

Lessons from Pennsylvania's Violence Intervention Programs (VIPs)

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About This Brief

In 2021 and 2022, the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency (PCCD) funded nearly 200 Violence Intervention and Prevention (VIP) programs across the Commonwealth as part of a statewide investment in community violence intervention. Between 2023 and 2025, NORC at the University of Chicago and Temple University conducted a mixed-methods evaluation to better understand how these programs were implemented, the factors that supported and challenged implementation, and lessons learned during the early years of the initiative. The evaluation included a survey of all 185 grants awarded to 157 organizations, followed by an in-depth process evaluation of a stratified random sample of 40 VIP-funded programs that included performance measurement data, interviews, and focus groups.

This brief summarizes key findings and practitioner insights from the evaluation, highlighting lessons learned during the early implementation of the VIP initiative and practical insights that may be useful to organizations implementing violence prevention and intervention programs in Pennsylvania and beyond.

Introduction

Gun violence continues to pose a significant threat to safety, health, and well-being across Pennsylvania and communities nationwide. In response, states and local jurisdictions have increasingly invested in community violence intervention (CVI) strategies designed to interrupt cycles of violence, support individuals and families at highest risk, and strengthen community safety through prevention, intervention, and healing-centered approaches.

The VIP initiative represents one of Pennsylvania's largest investments in community violence intervention and prevention. The programs included in this evaluation reflected a diverse range of

approaches, including community-based violence intervention, hospital-based violence intervention, school-based prevention programming, mentoring, workforce development, case management, behavioral health supports, and community engagement efforts. While these programs varied in structure, target populations, and service models, many shared common implementation experiences, successes, and challenges.

The lessons presented in this brief draw on findings from a mixed-methods evaluation of Pennsylvania's VIP initiative conducted between 2023 and 2025. The evaluation began with a survey of all 185 grants awarded to 157 organizations during the 2021 and 2022 funding cycles. Because it was not feasible to

examine every grantee in depth, the evaluation team then selected a stratified random sample of 40 programs for a more intensive process evaluation.¹ This deeper examination included analysis of performance measurement data submitted to PCCD, 133 interviews with executive leaders, program managers, frontline staff, and key stakeholders, and 12 focus groups with program participants.² Together, these data provide both a broad understanding of the statewide VIP portfolio and a more detailed picture of how violence prevention and intervention programs were implemented across Pennsylvania.

These findings should be understood within the context of programs in the early stages of implementation. At the time these initial grants were awarded, many elements of the initiative, including administrative guidance, performance measurement systems, and technical assistance supports, were new and in the process of being refined by PCCD. As a result, program experiences reflect both the opportunities and challenges associated with launching and scaling a complex statewide violence prevention effort. The lessons that emerged are valuable both because they highlight what worked and because they capture how organizations adapted, learned, and evolved during the initiative's formative years.

This brief highlights six key lessons that emerged from the data collected across the 40 grantees, and particularly from in-depth interviews with VIP program leaders, managers, frontline staff, and key stakeholders. These lessons offer practical insights into how organizations built strong foundations, adapted to changing circumstances, developed trusted relationships, supported healing, cultivated partnerships, and worked to sustain their efforts over time. The lessons are not presented in order of importance; rather, they reflect interconnected themes that consistently emerged across programs and collectively contributed to violence prevention and intervention efforts. While every community and program operates within a unique context, the experiences of VIP grantees provide valuable insights for organizations seeking to strengthen violence prevention and intervention efforts across Pennsylvania and beyond.

Table 1. What We Learned from Pennsylvania's VIP Programs

Lesson	Key Finding	Practice Implication
Strong Programs are Built on Strong Foundations	Staffing and infrastructure shape implementation success	Invest in organizational capacity alongside direct services
Adaptability Is a Core Implementation Strategy	Successful programs adapted to changing needs and circumstances	Build flexibility into implementation
Relationships are the Foundation of Violence Prevention	Trust and credibility drive engagement	Prioritize relationship-centered approaches
Healing-Centered and Holistic Supports Matter	Addressing broader participant needs supports engagement and healing	Consider participants' needs comprehensively
Partnerships Expand Capacity and Impact	Collaboration across organizations increases reach but requires investment	Treat partnerships as a core strategy
Sustaining the Work Requires Investing in People and Systems	Long-term impact depends on workforce and organizational capacity	Invest in staff, systems, and learning

