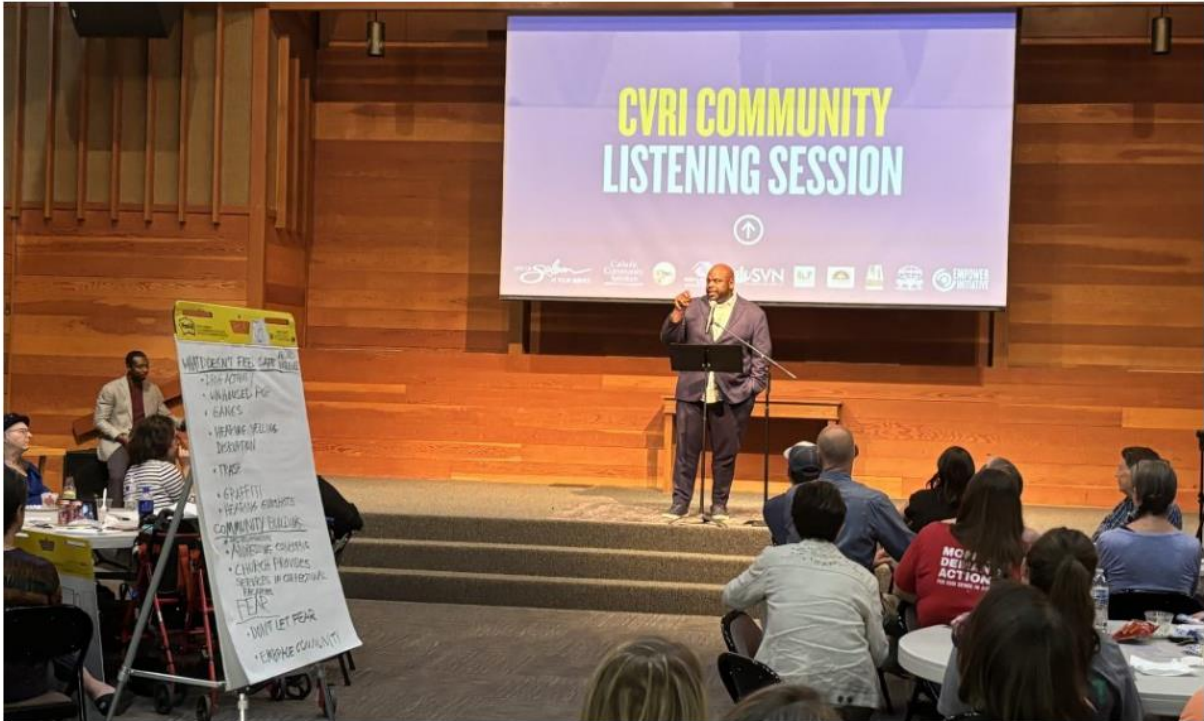


August 23, 2024



Ben McBride, CEO and co-founder of the Empower Initiative, addresses a full house at the Salem Alliance Church on Thursday. He spoke during the fifth and final listening session on community violence reduction conducted by the city since last March (Joe Siess/Salem Reporter)

After listening for months, city sets to work on anti-violence strategy

One tactic to reduce gun violence in Salem would be to gather those at risk together with community leaders to talk, a consultant explained Thursday.

Such an approach has worked elsewhere, according to Ben McBride, CEO and co-founder of the Empower Initiative. He's been retained by the city of Salem to help tap into community sentiments about gun violence and frame a strategy to pull down the number of shootings.

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McBride moderated the fifth in a series of community meetings conducted by the city since last March. Now, the consultant and city officials are expected to propose what the community should do to counter violence that has escalated in recent years, especially in parts of east Salem.

Around 130 people gathered at Salem Alliance Church for the city's final Community Violence Reduction Initiative listening session. The group included city officials such as Police Chief Trevor Womack, leaders of Salem nonprofits and local citizens.

They listened as McBride outlined what he termed the "call-in tactic" that might work in Salem.

That involves bringing the individuals most likely to shoot someone or to be shot themselves together.

"We sit them down at the table – people who may have been shooting at each other or in conflict with one another," McBride explained. "At that same meeting we have a mother who has lost her child to violence. We have law enforcement there. We usually have the district attorney there. We have faith leaders there. We have folks who used to be involved in the violence who have changed their lives there."

The discussion usually occurs in a church, McBride said.

He said this tactic leads to seven out of 10 at-risk individuals changing their lives.

Now that the sessions are finished, it will be up to community leaders to decide on what tactics to use in Salem. City officials have insisted their plans will heed community opinions and involve a variety of organizations.

One organization has already acted.

The Oak Park Church of God recently hosted a community peace walk, which involves community members walking through at-risk neighborhoods.

"I live, work and worship in east Salem and I care deeply about the neighborhood, said Abbey Ingalls, pastor of community engagement at Oak Park. She said she attended early meetings on violence reduction "just for the sake of my neighborhood and my family."

Ingalls said Oak Park Church is still testing the right model for the peace walks. She said she hopes there will be more collaboration with leaders from the city's Latino community.

Ingalls said she has high hopes for the program.

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“I feel like there are enough leaders and pastors and community members who care enough about this that they are not going to let it go,” Ingells said. “They are going to continue to work. Whether they join our peace walk, or do their own thing.”

The church will put on a second peace walk at 7 p.m. Thursday Aug. 29. The walk will begin with a 15-minute training session in the parking lot of the Big Lots at 2025 Lancaster Dr. N.E.

McBride said the initiative’s success relies on the city employing a coordinator to move the program forward. Having plans is only one piece.

“All of that is well and good but it won’t effectively work until you have a full-time position that’s going to actually root for this strategy,” McBride said. “That is the position that the city is going to be hiring. And it’s that position that is absolutely key to the success of this implementation.”

Courtney Knox Busch, the city’s strategic initiatives manager, told Salem Reporter that the city is still working to hire for the role.

McBride said the next step in the violence reduction process is engaging community leaders like Ingalls who are willing and able to put the plan into action. He said there is also interest from the Salem-Keizer School District and the Willamette Health Council. He said the Salem Leadership Foundation, which has been regularly involved in the initiative, has taken steps forward as well.

“Really what this summer has been about is trying to create the atmosphere to answer that very question. Who is ready? Who wants to do more than just talk about it? Who wants to do more than just complain to the police department?” McBride said.

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