

Community Collaborative to Counter Violent Extremism in Houston, TX

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Lead agency name | Crisis Intervention of Houston, Inc.

Location | Houston, TX

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This document focuses on the work of Crisis Intervention of Houston, Inc., completed under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) grant award for its project Community Collaborative to Counter Violent Extremism in Houston, TX. To understand the Crisis Intervention organization and the Community Collaborative project, one must first look more broadly at the national climate and the local community.

Violent Extremism and the Creation of the Department of Homeland Security

The September 11, 2001, attacks dramatically altered Americans' perceptions about the threat of terrorism. The attacks also prompted major shifts in public policy, including the creation of the DHS in November 2002 as a cabinet-level agency. The new agency became one of the federal hubs for addressing the threat of terrorism under the 2002 Homeland Security Act. Early efforts focused primarily on intelligence gathering and analysis and the suppression of terrorism using military and law enforcement strategies, but over time, a shift toward terrorism prevention—or what became more widely known as “countering violent extremism” (CVE)—emerged as an important component of the federal response to this problem. As such, in 2016,

Congress allocated \$10 million to fund the DHS CVE grant award program to help local, state, and nongovernmental entities design and implement prevention and intervention strategies focused on the reduction of domestic violent extremism.

Houston: A Core Part of the American Infrastructure

Houston, with a population of 2,325,502 as of 2018, is the fourth largest city in the United States. It is also one of the country's economic hubs, with major centers for oil, chemical, and aerospace production. According to the Rice University Kinder Institute for Urban Research, Houston is one of the most ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse cities in the country. Because of its strong labor market, relatively low cost of living, and proximity to Latin America, Houston has become a hub for refugee resettlement for Latin and other migrant populations. Houston's size, in combination with its economic infrastructure and substantial diversity, makes it a target for terrorism as well as for extremist recruitment and propaganda. This characteristic is evidenced by the case of Houston-born Asher Khan, who was convicted of providing material support to the Islamic State of Iraq and

al-Sham (ISIS) after he and a friend devised plans to travel to Turkey and then Syria to fight on behalf of the terrorist group. The friend went on to Syria, where he later died, but Khan returned from Turkey after his family feigned his mother's severe illness in an attempt to save their son. Khan's recruitment and radicalization generated national headlines, but his is only one of many cases and these processes are not exclusive to any one type of extremist ideology. The Anti-Defamation League has documented that Houston is a hotbed of anti-Semitic and white supremacist extremist activities as well, especially in the rural regions surrounding Houston. White supremacist activities include the distribution of hate-filled propaganda; harassment; vandalism; and various types of violent attacks, such as shooting rampages. In response to the threat of youth radicalization, Crisis Intervention of Houston has emphasized a behavioral health approach to intervene with adolescents who may be at risk for harming themselves or others as well as to support those who have concerns about friends or family members who may be susceptible to the recruitment efforts of extremist groups.

Crisis Intervention of Houston, TX: Reaching out to the Most Vulnerable

Crisis Intervention of Houston, founded in 1971, is a crisis hotline call center that serves Houston and the immediate surrounding counties. The nonprofit organization provides around-the-clock, free, anonymous crisis intervention and suicide prevention counseling and exists with one concise mission: To help people in crisis. The center represents a public health approach to prevention and intervention of harm to self and others. In 2017, Crisis Intervention was awarded a 2-year DHS CVE grant to develop a new crisis intervention hotline aimed at Muslim youth (known as the ACT: NOW Hotline), develop a new CVE training module for call counselors, and conduct outreach into the Muslim community to raise awareness about the new hotline. The purpose of the ACT: NOW Hotline is to provide culturally competent crisis prevention and intervention to Muslim youth who have concerns related to violent extremism. These concerns may come in a number of forms and include one or more of the following:

1. personal susceptibility to involvement, at some level, in violent extremism;
2. concerns regarding a relative's or friend's susceptibility to involvement in violent extremism; or
3. concerns related to past or future victimization stemming from violent extremism.

Community Collaborative to Counter Violent Extremism Project Focus Areas

Expand existing crisis hotline services to include specific training for crisis counselors regarding violent extremism

Expand hotline services to include a Muslim youth-oriented hotline (ACT: NOW Hotline) to combat "ISIS recruitment"

Develop a parent and youth training curriculum regarding extremism online and a series of "anti-bullying" and "online safety" training workshops

The CVE training module for call counselors, which has been incorporated into the standard call counselor training, provides additional information about the process of recruitment and radicalization and the vulnerabilities (i.e., risk factors) for youth radicalization. In many ways, the CVE training components mirror the standard crisis intervention training that call counselors undergo, but with violent extremism framed as a crisis situation, instead of suicide or another form of self-harm. The outreach to the Muslim community was conducted by a local, nonprofit organization, the Alliance for Compassion and Tolerance (ACT), because of its strong ties to the Muslim and refugee communities within the region.

The Community Collaborative to Counter Violent Extremism in Houston, TX

In 2014 Mustafa Tameez, the Managing Director for Outreach Strategists, and Wardah Khalid, also of Outreach Strategists, were asked by the Harris County Sheriff's Office to facilitate focus groups of concerned citizens, synthesize the findings, and make recommendations for local efforts to build community resilience to violent extremism. From these recommendations, Mustafa approached Naomi Madrid, the Executive Director of Crisis Intervention of Houston, in 2016 about a DHS funding opportunity. Mustafa suggested that Crisis Intervention partner with Outreach Strategists and the ACT to submit a DHS proposal to incorporate a crisis intervention approach to counter violent extremism. Each of these partners brought a unique skill set that would work in tandem to form a whole-of-community approach. Crisis Intervention had extensive experience operating a crisis intervention hotline (primarily focused on suicide prevention), but none of its personnel had experience in CVE.