Lessons Learned

LESSON 1. STRONG PROGRAMS ARE BUILT ON STRONG FOUNDATIONS

WHY THIS MATTERS

Violence intervention and prevention programs often focus on the services they provide, but successful implementation depends on the people, systems, and resources that support those services. In this study, organizations consistently emphasized that staffing, organizational infrastructure, and

participant supports were critical to delivering high-quality programming, maintaining participant engagement, and sustaining services over time.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Across VIPs, three foundational needs consistently emerged: qualified staff, functional organizational infrastructure, and resources that reduce barriers to participant engagement. Programs frequently described trusted staff as their most valuable asset, emphasizing the importance of retaining experienced personnel who had established credibility within the community and strong relationships with participants. Organizations also highlighted the importance of administrative and operational systems, including supervision structures, technology, data systems, and financial management processes, that enabled programs to function effectively behind the scenes. Finally, grantees consistently emphasized the importance of participant supports that helped individuals access services and remain engaged.

Implementation experiences also varied based on organizational maturity and program goals. Newer programs often used funding to establish staffing structures, develop operational systems, and build foundational capacity, while more established organizations focused on maintaining staffing, strengthening existing services, or expanding programming. Across program types, organizations emphasized that effective implementation required investments not only in direct services, but also in the infrastructure needed to support them.

By the Numbers

- **30% of programs reported implementing all proposed staffing, technology, space, and program investments as planned.**
- **Only one program reported being unable to implement any of its proposed activities.**

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Programs described a variety of ways they strengthened the foundation needed to support implementation:

- Retaining trusted staff who were viewed as essential to participant engagement, community credibility, and continuity of care.

- Investing in administrative systems, technology, and operational infrastructure that allowed programs to manage services more effectively.
- Using funding to create new staffing positions, particularly in newer organizations that were building programs from the ground up.
- Providing transportation assistance, transit passes, rideshare support, mileage reimbursement, or flexible stipends to reduce barriers to participation.
- Strengthening supervision and management structures to support staff and improve program coordination.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

The experiences of VIP grantees suggest that strong implementation begins with strong organizational foundations. Programs may benefit from regularly assessing whether they have the staffing, supervision, operational infrastructure, and participant supports necessary to sustain services over time. While these investments may be less visible than direct programming, they often determine whether organizations can engage participants consistently, respond to emerging needs, and maintain service quality.

Technical assistance, peer learning opportunities, and capacity-building resources can also help organizations build internal capacity by strengthening organizational systems, enhancing administrative capacity to support staff and manage workloads, addressing implementation challenges, and promoting continuous improvement. Many programs described learning from peers and drawing on external expertise as valuable strategies for building organizational capacity and supporting long-term success.

LESSON 2. ADAPTABILITY IS A CORE IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

WHY THIS MATTERS

Violence intervention and prevention programs operate in dynamic environments where participant needs, staffing capacity, institutional conditions, and community priorities can shift rapidly. As a result, implementation rarely unfolds exactly as planned. Programs must balance fidelity to their goals with

the flexibility needed to respond to changing circumstances and emerging opportunities.

WHAT WE LEARNED

One of the strongest findings from the study was that successful implementation required both a clear implementation plan and the flexibility to adapt that plan in response to real world conditions.

Across the VIP portfolio, adaptability emerged as a core implementation strategy that allowed programs to sustain services, deepen impact, and overcome barriers while remaining focused on their intended goals. Rather than viewing adaptation as a departure from program design, many organizations treated it as a necessary component of effective implementation.

Programs adapted in response to a variety of challenges, including staffing shortages, institutional constraints, scheduling disruptions, and participant needs that were more complex or intensive than originally anticipated. In many cases, adaptations strengthened services by allowing organizations to better align programming with community needs and operating realities. These findings suggest that implementation success was often defined not by rigid adherence to a proposal, but by an organization's ability to learn, adjust, and respond while maintaining its core mission.

By the Numbers

- Among programs that did not fully implement their original plans, the largest share implemented between 60% and 80% of planned activities, often adapting activities to respond to changing needs and circumstances.
- 30% of programs that partially implemented their original plans also expanded services beyond what was originally proposed.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Programs adapted to challenges and opportunities in a variety of ways:

- Organizations experiencing staffing shortages redistributed responsibilities, modified schedules, or developed new

staffing structures to maintain service continuity.

