

LOCAL

Wilmington group's anti-violence plan is adopted by Buncombe County. Is New Hanover next?



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Sokoto House has a saying: "Demonstrate to educate. Educate to liberate."

Now, some of the ideas coming out of the Wilmington community organization are beginning to gain traction both statewide and nationally. Recently, an anti-violence study co-authored by Sokoto House director Abdul Hafeedh bin Abdullah was adopted as the

official policy of Buncombe County's Justice Services division, which is using money from a \$2.5 million grant to implement it.

Next week, Sokoto House and some of the Wilmington organizations they work with are holding a symposium to explore and promote the ideas behind what they call a community-based public health response to violence. The hope is similar policies could be adopted in Wilmington and New Hanover County as a way of combating life-altering instances of violence locally, many of which disproportionately affect the Black community.

The Community-Based Public Health Response to Violence (CPrV) Symposium will be held 2-6 p.m. Monday, March 27, at the New Hanover County Arboretum Education Center on Oleander Drive. Attendance is free, but advance registration is required.

Abdullah, who runs his Quality Life Blueprint program out of Sokoto House headquarters on Dawson Street, said that Buncombe County, which is in western North Carolina, adopting the community-based public health response to violence model shows that "the work being done in Wilmington is notable and being recognized, and is being implemented around the country."

More: Sokoto House At Sokoto House in Wilmington, community healing is led by the community

The study, of which Abdullah, along with Dr. Colleen Barbero, is a primary co-author, bears a lengthy title: "Community Health Worker Activities in Public Health Programs to Prevent Violence: Coding Roles and Scope." Many of its findings have been adopted by the American Public Health Association out of Washington, D.C.

The basic idea behind the community health worker model comes from a Centers for Disease Control program that looked at violence and racism as a public health crisis. The approach involves training local leaders as community health workers, or CHWs, who learn to do the difficult work of addressing the violence and poverty born of decades of institutionalized racism and racist policies.

Sokoto House has trained numerous local leaders as CHWs in combating violence, Abdullah said.

"We have a huge opportunity to shift the culture of how our city operates," he said, by partnering with local government entities and community organizations. Given how

deeply entrenched the problem is, he said, even a best-case scenario is "not going to be a perfect situation. It's going to be a better situation."

There are plenty of success stories.



Sokoto House operations director Vance Williams, who has run his Advance Youth Outreach program in the Wilmington area for the past 15 years, said he recently advocated for a local high school student who faced several charges after an incident at school. After speaking with school and law enforcement officials and getting them to take into account such factors as economics, mental health and a root-cause analysis of the student's specific situation, the charges were deferred.

The student was suspended but not criminally charged, keeping him out of a justice system that, for many young Black men, leads into a downward spiral. Now, he regularly comes to Sokoto House after school to do his homework.

Dr. Mayra Overstreet-Galeano, Sokoto House board president and co-founder of Quality Life Blueprint, said that Wilmington and New Hanover County largely operate from "an antiquated model of criminalizing everything," one that is a proven failure when it comes to preventing violence.

Williams said that empowering community leaders to address and ideally pre-empt violence allows "experts in the field to take the lead ... I have the relationships. I have 18 years of doing this."

Government entities are notoriously slow-moving, he said, while community leaders "have the closeness. They can get to the people much more quickly."

"We are the short cut," Williams said. "The county doesn't need to reinvent the wheel."

Rachel Bodkin-Fox, director of programs for Quality Life Blueprint, said the upcoming symposium will focus in part on what the benefits of adopting a community-based health model to prevent violence might look like in Wilmington and New Hanover County. Some local entities, like Port City United, which has a 40-person staff and has a \$40 million budget from New Hanover County, use ideas associated with the community health worker model but haven't fully incorporated it as a guiding policy.

Bodkin-Fox said she's invited the Wilmington City Council and New Hanover County Commissioners to the symposium, as well as area justice and law enforcement officials.



Abdullah said he will be spending time with officials in Buncombe County, both virtually and in person, to help them implement the new policy, but notes that "all the evidence in that policy is based on work that we're doing here ... Buncombe County is looking to duplicate what we did here, with money behind it."

Among other topics, Sokoto House has programs educating the community on everything from healthy eating to ecology.



Sokoto House operates on a shoestring budget, but 80 percent of the \$2.5 million grant Buncombe County is using to implement the policy is going directly to community-based organizations, something Abdullah and Williams say is crucial for the program's success.

Abdullah acknowledges the irony of a county on the other side of the state adopting a policy developed largely in Wilmington. With Monday's symposium, he said, he wants "a clean slate. To start fresh with our city, our community leaders, professionals, and make something happen that will benefit the people who need it the most. Not as a favor. But because we can prove that it works."

WANT TO GO?

What: Community-Based Public Health Response to Violence (CPrV) Symposium

When: 2-6 p.m. Monday, March 27

Where: New Hanover County Arboretum Education Center, 6206 Oleander Drive,
Wilmington

Info: Presentations from 2-5 p.m., with refreshments from Catch and conversation from
5-6 p.m. Attendance is free, but advance registration is required.

Details: Register at <https://tinyurl.com/cprv-symposium>