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Residents get a chance to heal

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It's a war wound too hidden to show off, too close to tragedy to brag about.

Doctors were only able to remove one of the two bullets that lodged in 20-year-old Tommeik Harris' jaw when he was shot a little over four months ago.

But at Cooper University Hospital, Harris met an outreach worker -- a Camden resident not much older than himself -- who promised to help him recover even after his physical wounds had healed.

Harris became one of the first clients in a new initiative to help young victims of violence get their lives on track and keep out of harm's way.

Cooper launched the Guidance. Preservation. Support. -- or GPS -- program at the start of the year with a \$130,000 grant from the Nicholson Foundation. Since then, a full-time "intervention specialist" and other part-time staff have offered free assistance to 21 Camden residents who have come to the city's three hospitals with assault-related injuries.

Emergency room doctors at Cooper, Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center and Virtua-West Jersey Outpatient Emergency are all too aware of the high cost of crime in this troubled city.

Patients between the ages of 10 and 24 visited Camden hospitals 2,817 times for injuries related to assault from 2002 to June 2008. Altogether, the total charges for those visits added up to \$21 million. Hospitals collected less than seven percent of that, or about \$1.4 million. Government insurance or state charity care funds paid the rest.

"The cost is astronomical and a lot of these kids end up coming back and back and back," said Patty Vitale, a pediatric emergency room doctor at Cooper who oversees the GPS program.

Based on the data, 349 of the 2,391 victims -- or about 15 percent -- came to a hospital multiple times for assault during that 6 1/2-year period.

Vitale said those numbers are also "way undercounted," because hospital staff who code the type of injury often forget to indicate if it was the result of an assault.

Camden police count 264 victims of aggravated assault in the same age range since October. Twenty-eight were raped and 10 murdered.

Camden is not the first place to try to reach crime victims before they even leave the hospital.

A national directory lists 12 similar projects in Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Oakland, Calif., and other cities across the country.

Building on best practices from those programs, the GPS team put together a brochure and solicited

referrals from emergency room doctors. For now, they're only seeking patients up to age 24, though that could eventually expand.

"Those are the people you can really change their way of thinking and behavior," explained program coordinator Sue Liu. "Once you reach a certain age it's more a lifestyle instead of a distraction."

Once a doctor calls with a referral, Victor Murray, the program's only full-time staff member, visits the recovering patient in the hospital to pitch his assistance. It might seem invasive, he acknowledges, but sometime it's the only place he can reach them.

"They're reflecting now," he said. "This is an opportunity to take advantage of that."

So far, only six patients have turned Murray down, though others have signed up and not kept in contact.

His next challenge is getting them the services they need, whether a ride, a job, counseling, schooling or housing. He's even trolled the Internet to find free furniture for a client and borrowed a friend's truck to deliver it.

A staff member from the nonprofit Center for Family Services also works with him to connect patients to social services.

Despite the extraordinary amount of resources in Camden, Murray said it can still be tricky to find something appropriate or accessible. For example, there's only one youth psychologist in the city who takes GPS referrals, which means those who need counseling usually have to travel to the suburbs.

A battered audience

Much of Murray's time is spent calling and visiting clients. If he doesn't hear anything back, "It's time for a drive by."

Many of the clients landed in the hospital after being roughed up on their way home from school. One middle-schooler was beaten so badly, her leg broke. One took a bullet to the pelvis, another to his knee.

Often, the violent incidents are just one of many stressors for victims, Vitale said. Some have absentee parents or children of their own. Others have criminal records that keep them from getting a job. Another girl had an abortion and frequently cut herself.

Though only one patient has admitted to being in a gang, Vitale said she suspects not all of them are innocent victims. Others, like Harris and his brother Tyee, appear to have been random targets.

According to police reports, 21-year-old Tyee Harris had gone to the 36th Street RiverLINE Station to drop off diapers for his brother's son when a group of people picked a fight in the parking lot. A man shot him in the neck and then fired two bullets into the left side of Tommeik's face.

Tommeik's jaw was so swollen doctors couldn't operate for three weeks, said his mother, Faith Harris. As the brothers recovered, Murray made his pitch.

Having him there "gave them more confidence and stuff like that to keep going," Faith recalled. "It caused them not to be discouraged even though what happened to them was for no reason."

For her, Murray became a go-to person when she needed help finding a lawyer, making appointments or finding out what was going on with her sons.

"I can pick up the phone at any time and Victor's on it; it's no problem with this guy at all," Faith said. "I'm glad they ended up with a guy like him that really cares. And he's from Camden so he knows what it's like."

Police later charged Kuasheim Powell, 24, of Camden, with attempted murder in connection with the shooting. Powell -- who allegedly has gang ties -- also was charged with leading a group of nine other people who tortured and killed a Burlington County couple Feb. 22, one day after the shooting. The bodies were buried in the backyard of Powell's home on Berkley Street. Investigators do not believe the two incidents are connected.

After the brothers were discharged from the hospital, Murray continued to call them at least once a week. Since neither has a car, he drove them to doctor's visits and other appointments. Every so often, he drops by East Camden to visit Tommeik at the apartment he shares with his girlfriend and 1-year-old son.

"If I need to go somewhere, I'll just call him up and he'll just take me there," Tommeik Harris said. "He makes sure I go to my doctor's appointments, go to school; he reminds me of stuff."

Without someone to give him that positive attitude and support, Harris said, "I'd probably still be out running the streets, doing dumb stuff, hustling drugs."

That's been his life ever since he dropped out of school at age 17.

"I really had no support of anybody to help me," Harris said.

Today, he's preparing to start a GED program and land his first legal job. His brother, Tyee, is working at a grocery store in Delran.

Measuring success

Angel Osorio, community justice director of the Camden County Prosecutor's Office, said she's happy with more efforts to keep youth away from violence. Law enforcement agencies need "as many preventative intervention methods that they can (get) to tackle the issues that they are faced with," she added.

Murray keeps a log of how much time he spends with each patient and the gains they make. Sometimes, just getting a call back from an unresponsive parent is an accomplishment. The ultimate goal is to keep them from retaliation and reinjury.

"I try not to think of things in terms of success because then you've got to have failure, too," he explained.

But there are always bumps along the way. He points to Tommeik Harris, who fell victim to crime not long after he was shot, though this time with no injuries. Harris said he was robbed at gunpoint in June, again at the train tracks.

Despite that, Murray said the young man has stayed focused on the new direction his life is taking.

As his mother put it, he's "dead set on getting things right."

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Additional Facts

MORE INFORMATION

For more information about the Guidance. Preservation. Support. -- or GPS -- program operated by the Camden Coalition of Healthcare Providers, call (856) 298-0914 or e-mail camdengps@camdenhealth.org.