- School-based programs adjusted cohort schedules, shifted between in-school and after-school formats, and modified activities when access to classrooms or students changed.
- Hospital-based programs adapted outreach and follow-up strategies to align with clinical workflows, patient stabilization timelines, and discharge processes.
- Programs expanded services after discovering that participant needs were more intensive than anticipated, adding case management, behavioral health supports, mentoring opportunities, leadership activities, and outreach efforts.
- Organizations modified meeting structures, partnership strategies, and service delivery approaches to better respond to local conditions and participant feedback.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Adaptation should be viewed as a normal and often necessary part of implementation. Programs may benefit from creating structures that support ongoing reflection, participant feedback, and continuous improvement. Regularly assessing what is working, where challenges exist, and how community needs are evolving can help organizations remain responsive while maintaining fidelity to their mission and intended outcomes.

Organizations may also benefit from leveraging technical assistance, peer learning opportunities, and communities of practice to learn how other programs have navigated similar implementation challenges. Sharing lessons learned and promising adaptations can help programs respond more effectively to changing conditions while avoiding common pitfalls. Experiences from VIP grantees show that flexibility does not have to compromise fidelity; rather, it is often critical to sustain implementation over time.

LESSON 3. RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE FOUNDATION OF VIOLENCE PREVENTION

WHY THIS MATTERS

Violence intervention and prevention programs are built on human relationships. Whether programs focus on prevention, intervention, mentoring, outreach, hospital response, or case management, participants must first trust the people offering support. Across the study, organizations consistently emphasized that relationships were not simply a tool for delivering services, they were often the mechanism through which change occurred.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Trusted, community-rooted, and authentic relationships emerged as one of the strongest facilitators of program success. Organizations described trust as the foundation upon which engagement, participation, and long-term outcomes were built. Staff credibility, cultural alignment, community connections, and lived experience often helped establish the trust necessary for participants and families to engage in services. Practitioners emphasized that these qualities are not easily replicated or replaced; rather, effective violence prevention work depends on staff who possess a unique combination of lived experience, community credibility, established local relationships, and the ability to engage individuals and families facing complex challenges. Together, these specialized skills and attributes were viewed as essential to building trust, fostering sustained engagement, and supporting positive participant outcomes.

Programs emphasized that trust was earned through consistency, reliability, and genuine investment in participants' well-being. Rather than viewing relationship-building as a preliminary step before service delivery, organizations described it as an ongoing process that remained central throughout participants' involvement in the program. Across settings, staff served as mentors, advocates, connectors, and trusted sources of support during both moments of crisis and periods of stability.

Trust also emerged as an important, though often underdeveloped, component of family and community engagement. Programs noted that families were more likely to engage when organizations maintained a visible presence, demonstrated reliability, and responded to immediate needs. Similarly, community engagement efforts were often most successful when they were grounded in long-standing relationships, consistent

community presence, and a demonstrated commitment to local priorities.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Programs described several strategies that helped build trust and strengthen relationships:

- Hiring credible messengers, outreach workers, mentors, and advocates who shared lived experiences or community connections with participants.
- Maintaining a consistent presence in neighborhoods, schools, hospitals, and community spaces, even during periods of lower participation.
- Following through on commitments and remaining available during moments of crisis or disengagement.
- Meeting immediate needs, such as transportation, food, clothing, or resource navigation, as a way of demonstrating care and building credibility.
- Creating opportunities for participants and families to share feedback, shape programming, and contribute to decision-making.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Programs may benefit from viewing relationship-building as a core intervention strategy rather than a supporting activity. Staffing models, caseload expectations, supervision practices, and program design should recognize the time and effort required to build and maintain trust with participants, families, and communities.

Organizations may also consider how participant voice and community input are incorporated into program operations. Building trust is not a one-time activity but an ongoing process that requires consistency, transparency, and responsiveness. The experiences of VIP grantees suggest that strong relationships create the foundation upon which engagement, healing, and long-term impact are built.

LESSON 4. HEALING-CENTERED AND HOLISTIC SUPPORTS MATTER

WHY THIS MATTERS

Many individuals and families impacted by violence face challenges that extend beyond a single incident

or immediate crisis. Experiences of violence often intersect with trauma, housing instability, food insecurity, behavioral health needs, family stress, educational challenges, and other barriers that affect well-being and long-term stability. As a result, violence prevention and intervention efforts frequently require approaches that address the whole person and, in many cases, the broader family and community context.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Programs consistently emphasized the importance of healing-centered, trauma-informed, and holistic approaches to service delivery. Rather than focusing solely on violence-related outcomes, organizations described supporting participants through a range of needs, including transportation, food, clothing, housing, education, employment, behavioral health, and family stability. Staff frequently noted that addressing these immediate needs helped create the conditions necessary for deeper engagement and longer-term progress. Healing-centered approaches were closely tied to programs' ability to respond flexibly to participant needs while fostering safety, belonging, and resilience.

