

# THE BALTIMORE SUN

## How Roca's intervention program is helping drive Baltimore's homicide decline

Former participants now help mentor young men navigating trauma, retaliation and gun violence



Mayor Brandon Scott, is flanked by, Justin Fowlkes, left, and Sheldon Smith-Gray, right, both Roca participants and now Roca staff members, as they talk about the impact of Roca in the city. Roca Baltimore holds a seven-year update event to discuss the positive gains that the program has made throughout the city. Roca is a violence intervention and behavioral health program for the young people most likely to shoot or be shot. (Lloyd Fox/Staff)

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Roca, a [gun violence intervention](#) and behavioral health program, has seen significant results since the Massachusetts-based organization arrived in Maryland in 2018.

Over the last seven years, 69% of Roca Maryland's 734 participants have had no new arrests since entering the program, and 87% have had no new incarcerations. As Baltimore sees a historic decrease in homicides, violence prevention organizations such as Roca are helping prevent further gun violence among young men.

During the release of its seven-year impact report Thursday, Roca representatives discussed the program's use of cognitive behavioral therapy, job training and partnerships with the [Baltimore Police Department](#), the City of Baltimore and the Maryland Department of Juvenile Services to prevent gun violence among young men ages 16 to 24.

Kurtis Palermo, executive vice president of Roca Maryland, said the After Shooting Protocol — a collaboration with Baltimore Police — is a significant factor in reaching young men involved in gun violence. Palermo helped start the Roca Maryland chapter in 2018 with Roca founder and CEO Molly Baldwin.

"We're on our way to a historic landmark here for homicides in this city," Palermo said. "We are a small part of a bigger solution, but I truly believe that the After Shooting Protocol has moved the needle on these young people who have been shot from being revictimized or being homicide victims."



Mayor Brandon Scott listens as Sheldon Smith-Gray, right, a former Roca participant and now a Roca staff member talks about the impact of Roca in the city. Roca Baltimore holds a seven-year update event to discuss the positive gains that the program has made throughout the city. Roca is a violence intervention and behavioral health program for the young people most likely to shoot or be shot. (Lloyd Fox/Staff)

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After a shooting event, Baltimore Police contact Roca to get them in contact with young people who were shot within 72 hours.

Roca employees then reach out to the victim, offering safety, housing and other essentials before inviting them to participate in the program. Roca also receives reports of shootings and meets with Baltimore Police once a month.

Referrals are also made through the [Maryland Department of Juvenile Services](#) for young people with criminal charges involving gun violence.

The Roca program lasts three years, but participants may reenter if they are arrested or must leave Roca's coverage area.

Participants also enter a transitional employment program, where they learn job readiness and build habits such as waking up early and arriving to work on time.

Palermo said it is imperative that Roca reaches victims immediately, recalling one referral who was killed within two days of being shot the first time.

“We’re talking about young people of concern with a sense of urgency, not, “Hey this is Kurt, he needs some help we’ll get to him next week”” Palermo said. “No, this is Kurt and if you don’t go to his house in 24 hours, he might not make it.”

Sheldon Smith-Gray, a Roca staff member and former participant, said he once viewed guns as “fun,” influenced by music videos before entering Roca.

He said Roca helped him turn his life around after he was shot alongside his cousin, who died. Smith-Gray said he had “evil intentions” for revenge while he was in the hospital, devastated by the loss of his family member. Roca’s cognitive behavioral therapy helped him rethink that impulse. Now, he helps other young men find the same clarity and avoid violence.

“It was probably fun up until I got locked up with one; then it ain’t as fun as I thought it was because I had to go to jail for it,” Smith-Gray said. “I’ve been shot, and I know we need to put the guns down now.”



Molly Baldwin, founder & CEO of Roca, Inc., speaks at the seven-year update event to discuss the positive gains that the program has made throughout the city. Roca is a violence intervention and behavioral health program for the young people most likely to shoot or be shot. (Lloyd Fox/Staff)

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A crucial aspect of the Roca program is Rewire CBT, which teaches participants to avoid impulsive actions by pausing eight to 12 seconds before reacting.

The nonclinical approach helps young people understand how their feelings influence their actions and how those actions can affect their goals, families and friends.

“I’ve actually been applying CBT to my life, and I’m engaging in it more now with my relationship with my family and my relationships with my clients,” Roca employee and former participant Justin Fowlkes said. “It gives me a better understanding of how, or why, things are the way they are.”

The city is seeing another significant drop in homicides compared with recent years, with 127 homicides in 2025 as of Dec. 4, down from 194 in 2024, 245 in 2023 and 322 in 2022. These numbers reflect the city’s updated method for reporting historical

homicides under the FBI's National Incident-Based Reporting System, a change that was announced Thursday.

Mayor Brandon Scott, who had [a public spat](#) this week with Baltimore City State's Attorney Ivan Bates over the city's crime-fighting strategy, said Baltimore has not seen a stretch of homicide reduction like this in decades. He credited the collaborative efforts of Roca, Baltimore Police and the city's Group Violence Reduction Strategy.

"There is no one thing; we have to do all the things all the time," Scott said. "Every part of the comprehensive strategy matters because we cannot outweigh one over the other."