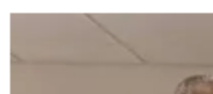


LOCAL

From 'yard talk' to trust, how a Wilmington group quietly combats violence

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Updated April 25, 2025, 8:03 a.m. ET



Employees of Coastal Horizons and other groups who took the community health worker/violence prevention professional training from Wilmington community organization Sokoto House. PROVIDED BY SOKOTO HOUSE

Key Points AI-assisted summary

- Sokoto House, a Wilmington program, graduated 20 community health workers/violence-prevention professionals.
- The program, led by Abdul Hafeedh bin Abdullah, trains individuals in conflict de-escalation and violence prevention techniques.
- The training emphasizes addressing root causes of violence, such as mental health and lack of job opportunities.
- Proponents argue this community-based approach is more effective than government-led initiatives like Port City United.
- The program's success in community engagement has also proven beneficial in disaster relief efforts.

(This story has been updated to add new information.)

A largely unsung Wilmington program dedicated to combatting violence in marginalized communities has been quietly at work, pursuing its mission of changing lives.

In March, Wilmington's [Sokoto House on Dawson Street](#) — which hosts and partners with a variety of community groups that have such diverse but interconnected aims as eradicating poverty, providing job training and improving wellness — graduated its latest cohort of some 20 community health workers/violence-prevention professionals, or CHW-VPPs for short.

The name might be unwieldy, but those bearing the CHW-VPP title say they have a vital interest in serving their community.

"The work he's doing is a necessity," said Demond Wells, a graduate of the training who works for LINC, Inc., a Wilmington nonprofit that provides transitional services for people who were previously incarcerated.

The "he" Wells refers to is Abdul Hafeedh bin Abdullah, the Sokoto House co-founder who teaches and helped design the violence-prevention program.

Sokoto House: [With Port City United's future uncertain, another local group continues to combat violence](#)



Abdul Hafeedh bin Abdullah addresses a crowd gathered for the commemoration of Aljhean Williams' death in Wilmington, N.C., Jan. 1, 2017. TERAH WILSON / STAR NEWS FILE PHOTO

March's graduation of community health workers from Wilmington, Asheville and elsewhere — including employees of nonprofits NC Fit and Wilmington's Coastal Horizons, and Buncombe County's Community-Based Public Health Response to Violence (CPrV) Coalition — brings the total number of people trained in violence prevention by Abdullah to some 130 across North Carolina, with even more nationwide.

"There is now a network of CHW-VPPs from the Cape Fear region, Buncombe County, Atlanta, Eastern Tennessee and Detroit all empowered to build community cohesion and collective efficacy to support a quality life for the communities they call home," according to a news release from Sokoto House.

The training, which was born from a former Centers for Disease Control and Prevention program that viewed community violence as a public health crisis, is based on a 2022 paper co-written by Abdullah that appeared in the American Journal of Public Health.

Abdullah noted that the locally trained CHW-VPPs are part of a wider Community-Based Public Health Response to Violence (CPrV) network, and that Sokoto House will host some 50 graduates of the program who are working in the Lower Cape Fear Region on May 24 to celebrate the fifth anniversary of the program, which began in Wilmington in 2020.

Wells said he spent 15 years in prison for a violence-related offense but now helps those who are in situations similar to the one he was in. Wells said the training includes techniques for both "conflict de-escalation" and for preventative measures that aim to stop violence before it starts.

"I've done conflict de-escalation where I walk into a situation where the cops are getting ready to use tasers," Wells said. "They're not always able to talk to a brother," but sometimes he's able to communicate. "I call it 'yard talk.' You might call it rapport. Next thing you know (the police are) driving away and no one's even been arrested."

Wells said the training "gives me an understanding of what I went through" as a younger person in terms of the structural and societal causes of violence in the Black community. Because of that, he said he's able to better help at-risk individuals today, many of whom he works with via the Med North clinic in Wilmington. There, he said, mental health, job training and more are key parts of fighting the root causes of violence.

"Being able to discuss with clients, 'Hey, conflict resolution, have we thought about this,'" Wells said, adding that one thing he often advises clients is not to "make a permanent decision based on a temporary feeling."



Employees from Coastal Horizons and other groups who graduated from the community health worker/violence prevention professional training program from Wilmington community organization Sokoto House. PROVIDED BY SOKOTO HOUSE

Fear and anger are fleeting, he said, but once a situation becomes violent and the authorities are involved, repercussions can be life-changing in a negative way.

Despite it being chronically underfunded, proponents of the Sokoto House program see it as a viable alternative to such [failed, high-profile efforts as Port City United](#), which was done under the auspices of New Hanover County government.

Background: [Three years later, what has Wilmington learned from the failure of TRU Colors Brewing?](#)

The preventative part of the program is crucial, said Philip Cooper of Asheville-based nonprofit Operation Gateway, which, like LINC in Wilmington, aims to provide transitional services for formerly incarcerated individuals. Cooper helped bring Abdullah's violence-prevention training to Buncombe County in Western North Carolina as part of the county government's official policy for combatting youth violence.

Operation Gateway also paid the tuition for many recent graduates of the Sokoto House training.

Crisis management is important, Cooper said, but "being able to transition into the preventative model is what we need to be into in regards to a lot of things."

Preventative measures might involve "being intentional about engaging certain communities before violence happens," he said. For example, educating people about the stigma associated with seeking help for mental health before getting into what resources are available, because it doesn't help for folks to know what's out there if they've not been educated on why it's important.

Other measures include "stopping the cycle of retaliation," Cooper said, even helping to plan a funeral of someone who was a victim of violence as a way of taking stress off their family, stress that can lead to a violent response.

Job training is also key, Cooper said, as is working through a "trauma-informed lens" that doesn't ask, "What's wrong with people," but rather, "What's happened to them?"

In terms of training CHW-VPPs, Cooper said, "A requirement to take the training is the trust (of the community). People will only invest in the training if you're already legit in the community."

He sees the ideal community health worker as "a person who is trusted in a community, who can bridge the gap between resources and individuals."

"We're making them professionals with these trainings and they can have a career" in a variety of fields, including health and education.

"If we can provide the resources, the state doesn't have to provide a bed," Wells said, adding that he thinks agencies can be unfairly blamed for not having a 100% success rate. "We only can provide what a person's ready to take. That doesn't mean the agency failed them."

What proponents say makes the community health worker model successful — under the radar, deeply embedded within marginalized communities — also means it doesn't get the kind of attention that might help it obtain funding. Violent incidents often get media attention, but when a crisis is averted, that doesn't typically get the same notice.

In March, Abdullah said that, in his estimation, street violence and shootings in Wilmington have been way down over the past two and half years, something [Wilmington Police Department statistics back up](#).

In Western North Carolina, an unforeseen benefit of having community health workers trained in "leveraging resources and getting them to vulnerable populations," Cooper said, was that after Hurricane Helene their skills came in very handy.

With federal funding for disaster relief decreasing, that's something that could also conceivably benefit hurricane-prone Southeastern North Carolina.

