

## Jobs, therapy and trust: Inside Baltimore's Roca violence-prevention program

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PUBLISHED: December 27, 2025 at 5:00 AM EST | UPDATED: January 2, 2026 at 5:30 PM EST

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As [Roca employee](#) Daquan Ross backed his car into a parking spot at Rocky Point Beach, more than a dozen young men swarmed toward him, hoodies pulled tight against the wind and gloves waving. They slapped the car windows, yelling, “Yo, what’s up, bro?” and “You late, bro!”

Ross just laughed. He was late — and they all knew it. Their lunch was in the back seat.

After rounds of handshakes and hugs, Ross placed boxes of Domino’s pizza and a couple of 2-liter sodas on a picnic table. The men, participants in Roca’s Transitional Employment Program, quickly gathered around. For Ross, feeding “the guys,” as he calls them, is part of the rhythm of his job: showing up every day for young adults who rarely have people showing up for them.

Roca is a part of Baltimore’s [Group Violence Reduction Strategy](#), a partnership between the city, Baltimore Police, the State’s Attorney’s Office and other youth advocacy programs that redirects young people involved in violent or criminal situations to programs like Roca to help them rehabilitate.

# A three-year bet on change

[Founded in Massachusetts](#) in 1988 and launched in Baltimore in 2018, Roca works with people ages 16 to 24 who have faced chronic trauma, street violence and arrest. It's a long-term effort — a three-year program that mixes relentless outreach, cognitive behavioral therapy and transitional work.

The model has shown early promise in Baltimore. Of the 734 participants since 2018, 69% have had [no new arrests](#) and 87% have avoided new incarcerations, according to the organization.

There's "so much going on in these young men's life where I just tell them I appreciate them for pushing through," Ross said. "Your brain isn't even finished developing yet. You're going to do stuff you don't really understand the consequences of."

Ross and his colleagues spend their days coaching participants through choices big and small — avoiding a party that might turn violent, showing up to a job site at 7 a.m., learning how to work alongside people they've never met or might not like.

"Being an adult, you might not like everything you have to do," Ross said. "But you have to do it to keep going and pay the bills. So the transitional employment program is really to show these guys how to deal with other co-workers that come from every walk of life like East Baltimore, West Baltimore, South Baltimore, different areas that sometimes they don't get along with."

## Meeting them where they are

Before the pizza run in Essex, Ross made several house calls — reaching out to clients on his caseload.

One stop was the home of Jakwon, 19, a high school senior who stayed home to take care of a younger family member that day. Ross arrived with McDonald's and settled in on the couch next to Jakwon, who had NBA 2K26 running on the TV.

Ross has worked with him for four months, ever since Jakwon was referred to Roca following an arrest.

“Right now, the main thing is really just graduating and getting a job,” Jakwon said.

Jakwon recently witnessed a gunshot surgery as part of a violence-prevention program. The experience changed his perspective on guns, although he said he knew they weren’t a laughing matter before witnessing the surgery.

Roca’s work centers on what it calls Rewire CBT — a version of cognitive behavioral therapy that teaches participants to move from “bottom brain” survival thinking to “top brain” decision-making driven by long-term values.



Daquan Ross, Roca staff member, said he joined the violence prevention organization to help Baltimore's young men in a hands-on manner. Daquan regularly checks on clients on his case load daily to keep track of their progress. (Chevall Pryce/Staff)

## ‘I took the eight-second pause’

Later that afternoon, Ross headed back toward the Roca office with 23-year-old participant Malik. Malik said he realized how committed the staff were to him after he suffered a seizure. Two of the first people he saw in the hospital were Roca’s director, Tyrone Kent, and executive vice president Kurtis Palermo.

“Brother Kurt and brother Ty were right there,” Malik said. “First thing they asked me was, ‘How are you feeling? Are you good?’”

Malik hopes to earn his commercial driver’s license, but he’s also learning to navigate old neighborhood tensions. He recalled one afternoon at Lexington Market when men from his neighborhood approached a Roca co-worker from a rival area.

His instincts kicked in — then so did the [CBT tactics](#) he was taught through Roca.

“I was in my bottom brain, but I took the eight-second pause, you feel me?” Malik said. “I’ve got to act on my values. I provide for my family. That’s street business. Leave it in the streets. I’m at work.”

## Values on a flash card

Ross’s final stop of the day was driving 25-year-old Rico home from his work shift. Rico, who has been enrolled in Roca multiple times, said he learned valuable lessons about staying out of violent confrontations within his neighborhood and beyond.

In the passenger seat, Rico flipped through the deck of Rewire CBT flash cards every staff member carries.

He tapped one labeled “Act on your values.”

“This is my favorite one,” he said. “This helps you a lot from crashing out. Say I want to go do something to somebody, but I got my kids and my mother I look after. So I can’t go do it. Because I have to act on my values.”