is not a contracted security guard. The team member who staffs the front desk is trained, like all Roca staff, in cognitive behavioral theory (CBT) skills and de-escalation techniques and is responsible for upholding Roca's values and reinforcing the same skills taught by Roca youth workers.

As another leadership team member explained:

A lot of the other sites didn't think that was a good idea, they thought it was going to make us look too carceral. And we were like, no, our security guard's going to be different. He's going to know CBT. He's going to be able to read and scan that young person before they even get upstairs to the rest of the staff. So, he's that first person who can help that young man to regulate his emotion before he even gets upstairs, checks them, and builds trust with them.

Other staff echoed this sentiment. One staff member told us:

He knows this population. He's from the community. He has a security background. But his job is not to enforce anything on the guys, they know that they're going to get patted down, they know he's going to take their phones, but he also is engaging in relationships with them. He's also asking them questions, sometimes guys leave very pissed off. So he is that last point of contact if no other staff is with the young person to say, 'Hey look, you want to have a conversation?' He knows CBT, he's trained, he's not just some random contractor we brought in. He gets it.

2. Phone lockbox at the building entrance



Roca also requires young people to put their phones in a lock box behind the front desk at the building's entrance. Roca implemented this measure after observing that young people often saw others in the building who either they, or their friends, had problems with. Young people would proceed to text their friends to let them know of the other person's location so that they could be prepared for a confrontation when the other person left the Roca building. To prevent this type of situation from happening, Roca banned the use of cell phones while inside the building. This measure also allows young people to practice a CBT skill, "Be Present" and unplug from social media, text messaging, phone calls, and other push notifications which can distract them from connecting with youth workers or other young people.

3. Constant communication, including daily check-in and check-out and a staff group chat



Roca conducts all-staff check-ins and check-outs at the beginning and end of each day, in addition to keeping staff updated on real time issues throughout the day. Part of the check involves sharing information about young people who are on a "do not approach" status or "do not let in the building" status. Roca staff get information about real time issues from young people, their connections in the community, and BPD. For example, one youth worker said **"We probably have 20 or 30 guys that can't be in the building right now because of information from BPD."** During check-ins, Roca staff also discuss which young people have ongoing issues with other participants in the program, so they can coordinate to ensure those young people do not accidentally run into each other in the building. A key feature of this approach is that it allows Roca to make a plan about when and how to safely bring in young people that have issues with one another, so they are not excluded from in-person programming. Their interpersonal conflicts do not limit their engagement with Roca.

Do not approach or do not let in the building status

Young people may be categorized as do not approach or do not let in the building based on intelligence from the Baltimore Police Department, the young person's interactions or statements to Roca staff, or information from other young people or community members. Being banned from in-person meetings or entering the building is temporary until whatever situation leading to this status resolves. Roca youth workers continue to engage with these young people by phone during this time.

In addition to twice daily in-person meetings, all Roca staff who work in Baltimore are part of a group chat using an encrypted phone application. This group chat allows staff to update one another in real time about who is in the building, who is coming to the building, any disagreements or hostility between participants, and any neighborhoods or individuals that have been flagged as high risk/ do not approach. In one instance, a youth worker explained, the group chat allowed them to remove a young person from the building using the back staircase as another young person they had trouble with came up the front staircase:

We did have a situation [where] we had one young man on the third floor as the other young man that he's beefing with [was] coming up on the elevator and we had to get the young man off the third floor to go down the back stairwell and take him out the garage door. So, it has been several incidents where it could have been chaotic.

Roca staff indicated that building safety measures are not just for their own safety, but also for the safety of their participants. As one Roca leadership member summarized:

I bet if you sat down with the guys and asked them, 'do you feel safer now or did you feel safer two years ago?' They're all going to tell you they feel safer now. And we did that for them in a way that they didn't have to admit that they were ever scared or worried.