The study also found that trauma-informed care was often viewed as an ongoing process rather than a fully institutionalized organizational practice. While many programs expressed a strong commitment to trauma-informed principles, respondents frequently described implementation as aspirational and evolving. Organizations noted that translating trauma-informed values into consistent practice required staff training, supportive supervision, organizational policies, and leadership commitment that were not always fully developed or consistently available across programs.

Programs also reported that access to trauma-informed training varied considerably. Some organizations had established opportunities for ongoing learning and reflection, while others relied on external training opportunities, discretionary funding, or individual staff initiative. Many respondents emphasized that training alone was insufficient without the broader organizational infrastructure needed to support trauma-informed practice over time. Staffing shortages, turnover, limited resources, and competing demands often made it difficult to sustain these efforts. As a result, while trauma-informed principles were widely

embraced across the VIP portfolio, the organizational capacity to fully operationalize them remained unevenly developed.

By the Numbers

- Among programs that discussed family engagement, approximately two-thirds emphasized that stabilizing caregivers and households was critical to stabilizing youth.
- Approximately 40% of programs who discussed providing trauma-informed and client-centered practices emphasized participant empowerment, agency, and voice as important components of healing and engagement.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Programs described a variety of ways they incorporated healing-centered and holistic supports into their work:

- Addressing immediate needs related to transportation, food, clothing, housing, and resource navigation before expecting participants to engage in longer-term programming.
- Providing trauma-informed case management, mentoring, counseling referrals, grief support, conflict mediation, and behavioral health services.
- Creating safe and predictable environments where participants could build relationships, develop skills, and experience a sense of belonging.
- Working with caregivers and family members following violent incidents to provide emotional support, resource connections, and assistance navigating schools, healthcare systems, and community services.
- Incorporating participant voice into service planning and encouraging youth and families to help shape program activities and priorities.
- Investing in trauma-informed training, reflective supervision, staff wellness efforts,

and organizational learning processes to strengthen trauma-informed practice over time.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

The experiences of VIP grantees suggest that violence prevention efforts are effective when they address the broader circumstances affecting participants and families. Programs may benefit from considering how immediate needs, trauma exposure, family dynamics, and community conditions influence engagement and outcomes. Building strong referral networks, strengthening family engagement practices, and creating opportunities for participant and family voice can help support more comprehensive and responsive service delivery.

The findings also suggest that trauma-informed care should be viewed as an organizational capacity-building effort rather than a one-time training activity. While training remains important, sustaining trauma-informed practice often requires supportive supervision, staff wellness efforts, organizational policies, leadership commitment, and opportunities for reflection and continuous learning. Programs may benefit from leveraging technical assistance, peer learning opportunities, and capacity-building resources to strengthen these systems over time and move trauma-informed principles from aspiration to consistent practice.

LESSON 5. PARTNERSHIPS EXPAND CAPACITY AND IMPACT

WHY THIS MATTERS

Violence prevention and intervention programs operate within complex systems that often include schools, hospitals, behavioral health providers, workforce development agencies, victim service organizations, probation departments, law enforcement, and community-based organizations. Because no single organization can meet all participant needs, partnerships are often essential to connecting individuals and families to comprehensive supports and ensuring continuity of care.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Across interviews, partnerships emerged as a critical component of program implementation. Programs consistently described partnerships as a

primary mechanism for participant recruitment, referrals, service coordination, and access to resources that organizations could not provide independently. For many grantees, partnerships expanded service capacity, strengthened referral pathways, and helped participants navigate multiple systems of care.

Partnerships often functioned differently across program types. Intervention programs relied heavily on hospitals, justice agencies, victim service providers, and behavioral health partners to support crisis response, safety planning, and continuity of care. Prevention programs more commonly partnered with schools, youth-serving organizations, faith-based institutions, and community groups to support participant recruitment, engagement, and long-term development. Regardless of program model, organizations viewed collaboration as essential to achieving their goals.

