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An Israeli trauma counselor, Moshe Siegel, hugs a pastor who has graduated a course teaching pastors how to counsel victims, perpetrators and witnesses of gun violence.

Chicago hospitals lean on church leaders to help stem emotional toll of gun violence

By [Adam Rubenfire](#) | December 15, 2016

CHICAGO — In the absence of a Level I adult trauma center on Chicago's notoriously dangerous South Side, many local victims of gun violence go to Northwestern Memorial Hospital, over 10 miles away in the city's busy downtown. Northwestern, which is often overrun by these patients, is now looking for partners in the community to curb violence and counsel victims and survivors of shootings.

“Population health is really looking at other assets in communities that affect health outcomes. We can provide top notch medical care, but what are some of those other things that impact health indicators?” said Posh Charles, Northwestern Medicine's vice president of community affairs.

Hoping to reach residents who are often hesitant to seek out professional counseling, Northwestern has partnered with University of Chicago Medicine, which only has a level I pediatric trauma center on its south side campus, to back a program that enlists those who often are sounding boards for the community. Pastors in Chicago's Bronzeville neighborhood are being trained by a group of Israeli trauma counselors who, having treated victims of terror and war, say gun violence victims are experiencing much of the same psychological effects.

For over five weeks, the pastors were trained by members of Natal, a Tel Aviv-based not-for-profit that offers in-person therapy, as well as a helpline, for victims or military veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. The organization believes trauma represents “invisible wounds” in people, said Orly Gal, the program's executive director.

The program, called The Urban Resilience Network, or TURN Center, offers a critical bridge to mental health services in a community where unaddressed emotional trauma can perpetuate violence. TURN will rope in perpetrators, victims' families and witnesses to violence. “We understand that when the trauma is happening, it's affecting everyone,” Gal said.

Officials at Northwestern and UChicago say programs like TURN help them boost the overall physical and mental wellbeing of communities they serve. It brings services to the patients' doorstep or church, Charles said.

Seeking mental health services is stigmatized in some cultures.



Pastor Chris Harris, CEO of Bright Star Community Outreach, speaks to Bronzeville pastors who have graduated a trauma counseling course run by experts from Israel-based Natal.

“Black and Brown people don't do counseling,” said Pastor Chris Harris, founder and CEO of Bright Star Community Outreach, the not-for-profit that partners with Natal. “But they still talk to faith leaders.”

Additionally, the communities in Chicago that most often experience violence are also low-income, making it hard for residents to afford mental health services or even access it due to a lack of reliable transportation.

According to Harris, in some cases, gang boundaries prevent some individuals from reaching healthcare facilities, which is why the services need to come to them.

Northwestern Medicine and UChicago each contributed \$250,000 in funding for the program and its brick-and-mortar community center, with additional support from United Way of Metropolitan Chicago and The Jewish United Fund of Metropolitan Chicago. UChicago offered its support as it awaits the opening of its [own level I adult trauma center](#). The facility is expected to open in late 2017 following [significant pressure from activists](#) who said one was needed in the area where the hospital is located.

Violence prevention was escalated to a “priority health issue” in UChicago's [latest community health needs assessment](#) conducted in 2015, after being labeled a “future focus area” in previous reports. 81% of respondents said that mental issues are a “major problem” on the south side.

“We know there's a lot of things that create trauma, and helping people receive services and understand how to better deal with trauma can help create safer spaces. To us, that's what's vitally important to our community,” said Leif Elsmo, UChicago Medicine's executive director of community and external affairs.

The program also acknowledges that psychological trauma from urban gun violence can be just as damaging as trauma from war or terror, said Itay Milner, Israel's deputy consul general to the Midwest U.S., in a speech at a graduation ceremony for the faith leaders.

“A boy that is traumatized by rockets is no different than a boy who is traumatized by gunshots,” Milner said. “A mother who grieves for her son who was shot is no different than a father who grieves for a slain soldier.”

If the program proves successful, officials hope to replicate it in other Chicago neighborhoods and even other cities. Pastor Harris has been contacted by other spiritual leaders, and Milner said Jewish community leaders in Detroit expressed some interest in supporting a similar program there.