

LOCAL

With Port City United's future uncertain, another local group continues to combat violence



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Wilmington StarNews

Published 5:02 a.m. ET June 4, 2024 | Updated 5:02 a.m. ET June 4, 2024



Sokoto House director Abdul Hafeedh bin Abdullah speaking at Sokoto House with, from left, Vance Williams of Advance Youth Outreach and Lily Nicole of the lowercase leaders in a still from Christopher Everett's upcoming film "Wilmington on Fire: Chapter II." COURTESY OF CHRISTOPHER EVERETT

Since forming back in 2021, self-described "[community hub](#)" [Sokoto House](#) has played an active but under-the-radar role in trying to combat the violence and lack of opportunity that has affected Wilmington's Black communities for decades.

The executive director of Sokoto House is Abdul Hafeedh bin Abdullah, who runs his [Quality Life Blueprint program](#) out of Sokoto's headquarters on Dawson Street.

A native of California, Abdullah said he went to prison for eight years starting at age 17. Growing up in the '80s and '90s, "I was part of the 'super-predators' that the Clintons defined," he said wryly.

Once he got out of prison, "From day one, I've been building in my community, learning public health language, learning community organizing and moving as a community health worker," he said.

In Wilmington since the 2010s, Abdullah is now a nationally recognized thought leader in the field of violence prevention.

In 2023, an anti-violence study he co-authored [was adopted as the official policy of Buncombe County's Justice Services division](#).

[Sokoto House: Wilmington group's anti-violence plan is adopted by Buncombe County. Is New Hanover next?](#)

In addition to anti-violence programs, Sokoto House has hosted such community-building programs as dance and martial arts classes, food pantry giveaways, free community markets and more, while working with such diverse groups as Advance Youth Outreach, Brenda Galloway's [HOPE \(Helping Others Proceed Effectively\)](#), the lowercase leaders, New Hanover for All and others.

"Summer's getting ready to kick off and there's going to be lots of activities here like there is every year," Abdullah said, although finding funding for Sokoto House's programs has been a major challenge.

"We've been thriving off of the natural ecosystem of community support," he said. "The one part of our ecosystem that we haven't been able to really optimize and grab ahold of that will really help us in the city would be the funding."

Abdullah said Sokoto House has been turned down for grants by the New Hanover Community Endowment, New Hanover County and the United Way among others.

"At some point you just have to say to yourself, 'What more do you have to do?' They decided that it's something that they don't want to support," he said. "You actually have literature backing the work you're doing, actually showing that you're able to do the work (and) they don't want to put a little bit behind that to see what's possible?"

Being better-funded would help Sokoto House scale what has been a successful model, Abdullah said.

"Over the last couple of years, we've had the lowest rates of homicides and shootings happening in our city, and no one's talking about it," he said.



Brandon Cagle brings in donations of notebooks for area youth at Sokoto House in Wilmington. JOHN STATON/STARNEWS

Sokoto House follows a community health worker model based on a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention program that treated 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 violence and poverty born of decades of institutionalized racism and racist policies.

Abdullah calls it "a nationally recognized, innovative way to address violence prevention."

The goals of Sokoto House are similar to those of Port City United (PCU), the New Hanover County agency founded in 2022 and described as a \$5.74 million "community investment plan" that looks to help residents in various ways, from accessing available services to violence prevention.

PCU has faced high-profile struggles, from the firing of original director Cedric Harrison and the arrest of two of its employees (one for drug charges, the other for being an accessory to a shooting) to a recent controversy that had New Hanover County Commissioner Dane Scalise accusing former PCU employee Anthony Brumm of threatening him.

Brumm denies threatening Scalise and said he was merely trying to have a conversation with the commissioner about the "dehumanizing" way Brumm felt Scalise had been talking about the community PCU serves.

The fate of the agency remains uncertain, even as people like New Hanover County Commissioner Jonathan Barfield have [praised PCU's accomplishments](#) in defusing potentially violent situations.

Abdullah said he's been watching all this unfold while thinking things didn't have to go this way.

"Community members have been finding themselves in the news, (but) it wasn't the community that came up with that program," Abdullah said. "It's a county program that the county itself wanted to create."

He acknowledged that PCU was "put together with feedback from the community," but said that New Hanover County Manager Chris Coudriet and Assistant County Manager Tufanna Bradley, who oversees PCU, "put together what they wanted to put together."

Abdullah said that PCU's three-pronged approach — violence prevention using the Cure Violence model, which, like Sokoto House's, treats violence as a community health issue; a 24-7 call center where residents can report threats of violence and request other forms of assistance; and bringing "community resource coordinators" into area schools via nonprofit partnerships — was always and remains unproven.

"Don't get me wrong, all those things could work out," Abdullah said. "But the reality was, they were testing that. It was an experiment. That had never been done before. They had no evidence that this combination would work inside a county setting."

He added that he believes PCU was started with good intentions.

"I think the county and the people who work there genuinely tried to figure it out," he said. "But these young men that have been finding themselves in the news, the reality is that the county hired them and they never properly trained them."

"They cannot allow Black faces to be in the news without us saying, 'Why did we allow them to experiment?'" he added. "You could've hired anyone in the country with that much money to come here and run a legitimate program ... And now we're saying, 'Oh, it failed, let's get back to what we know works.'"

Abdullah admits he's had disagreements with people in county government and at PCU about various issues but doesn't think that should preclude exploring the ideas he's been talking about in Wilmington for years.

"Maybe because I'm not from here, or maybe it's because I got a big mouth. Maybe that's the issue," he said. "Right now in New Hanover County, we're missing an opportunity to change the way we think about violence."

Despite the recent efforts of those at Port City United, he said, "It's very important that our city understands that community-based initiatives — not only to prevent violence but also to improve the conditions of our community — have yet to get a legitimate chance to do what it is we do."