At the same time, partnerships required substantial time, effort, and organizational capacity to build and maintain. Programs frequently described the administrative burden associated with coordinating referrals, attending meetings, negotiating data-sharing agreements, aligning protocols, and maintaining communication across agencies. Several organizations noted that partnership management often competed with direct service delivery for limited staff time and resources. Programs also described challenges related to differing organizational priorities, institutional requirements, leadership turnover, and changing partner capacity.

The study further found that power dynamics could influence partnership effectiveness. Community-based organizations sometimes described working within systems where larger institutions—including schools, hospitals, and justice agencies—controlled access to participants, resources, or decision-making processes. Data-sharing restrictions and confidentiality requirements also complicated collaboration, even when strong relationships existed between organizations. These findings suggest that while partnerships can significantly expand program impact, they also require intentional investment and ongoing attention.

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Programs described a variety of ways partnerships supported implementation:

- Working with schools to identify participants, coordinate services, and maintain engagement throughout the school year.
- Partnering with hospitals to facilitate bedside engagement, discharge planning, and connections to community-based services.
- Collaborating with behavioral health providers to increase access to counseling, trauma services, and mental health supports.
- Leveraging workforce development, housing, legal, and victim service partners to address participant needs beyond the scope of the program.
- Developing relationships with key champions inside partner organizations who helped facilitate referrals, communication, and problem-solving.
- Adjusting coordination structures over time, including moving from large collaborative meetings to smaller, task-focused workgroups to improve efficiency and responsiveness.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

The experiences of VIP grantees suggest that partnerships should be viewed as a core implementation strategy rather than an ancillary activity. Effective collaboration requires dedicated time, relationship-building, communication, and ongoing maintenance. Programs may benefit from establishing clear expectations with partners, identifying champions within collaborating organizations, and creating systems for regular communication and problem-solving.

Organizations should also recognize that partnerships involve navigating differences in organizational culture, priorities, resources, and authority. Building equitable and sustainable partnerships requires attention to power dynamics, mutual accountability, and shared goals. Technical assistance, peer learning opportunities, and communities of practice may provide useful strategies for strengthening collaboration and addressing common partnership challenges

LESSON 6. SUSTAINING THE WORK REQUIRES INVESTING IN PEOPLE AND SYSTEMS

WHY THIS MATTERS

Violence prevention and intervention work is inherently long-term. Building trust, supporting healing, strengthening communities, and reducing violence require sustained engagement over time. Yet many programs operate in environments characterized by funding uncertainty, staffing challenges, and increasing demands on organizational capacity. As a result, sustainability emerged as a central concern across the VIP portfolio.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Across interviews, organizations consistently described sustainability as both essential and difficult to achieve. Programs emphasized that sustaining violence prevention efforts requires more than securing funding; it also depends on retaining staff, maintaining organizational infrastructure, supporting workforce well-being, documenting impact, and adapting to changing community needs. Many organizations reported balancing the desire to expand services with the realities of limited resources and uncertain funding environments.

Staffing emerged as one of the most significant sustainability challenges. Programs consistently describe frontline staff as the backbone of violence prevention efforts because they build relationships, provide direct services, respond to crises, and maintain continuity for participants and families. However, organizations frequently report challenges related to recruitment, retention, burnout, and turnover, often linked to funding limitations and the emotional demands of the work.

The study also highlighted both the value and challenges of data collection across the VIP portfolio. While nearly all programs collected participation and demographic information to meet reporting requirements, many organizations also used participant feedback, surveys, focus groups, and internal data to inform program improvement efforts. At the same time, variations in reporting practices, evolving performance measurement requirements, and limited organizational capacity created challenges for collecting complete and consistent participant-level information. In some cases, substantial portions of demographic data

were missing or not reported, limiting the ability to fully assess who was being served and how participation varied across program types. These findings underscore the importance of building sustainable data collection systems that support both accountability and learning.

By the Numbers

- **60% of organizations discussed sustainability planning as a challenge in an environment characterized by funding uncertainty and changing grant opportunities.**
- **Staffing was the most consistently identified sustainability challenge across program types, with 50% of organizations emphasizing that retaining and supporting frontline staff is essential to sustaining violence prevention efforts.**

EXAMPLES FROM THE FIELD

Programs described a variety of strategies to strengthen sustainability and organizational capacity:

- Investing in staff wellness, reflective supervision, peer support, and professional development opportunities.
- Creating opportunities for staff to debrief after critical incidents and process the emotional demands of the work.
- Diversifying funding sources through local foundations, philanthropy, and other revenue streams to reduce dependence on a single funding source.
- Using participant feedback, surveys, and program data to inform continuous improvement efforts.
- Building stronger administrative systems, data infrastructure, and evaluation capacity to support long-term program growth.
- Prioritizing the maintenance of core services rather than pursuing rapid expansion when organizational capacity was limited.