This emphasis on participants' safety is in line with best practices for trauma-informed approaches which highlight the need for physical, psychological, and emotional safety for program participants. In line with this emphasis on the emotional and mental wellbeing of their participants, Roca also holds peace circles for conflict mediation and facilitates mediation between participants known to have problems with one another.

4. Daytime outreach



Although the building serves as the hub for Roca's programming, a lot of activities take place in the community, including outreach and the transitional employment program. Like Roca sites in Massachusetts, Roca Baltimore implemented a similar policy to only conduct outreach until as late as 8pm to limit outreach to daylight hours.

One leadership team member described the basis for this decision:

In Baltimore, people talk about the homicides, but the [nonfatal] shootings are off the chart, 1,000 to 1,200 downtown shootings. I don't even know how many discharges there are. And I said, wait a second, we are doing outreach [at night] in one of the most violent cities, absolutely not. We are cutting it back.

Another reason Roca staff prioritize daytime outreach is that in their experience, outreach at nighttime is less effective. Youth workers and leadership mentioned that it is harder to engage with young people in the evening if they have been hanging out with their friends late, and young people are more likely to be drunk or high at night than the daytime.

Although Roca's policy is to conduct outreach in daytime hours whenever possible, Roca staff understand that there are instances where nighttime outreach is necessary. For example, youth workers regularly respond to young people off-hours if the young person reports they are in crisis. Further, some scheduled group engagements end during evening hours. Roca's relationship with BPD helps them to plan their outreach safely. As one leadership team member said:

Since I have worked here, there has never been a situation where we went into somewhere blind. We always know where the hotspots are. I think that comes from our director. He builds relationships with the police department so they always reach out to him to let him know the areas we need to avoid.

5. Extra attention to Transitional Employment Program off-site work crews



In our discussion with Roca leadership and TEP crew members, we learned that Roca considers off-site TEP as one of the riskier parts of the job. While in the building, Roca strives for 1:1 or 1:2 ratio of staff to young people; at work sites, however, this ratio is normally around 1:6. To promote safety of work crews, Roca ensures that crews do not establish a predictable pattern at their work sites. For example, if they are at a park on Monday morning one week, they will be there again on a different day of the week and at a different time. This prevents passersby from recognizing TEP work crew members as individuals they have conflict with and planning a confrontation for the next day. Furthering prevention tactics, Roca TEP trucks are unmarked vehicles with no Roca logos visible. A policy states that if Roca staff see a work crew in the neighborhood during their outreach, they should stop and check in with the work crew supervisors. This informal drop-by gives the supervisor a chance to share any concerns and strategize an exit plan with an increased staff to young person ratio.

6. Roca program model is a safety measure



Roca leadership and staff also described that Roca's program model (both programmatically and relationally) inherently makes it safer for staff and participants. Roca leadership and staff explained that teaching CBT skills to staff and to participants facilitates de-escalation should tensions arise. By teaching participants how to label and understand the root of their feelings, Roca programming helps introduce a pause between stimulus and action. Several participants noted that because they had learned CBT skills, they were able to choose an alternate, non-violent response when faced with a stressful situation. This mindset and behavior change among

participants makes Roca's programming inherently safer for both staff and participants. Further, since Roca staff are trained in CBT, they are able to have challenging conversations with participants and de-escalate potentially unsafe situations (see **Mediation success story**).

Roca also explained that developing transformational relationships with participants contributes to safety. At intake, Roca conducts safety assessments of new participants, which are embedded into the client dashboard that staff have access to. Roca youth workers report being able to leverage the transformational relationships they develop with participants to ask about potentially unsafe situations and safety-related issues. As one youth worker noted, **"That's why you build these relationships to find out what's going on. You find out who don't like who because if you don't build that relationship with them, you will never know."** Through building transformational relationships and trust with participants, youth workers also learn if participants have problems with other participants and can develop a plan to ensure they do not interact. As one participant noted, **"If you say you've got a problem with a dude on the outside, they're going to either help you try to fix it or if it's something they can't fix, they're going to just—y'all won't never be around each other."**

