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Roca to add 400 Baltimore-area clients after $1M federal grant

Kurt Palermo, executive director of Roca Maryland, Congressman Kweisi Mfume and Roca Baltimore director Tyrone Kent. Mfume presented a $1 million appropriation to Roca on Monday to help the organizations crime reduction efforts. (Chevall Pryce/Staff)

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Before presenting Roca with $1,031,000 in appropriated federal funding to bolster its already proven violence reduction methods, U.S. Rep. Kweisi Mfume told the young men in the Roca program his story of struggling as a young man who fell into a lifestyle of crime in West Baltimore.

From watching his mother die in person, dropping out of school, and becoming a teen father to having an epiphany in front of a liquor store with two revolvers in his face, Mfume let the young men know he knew what types of decisions led them to Roca long before he became a congressman.

“I started running with gangs here in Baltimore on the west side on Pennsylvania Avenue,” Mfume said. “I ran with those gangs for as long as I could. I’ve been shot at, I’ve been stabbed, I’ve been beaten up in alleys. I know what it’s like. Trust me.”

The million-dollar appropriation to Roca, secured by Mfume and presented Monday, will help the organization further its mission, increasing its reach to 400 more clients and expanding training to law enforcement agencies and education professionals beyond Baltimore City to surrounding counties.

Roca employees reach out to young people involved in gun violence directly after an incident, offering an alternative to the lifestyle that led them to said violence.

Roca, originally founded in Massachusetts, uses tactics like cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT, to help its clients rethink situations before turning to violence, as well as a work program that teaches them work readiness and routines needed to succeed.

“We work with young people who are the highest risk of violence, those most likely to shoot or be shot, but we don’t give up on them,” Kurt Palermo, executive vice president of Roca in Maryland, said. “At a time when federal funding and support for community violence intervention is uncertain or even pulled back, this partnership matters even more.”

Baltimore had a string of shootings this past weekend, though none of the shootings appeared to involve young people, who are Roca’s main demographic. Baltimore also had 133 homicides last year, the lowest total for the city in 50 years.

The funds will be used to train youth, law enforcement officials, and educational professionals in how to support behavioral change with emotional regulation techniques like cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT, which is central to Roca’s strategy.

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Within the 2025 fiscal year, Roca worked with 354 high-risk youths, 84% of whom were involved in gang activity, and 77% that had no work experience. Of Roca participants who were engaged for 18 months or more, 98% reported seeing an improvement in their behavioral health.

Out of Roca's total of 2,300 outreach efforts, 70% of the group's clients have been retained. Of those involved with Roca for 24 months or more, 84% had no new arrests and were overall 19% less likely to be arrested again.

"These young men are often written off — but not here," Tyrone Kent, director of Roca Baltimore, said. "What makes this work different is how we show up. … We teach something simple but powerful: Pause, even 10 to 12 seconds can disrupt an automatic reaction."

Khiree Oliver, who finished the Roca program himself, said the employees pushed him to try harder after he had almost dropped out of the program due to a lack of attendance. As he continues to build a career with Maryland Transit Authority, he told Mfume that he relates to his connection with his mother.

"I didn't know what I wanted for myself as far as just making something happen," Oliver said. "I had to humble myself, start relying on people, and start to accept help from people. That's when I started to rewire with CBT, as y'all can see, and I started to understand things differently."