- Sharing lessons learned and learning from peer organizations facing similar implementation challenges.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

The experiences of VIP grantees suggest that sustainability should be viewed as an ongoing organizational practice rather than a future planning exercise. While funding remains an important component of sustainability, organizations consistently emphasize that long-term impact also depends on investing in staff, organizational infrastructure, partnerships, and continuous learning. Programs may benefit from prioritizing workforce development, supportive supervision, staff wellness, and opportunities for reflection, recognizing that the people delivering services are among the most valuable assets in violence prevention and intervention work.

The findings also highlight the importance of building organizational systems that can support programs over time. Investments in administrative capacity, data infrastructure, evaluation practices, and operational processes can strengthen service delivery, improve organizational resilience, and position programs to respond effectively to changing conditions and funding environments. Programs may benefit from viewing these systems not as administrative requirements, but as essential components of effective implementation and long-term sustainability.

Data collection and evaluation efforts can play an important role in this process. Strengthening data collection practices, staff training, and internal systems may help improve the quality and completeness of information used to understand who is being served, identify service gaps, assess program reach, and demonstrate impact. While reporting requirements can create administrative burdens, high-quality data can also support program improvement, strengthen funding applications, and help organizations tell the story of their work more effectively.

Organizations may also benefit from leveraging technical assistance, peer learning opportunities, and capacity-building supports to strengthen internal systems, improve data practices, address implementation challenges, and plan for long-term sustainability. Throughout the study, practitioners emphasized the value of learning from peers,

sharing lessons learned, and exchanging strategies for navigating common challenges. Building sustainable violence prevention efforts requires not only strong programs, but also strong organizations capable of supporting those programs over time.

Learning from Peers: Practitioner Perspectives

The evaluation highlighted not only what programs learned through implementation, but also what practitioners would recommend to others engaged in violence prevention and intervention work. While many of these perspectives reinforce the key lessons presented throughout this brief, they also provide additional insight into how practitioners have translated those lessons into day-to-day practice. Drawing on the experiences of the first cohort of VIP-funded grantees, the perspectives presented below reflect practical wisdom grounded in implementation experience and shaped by the realities of serving communities affected by violence.

These perspectives are not intended to be ranked or interpreted as a checklist. Instead, they represent complementary lessons shared by practitioners based on their implementation experiences. Organizations may find that different recommendations are more or less relevant depending on their community context, program model, and stage of development. Together, they offer peer-informed insights that may help organizations strengthen implementation, build organizational capacity, and sustain violence prevention and intervention efforts over time.

BUILD TRUST AND CREDIBILITY

Practitioners consistently emphasized that trust is the foundation of effective violence prevention and intervention. Rather than being established through formal authority or credentials, trust was described as something earned through consistency, transparency, humility, and genuine care for participants and communities. Across program models, practitioners encouraged organizations to invest in long-term relationship building, maintain a consistent presence in the community, and follow through on commitments, recognizing that

credibility is built through everyday actions rather than a single interaction.

INVEST IN STAFF AND SYSTEMS

Practitioners emphasized that strong programs require investments in both people and organizational infrastructure. Staff development, supportive supervision, opportunities for reflection, and attention to staff wellness were viewed as essential to sustaining high-quality services and reducing burnout. Respondents also stressed the importance of building strong administrative systems, policies, and data infrastructure that enable organizations to adapt, learn, and sustain their work over time.

CENTER COMMUNITY AND PARTICIPANT VOICE

Programs encouraged organizations to design services with communities rather than for them. Practitioners emphasized listening to participants, families, and community members throughout program implementation and creating meaningful opportunities for them to shape programs and define success. Grounding decisions in lived experience was viewed as essential for ensuring that services remain relevant, responsive, and trusted by the communities they serve.

COLLABORATE RATHER THAN COMPETE

Practitioners described collaboration as a cornerstone of effective violence prevention and intervention. They encouraged organizations to build authentic partnerships, share knowledge and resources, and recognize the strengths that different partners bring to the work. Rather than competing for recognition or resources, respondents emphasized that sustained collaboration, transparency, and shared accountability produce stronger outcomes for participants and communities.

