Research a key in disrupting gangs

By John J. Larivee and Michael Kane

Gang activity continues to be a destructive force in many communities, dragging young people into lives of violence, crime and incarceration. Keeping these at-risk youth from falling victim to gang life demands highly innovative intervention and support programs that reach these young people at a critical juncture.

One such program that's proven its worth through data and changed lives is the Charles E. Shannon Community Safety Initiative, which funds programs targeting gang violence in 15 Massachusetts communities this year. Gov. Charlie Baker announced new grant awards in January to support outreach efforts, provide services to youth and enhance collaborations among community service providers with the aim of preventing gang violence and diverting youth away from gang involvement.

Since the Initiative's inception in 2006, the Crime and Justice Institute at CRJ has partnered with the City of Fall River, led by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Fall River Police Department, to provide strategic, analytic and research support to their Shannon Initiative group as the Local Action Research Partner.

The Shannon Initiative has made a tangible impact on Massachusetts communities, both through diversion of at-risk youth and the establishment of long-term problem-solving collaborative efforts that involve community organizations and local government.

The funding received by Shannon communities supports the implementation of the Comprehensive Gang Model, a nationally recognized model supported by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention's National Gang Center. The model, based on the premise of community problem-solving and collaboration, involves five strategies for addressing gang involvement – community mobilization, opportunities provision, social intervention, suppression and organization change and development. A crucial component of the model is the involvement of an action research partner – to provide recommendations, collect and analyze data, and document the activities and impact of the Initiative.

Nationally, many communities have implemented a version of the Comprehensive Gang Model, but Massachusetts, to our knowledge, is unique in both the scope and duration of funding to support these activities. Over the course of the past 11 years, the Shannon Initiatives have grown in their understanding of the roots of the gang problems in their communities, the sophistication of their strategy to address these issues, and the strength of their multi-agency collaboration.

In the community that we are most familiar with, Fall River, the Shannon grant has evolved over the life of the Initiative as partners found their role within the grant and gaps were addressed by bringing new partners into the fold. For example, the Fall River Shannon partners, including 11 funded partners and several unfunded partners, have developed criteria to refer and identify at-risk youth for outreach while screening out lower-risk youth. Once enrolled, policies are in place to assess individual needs and develop a case plan tailored to the youth. Services offered through partners include mentoring, vocational training, GED programming, job placement services, youth court, education and prevention.

The gang problem in Fall River has not remained static over the last 11 years, evolving over the course of the grant: The age at which youth are joining gangs has decreased, gangs have become more territorial and specific gangs have grown in size and influence while others have diminished, to name a few changes. As the Local Action Research Partner, the Crime and Justice Institute documents these changes through periodic assessment, including interviews with youth, service providers and law enforcement as well as surveys of community members.

Measuring the impact of a program like the Shannon Initiative is challenging. No grant program occurs in isolation – many communities are fortunate to receive multiple funding streams to address the needs of at-risk youth and trends nationally have seen a reduction in violent crime. Working with the Statewide Youth Violence Prevention Research Partner, Clark University, as well as Local Action Research Partners, Shannon sites are measuring performance and tracking outcomes, including youth and gang violence.

According to data analyzed by Clark, from 2010 through 2015, arrests of youth and young adults (ages 14 to 24) for aggravated assault declined by 34.6 percent; for simple assault declined by 24.3 percent; and for robbery declined by 38.4 percent in Shannon-funded communities. During the same period, Fall River has seen a 41 percent decrease in aggravated assaults involving youth 11 to 28, according to our analysis.

There are a number of success stories involving individual youth leading us to believe that the program is having a positive impact. Furthermore, across the Commonwealth partners like UTEC in Lowell and RE-Creation in Fall River have developed robust youth and street outreach programs that rely on the Shannon Initiative for support. The collaboration created through the Shannon Initiative has created strong bonds of trust among community organizations and local government, which has already had a positive impact through the development of successful partnerships and additional programs that exceed the boundaries of this one initiative.

John J. Larivee is the President and CEO at Community Resources for Justice and Michael Kane is the Senior Associate at CRJ's Crime and Justice Institute.

Memory cafe hopes to reach LGBTQ community

By A. Michael Brown

More than five million Americans (120,000+ from Massachusetts) are currently living with Alzheimer's disease. The number of families supporting a loved one with dementia will continue to grow exponentially over the coming years.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, caregivers of people with Alzheimer's and related dementias provide care for a longer duration than caregivers of people with other types of conditions. Approximately 32 percent of family caregivers serve in the role for five years or more, and a decade (or longer) of support is not uncommon.

Alzheimer's takes a devastating toll on caregivers. According to a recent study by the Alzheimer's Association, nearly 60 percent of caregivers rate the emotional stress of caregiving as high or very high, with as many as 40 percent suffering from depression. And 74 percent of caregivers report being concerned about maintaining their own health since becoming a caregiver.

LifeLinks, Inc. was recently awarded an innovation mini-grant funded by the Massachusetts Lifespan Respite Coalition and the Federal Administration on Community Living to launch a memory café for families dealing with memory impairment in the Greater Lowell area. This fully inclusive program is open to all members of the community and designed to relieve some of that stress.