Mediation success story

Conducting safety assessments and building transformational relationships with participants helps Roca staff learn about potential conflicts between participants and gauge whether these can be de-escalated. When feasible, without jeopardizing staff and participant safety, Roca staff help mediate conflicts and promote shared understanding between participants. In some cases, staff are mediating conflict between participants that are known weapon carriers, gang-involved, and have deep-seeded history. Through this process, Roca staff spends weeks, if not months, with these conflicting participants to build transformational relationships with one another, thereby making Roca's programming inherently safer. As one leadership team member described:

We had situation where a young man got shot and his friend got killed. Another young man that was in the program was actually the twin of the person that shot the other young man and killed his friend. So, it was really difficult for him to look [the twin] in [his] face. At first, the young man who got shot said 'it is on-site when I see him.' He was basically saying 'regardless of who around, where it's at, it is going down. I'm going to kill him.' Then it changed to 'okay, he's in here trying to better himself. I'm in here trying to better myself.' That went from 'as long as he stay out of my way, I'm going to stay out of his way.' Then weeks went by, then they played in a basketball game together. A few more weeks went by, they're on the same [TEP]crew. A few more weeks went by, they're outside hanging out together and they're two individuals [who had said], 'I'm going to kill him first chance I get.'"

Because of the transformational relationships that youth workers build with participants, participants also proactively inform Roca staff about “hot spots” or potentially unsafe areas. Based on this information, youth workers adjust their outreach to prioritize staff safety. As one leadership team member explained: **“When you build that relationship, of course, they’re not going to allow harm to come to you.”** Several youth workers underscored that maintaining strong relationships with their participants helps keep them safe. As one youth worker noted, **“You have to have a good relationship with your guys because most of the time, if they know what’s going on in their neighborhood, and if your guy is really connected with you, they’ll tell you off the rip. I’ve never been in a situation where there was incidents going on that I didn’t know about because my guys, they’re going to tell me.”** The role of transformational relationships in keeping Roca staff and participants safe is discussed in more detail in the Transformational Relationships brief.

7. Ongoing communication with Baltimore Police Department (BPD)



Roca Baltimore’s ongoing partnership and communication with BPD is another central part of their safety protocol. Roca leadership maintains strong relationships with the Baltimore Police Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner and other leadership. Roca also holds regular meetings with District Majors and works with BPD’s Group Violence Unit (GVU) for Group Violence Reduction Strategy.

Roca also conducts outreach to police officers, outside of leadership. For example, every nine weeks, Roca leadership and youth workers go to the Baltimore Police Academy and present to the new cadets about the Roca model and its programming in the city. The goal of these meetings is to talk about the work Roca does and engage with the recruits early so that they become more familiar with Roca and understand the work and value Roca does in the city.

Roca’s relationship with BPD further contributes to the program’s overall safety. As mentioned earlier, BPD intelligence informs the Roca Baltimore Director of shooting incidents and “hotspots,” neighborhoods or areas experiencing an uptick in violence. Roca leadership, in turn, notifies youth workers so they can adjust their outreach accordingly. Roca staff also call BPD if they are concerned about a group of participants or a situation. As one youth worker described:

“If we have a concern about a group of guys or a situation I’m calling BPD immediately. While an officer was here two months ago, we ran a list of 35 names and the officer shared, that these two guys can’t be here together, this guy can’t be in the building exercise caution with this guy, these guys don’t meet in the neighborhood, let the youth worker meet them somewhere else.”

BPD continues to share with Roca relevant safety information about participants, including information about which participants cannot be around each other, which participants Roca needs to “exercise caution” with, and which participants Roca should not meet in their neighborhood. Roca uses this information to adjust in-office programming and their “do not approach” list. In addition, if there is a dangerous incident in a participant’s neighborhood, Roca does not send staff to conduct outreach.