BE FLEXIBLE AND RESPONSIVE

Programs emphasized that successful implementation requires the ability to respond to changing participant needs, community priorities, and operating conditions. Rather than viewing adaptation as a departure from program goals, practitioners described flexibility as a hallmark of effective implementation. They encouraged organizations to regularly seek feedback, reflect on what is working, and make thoughtful adjustments

while remaining grounded in their mission and core values.

SUSTAIN THE WORK

Practitioners stressed that sustaining violence prevention and intervention efforts requires caring for both communities and the people doing the work. Respondents emphasized investing in staff wellness, strengthening organizational infrastructure, and pacing program growth to align with organizational capacity. Long-term impact was viewed as the result of sustained relationships, stable organizations, and a commitment to continuous learning rather than rapid expansion alone.

GROW WITH INTENTION

Practitioners noted that organizational needs evolve over time and that successful programs adapt as they mature. Newer organizations were encouraged to focus first on building strong foundations, while more established programs emphasized the importance of reflection, leadership development, and mentoring emerging organizations. Across the field, respondents encouraged organizations to remain open to learning, share their experiences with peers, and recognize that organizational growth is an ongoing process rather than a fixed destination.

Conclusion

The experiences of Pennsylvania's VIP grantees demonstrate both the promise and complexity of violence prevention and intervention work. Across diverse communities, program models, and organizational contexts, practitioners consistently emphasized the importance of strong relationships, adaptability, healing-centered approaches, community partnerships, and sustained investment in people and systems. While programs faced challenges related to staffing, funding, administrative requirements, and organizational capacity, they also demonstrated remarkable resilience, innovation, and commitment to the communities they serve.

Importantly, the findings presented in this brief emerged during the early years of Pennsylvania's statewide violence prevention initiative. Many organizations were simultaneously building new programs, strengthening infrastructure, navigating

evolving requirements, and responding to changing community needs. As a result, this brief reflects not only what programs accomplished, but also what they learned through implementation, reflection, and continuous adaptation.

Together, the six lessons and practitioner perspectives underscore that there is no single model for effective violence prevention and intervention. Rather, successful implementation depends on an organization's ability to build trust, remain responsive to community needs, invest in people and partnerships, strengthen organizational capacity, and adapt as circumstances evolve.

This brief was developed to support peer learning by sharing both the findings of the evaluation and the experiences of the practitioners who participated in it. As the field continues to evolve, continued collaboration, reflection, and knowledge sharing will remain essential to strengthening violence prevention efforts and building safer, healthier, and more resilient communities across Pennsylvania and beyond.

Endnotes

1. Because it was not feasible to conduct in-depth qualitative data collection with all 185 VIP-funded programs, the process evaluation included a stratified random sample of 40 programs. Programs were stratified by geographic location (Philadelphia vs. the remainder of Pennsylvania), grant size (less than \$500,000 vs. \$500,000 or more), and program type (prevention vs. intervention), resulting in eight strata. Five programs were randomly selected from each stratum, with no organization selected more than once, producing a balanced sample that reflected the diversity of VIP-funded programs. For this evaluation, prevention programs were defined as those that proactively addressed risk factors for violence and generally did not require person-based eligibility criteria, whereas intervention programs served individuals already identified as being at elevated risk for violence or recently impacted by violence and typically limited participation based on specific risk factors.
2. Qualitative findings are based on 133 semi-structured interviews conducted across the 40 participating programs, including 56 interviews with organizational leaders, 40 with program managers, and 37 with frontline staff. Interviews explored program implementation, services, partnerships, barriers and facilitators, trauma-informed practices, sustainability, and lessons learned. Interviews were conducted in person during site visits to 18 programs and virtually with 22 additional programs, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. Interview protocols were tailored to participants' roles within each organization; consequently, not all respondents were asked every question, and the number of responses varies across topics.

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We also extend our sincere appreciation to the VIP programs that generously shared their experiences, perspectives, and lessons learned. Their openness

and commitment made this evaluation possible. We are deeply grateful for the work they do each day to support individuals, families, and communities across Pennsylvania.

As one VIP grantee reflected, "We're not just responding to violence—we're building the conditions for peace."

For more information about the evaluation, the full evaluation report and other materials produced by the evaluation team, see [Evaluation of Pennsylvania Community Violence Intervention Programs | NORC at the University of Chicago](#)

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ABOUT NORC

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