One of the leading factors likely contributing to caregiver stress and depression is the feelings of isolation and loneliness. One of the hardest parts of dealing with dementia, Alzheimer's and other memory loss is the absence of the normal interactions they once had in a couple or parent/child relationship, leaving days filled with "must-do" activities and difficult and mundane tasks.

The grant organizers highly recommended targeting outreach to special populations, such as the LGBTQ community. Therefore, LifeLinks is also warmly welcoming members of the LGBTQ community who can feel especially isolated when supporting loved ones with Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia. Having attended and presented at annual LGTB Elders conferences hosted by Salem State University the last several years, participants spoke about the loneliness that can be felt during the caregiving journey. Sadly, it is not uncommon for family members to ignore requests for support or to cut off relations due to the disclosure of sexual orientation. During one session several years ago, an endearing woman tearfully shared that her spouse had Alzheimer's disease and, even though her spouse's adult children from a prior marriage lived close by, they had refused to have any contact with them. These conference experiences stuck with me and served as inspiration to embark on targeted outreach to members of the LGBTQ community.

Back in the 1990s, Dr. Bere Miesen, a Dutch psychiatrist, noticed that talking about dementia was often taboo, even among family members. In 1997, Dr. Miesen introduced the Memory Café in the Netherlands. Since then, memory cafés have spread all across Europe, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Over the last several years, memory cafés began occurring throughout the United States, including here in Massachusetts.

The events are free, informal, social settings that bring together people living with Alzheimer's/dementia, their family caregivers and professionals. Sessions typically are scheduled on a monthly basis that may include art activities, games, musical entertainment or some form of educational/therapeutic training from a memory impairment expert. A memory café offers a safe space where participants can openly talk with like-situated people without the stigma of the dementia label, with the goal of creating new, positive memories.

For more information about the LifeLinks' Memory Café, please visit lifelinks.net/what-we-do/.

A. Michael Bloom is Director of Strategy and Innovation for LifeLinks.

Photographer brings into view the hidden scars of emotional abuse

By Rachel Tine

A memory has stuck with me from my teen years, of lying on my bedroom floor one night. Staring up at the ceiling, I found myself making a wish, as if I was still a little girl. I wished that my abuser would beat me. If only there were some mark left on my body—a bruise, a broken bone—then, I thought, my depression and sense of betrayal could be explained. I felt like I couldn't justify, to myself or others, why my abuser's emotional cruelty impacted me so deeply despite leaving no physical evidence.

For those who have never experienced an abusive relationship, it can be difficult to imagine how the pain of emotional abuse can exceed that of physical abuse. And yet emotional abuse is a prerequisite for any abuse: It's part of why people feel so trapped even when the violence begins. When abusers are trying to win your love, they shower you with adoration. But once they see that they have won your trust and have made you dependent on them for your self-worth (and often financially, as well), they knock you off the pedestal. An abuser uses your love, patience, and forgiveness for them against you. But in an abusive relationship, the game is rigged: You'll never be free from the abuser's cruelty for long no matter what you do, because making sure you always feel insecure is essential to maintaining their control. Abusers convince you that without them, you'd be lost, helpless, broken, unloved, alone, even though their abuse is what has made you feel lost to yourself. Even after you've escaped, it can take a long time to see your abuser's lies for what they are.

I have experienced physical violence at the hands of loved ones, but the wounds of emotional abuse have marked my life more profoundly. The emotional scars have made it harder for me to trust both myself and others. And yet I, like many survivors, have also struggled to recognize that the trauma I sustained from emotional abuse was no less important than the trauma I suffered from physical violence. It's hard for many people, even those who are not trauma survivors, to verbalize how they have felt in and have been shaped by their relationships. And when the subject, in this case abuse, is so rarely discussed, words are even more likely to fail us.

But art can sometimes express the unspeakable. As a photographer, I realized that I could make the invisible fractures of emotional abuse visible. Through my photography, I wanted to raise awareness about how each of us can support survivors and help end abuse – which my partners at Casa Myrna are helping achieve – and to do justice to the complicated emotions of each survivor whose pictures I took.

What resulted is a new exhibit that is showing at a Boston gallery throughout the month of February. It allows these survivors of severe emotional abuse to tell their stories through recorded audio and photographs. Each of the 22 images in *Invisible Fractures: The Enduring Trauma of Emotional Abuse* emerged from my collaboration with the survivor depicted. Art has helped me to understand and heal from my trauma, and it has been a privilege to help other survivors experience a similar catharsis. When I asked one survivor what participation in this series meant to her, she wrote: "It's made me realize that the shame I've carried is not my burden to bear. Sharing my truth helped me recognize the strength and courage within me; it's given me a sense of purpose in the hope that I might inspire or help another person on a similar journey. Lastly," she added, "I think it's made my teen son think deeply about just who should be ashamed and who shouldn't when covert abuse is suddenly brought to light."

Each of us – artists, activists, or advocates; family members, friends, or neighbors – can help to end abuse. Together, we can speak the unspeakable and help each other see the invisible.

Rachel Tine is an internationally published and award-winning photographer with a focus on artistic portraiture. The exhibit is showing Feb. 3-26 at the Piano Craft Gallery, 793 Tremont St., Boston. An opening reception will be held Feb. 3 from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. RSVP at www.facebook.com/RachelTinePhotography/ or learn more at www.casamyrna.org.