Conclusion

Despite working in the highest crime neighborhoods and with young people who are deeply embedded in violent crime, Roca Baltimore has maintained a strong track record in terms of preventing staff and participant injury and death at their building and during program activities. The findings in this brief underscore Roca’s commitment to adapting their policies based on observations of their environment and putting safety first. Creating a safe environment—including the physical environment and in interpersonal interactions—is the first principle of trauma-informed approaches to programming.² Roca’s safety protocols do not get in the way of participants’ psychological safety but rather set the foundation for participants to be able to heal and grow through the Roca program, because they have a place where they can relax and feel safe.

Methodology

Four Abt team members conducted a one-week site visit at Roca’s Baltimore office in January 2024. Our site visit included a total of 22 interviews which included: six interviews with Roca leadership, six interviews with youth workers and transformational relationship phase three workers (TR3 workers), and 10 interviews with young people participating in Roca’s programming. Roca participants received a \$15 gift card for participating in an interview. The average interview length for each group is summarized in Table 2.

Respondent type	Number of interviews	Average interview length
Leadership	6	47 minutes
Youth workers	6	49 minutes
Participants	10	33 minutes

We also conducted five ride-alongs in the community with Roca staff. Ride-alongs lasted three to four hours. Finally, we observed Roca’s in office programming, including healthy habits, a peace circle, a culinary class a GED class, a check in for the Transitional Employment Program (TEP), and a training on preparing for job interviews.


Analysis

We transcribed all audio recordings and uploaded them into NVivo, a software designed to facilitate qualitative analysis. All interview participants consented to be audio recorded. To guide analysis, we developed a coding scheme prior to the site visit based on our research questions, interview protocols, and observation guides. At the end of each day, we debriefed to discuss emerging themes to integrate edits and feedback to our interview guides as needed. At the end of the site visit, we held one final debrief to update the coding scheme based on the observed themes in the interviews. While coding interviews used this pre-established framework, we also used an inductive approach involving open and axial coding to allow new themes to emerge, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of qualitative information.

1 Baltimore Police Department Mid-Year Crime Report. 2024. Retrieved from: <https://www.baltimorepolice.org/news/baltimore-police-department-releases-2024-mid-year-crime-report-and-key-highlights#:~:text=Arrests%20are%20up%2013%25%2C%20including,seven%20gun%20seizures%20a%20day>.

2 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach. SAMHSA Publication No. PEP23-06-05-005. Rockville, MD: National Mental Health and Substance Use Policy Laboratory. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2023.

Appendix



MISSION
Roca's mission is to be a relentless force to disrupt incarceration, poverty, and racism by engaging the young people and systems at the center of urban violence to address trauma, find hope, and drive change.

Culture is about embodying our values through our actions and behaviors.

Reducing urban violence and addressing trauma are fundamental to achieving racial and economic justice. At Roca, we are guided by our four core values, which frame our individual and organizational actions but also remind us of the privilege we hold in knowing and working alongside these resilient young people. Given all the challenges they live through, we have the responsibility to honor the trust and openness they share with us and to act with unwavering urgency.

Our commitment ensures we foster healing, equity, and justice, embodying the relentless force necessary for transformative change.

	COMPASSION	SAFETY	TRANSFORMATION	HONESTY
	Relentlessly serving others with empathy, love, and hope.	Prioritizing safety in every action and decision.	Programming that heals and empowers young people.	Building trust through support and accountability.
Young People	Demonstrate the belief that young people matter and can change.	Apply harm reduction and real-time safety practices to ensure physical, emotional, and psychological well-being.	Implement Roca Model and teach/practice Rewire CBT.	Be honest and provide support in facing and overcoming difficult challenges.
Staff	Support each other, especially during challenging situations.	Utilize the safety policies, keep the team and space safe so we can engage with young people.	Model growth for young people. Pursue learning and personal development related to the Roca Model.	Bring accountability and transparency to all aspects of the work and organization.
Partners, Family & Community	Show empathy for others' experiences and respect their diverse roles and perspectives.	Promote "Safety First" and work with everyone who can help.	Work together to improve safety protocols and foster systemic change.	Maintain honesty and actively engage in addressing complex challenges to promote change.