

**NEWS**

# Chatham County DA's new youth diversion program seeks to get guns off the street

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The Chatham County District Attorney's Office launched a new youth diversion program last Friday intended to help young people ages 16 to 25 and facing gun charges avoid prosecution and, possibly, incarceration for first-time offenses.

The program "Show Us Your Guns" has two goals, statistically speaking: To reduce the number of simple gun possession prosecutions by 20% and to reduce racial disparities in Chatham County's criminal legal system by at least 20%.

The program has bigger aspirations, however. "Show Us Your Guns" seeks to get firearms off the street before they are used. Second, "and more importantly, to work with that young person, to ensure that they understand they have inherent power, they have power within their minds and within their bodies," said Michael Edwards, chief assistant district attorney for Chatham County.

"And, [by providing them] with social programming for them to be able to harness that power, that energy, it will decrease the number of violent acts and gun crimes in our community."

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## Vera Institute grant

Of the 33 homicides in the city of Savannah in 2021, four were minors under the age of 18 shot by someone 20 years or younger. With this new program in place, the Chatham County

District Attorney intends to address the number of young people stealing or brandishing guns that could be used in future crimes.

"We are seeing more young people and people at younger ages in possession of firearms," Edwards confirmed.

State Representative Carl Gilliard (D-162), who founded the nonprofit Feed the Hungry in 2009, partnered with the DA's office to apply for a \$40,000 grant from the Vera Institute for Justice to initiate the diversion program. Gilliard said that the concentrated level of gang activity, the proliferation of illegal guns on the streets, and the high number of incarcerated individuals gave him and the DA reason to apply for the grant in the first place.

In July 2021, Gilliard and the DA received word that their "Show Us Your Guns" proposal would receive funding from the Vera Institute — an independent nonprofit judicial accountability research and advocacy organization. The Chatham DA is one of only 10 offices nationwide to have received the grant as well as support in terms of data analysis, training and policy expertise.

## **How will 'Show us Your Guns work?'**

Local and county law enforcement agencies will refer first-time youth offenders in possession of illegal firearms. (If they have used that firearm in any capacity, already have a conviction, or do not reside in Chatham County, they are not eligible for the program.)

Once the young person turns in their gun to law enforcement, that individual is diverted to Savannah Feed the Hungry's Empowerment Center where, instead of incarceration, he or she will receive conflict resolution training and workforce development support. Counselors at Feed the Hungry also will assess the individual's educational needs, housing stability, physical and emotional health needs.

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As Edwards explained, the program is designed to get at key individual and community issues. "Where did they feel the weakest in their lives that's giving them cause or reason to carry a firearm and have that false sense of power that firearms give our young people? We're going to take the guns off of the street and empower these individuals to use their own inherent strength."

Successful completion of the program, said Edwards, will not only see the young person's criminal records restricted, but also leave them "walking away empowered and stronger as

individuals.”

Edwards added, “We’re really excited to start this program. We will start to see outcomes that are more meaningful and deeply impactful for our young people and for the communities that they live in.”

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