Outreach Strategists had extensive experience working in the CVE space, including Mustafa's consultant work for the DHS in the mid-2000s, but did not have expertise in crisis intervention or mental health intervention. On the basis of its local reputation, ACT was selected to serve as a liaison between Crisis Intervention's efforts and the Muslim community in the greater Houston area and, through the support of the grant award, Baber Mohammed was hired to serve as the ACT Executive Director.

Resistance to the CVE Grant Award

Like many communities across the United States, some communities of Houston were concerned about receiving a grant award from DHS as part of the CVE program. The concerns stem from the perception that CVE is essentially a Muslim-focused program that involves surveillance and leads to further stigmatization of the Muslim community by branding individuals (youth in particular) as "at risk" for terrorism.

To address some of these concerns, ACT, one of the key partners, held public and private meetings that provided opportunities for community members to express these concerns and for representatives of the Community Collaborative to emphasize their programmatic focus on addressing vulnerabilities by providing outreach services and using training workshops to raise awareness about violent extremism.

The concerns that emerged in Houston appeared less extensive than those in several of the other evaluation sites. However, these concerns highlight an important limitation of programs funded by the DHS CVE program and the scope of the ACT: NOW Hotline: the focus remains on Islamist extremism. This parochial approach to CVE leaves serious gaps in prevention, intervention, research, and evaluation of other forms of violent extremism. Crisis Intervention of Houston even fielded calls regarding concerns about violent far-right extremism—a concern that is not unfounded given the presence of white supremacist activity in the greater Houston region. The best practice would be for each site to conduct a needs assessment of its jurisdiction to understand the specific risks of violent extremism and develop a data-driven program that targets the greatest need or a comprehensive approach that can meaningfully address various forms of violent extremism.

Key Partners Connecting With the Community

Crisis Intervention of Houston's two key partners are described below. Beyond these two organizations, Crisis Intervention also partnered with Thrive Productions for assistance with marketing materials related to the new crisis hotline.

Outreach Strategists – A global communications and public affairs firm. Its diverse team of experts has extensive backgrounds in government, politics, and media. They specialize in public relations, business development, campaigns, and communications. Outreach Strategists advises clients on the most effective ways to navigate in the public and political arenas.

Alliance for Compassion and Tolerance (ACT) – A forum organized to focus on our shared humanity; foster harmony, trust, and understanding among people of all faith traditions; and undertake initiatives that promote compassion, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence. ACT condemns violence against individuals or groups based on race, religion, or ethnicity.

Other Partners: The Houston Independent School District and Harris County Sheriff's Office

During the award period, the Community Collaborative informally partnered with the Houston Independent School District, gaining access to several school sites. The school access was used to develop dialogues with students about the issues of violent extremism and bullying behavior. The Community Collaborative also established

a relationship with the Harris County Sheriff's Office to provide constables with crisis intervention training (primarily in suicide prevention). As part of the grant award, the Community Collaborative developed a section of the training related specifically to CVE, and Naomi Madrid began offering the constables the new curriculum in January 2019.

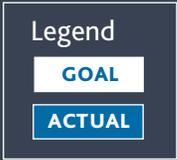
Timeline



Performance and Outcome Indicators

As part of the evaluation, performance and outcome indicators were reviewed using quarterly Project Implementation & Evaluation Plan (PIEP) data.

Accomplishments Visualized Through PIEP Output Data



ACT: NOW Hotline

The Crisis Intervention project's goal included an increase in awareness of the new youth hotline (ACT: NOW) and decreasing anxiety among individuals who called the hotline. It did not reach the goal of 300 anticipated calls, but among those callers, the majority experienced decreased anxiety by the end of the call.

At-Risk Youth Hotline Calls (ACT: NOW) Decreased Anxiety



Anticipated Hotline Calls



Outcome 1: Individuals who may be on a path of radicalization to violence or violent extremism receive support through the ACT: NOW Hotline that redirects them away from the use of violence to harm themselves or others.

Outcome indicators

Five additional hotline call counselors have acquired increased understanding of signs and signals of potential extremist recruitment concerns of callers. To date, 52 call counselors have been trained.

Results

No additional information was provided regarding the number of people on the path to violent extremism who were redirected.¹

¹This was all the information provided on this outcome indicator. See Recommendation 1.

Engagement Activities Outputs

The Executive Director of ACT conducted outreach activities to the Muslim community in Houston; Baber facilitated dialogue about CVE, online safety, and youth bullying (a potential risk factor for crisis or recruitment) with parents and community leaders.

Anti-Bullying Workshops for Parents Participants



Outcome 2: Youth have increased sense of belonging and self-worth.

Outcome indicators

Of the 85 youth trained, 100% determined they were able to counter bullying and see the signs of bullying against others.

Results

No information was provided regarding any increase related to identifying signs of bullying.²

²This was all the information provided on this outcome indicator. See Recommendation 1.

Engagement Activities Outputs

CVE Parent Workshops Participants



CVE Community Leader Workshops Sessions



Outcome 3: Bystanders and gatekeepers have increased likelihood of recognizing warning signs and referring young people who may be radicalizing to community-based support options.

Outcome indicators

To date, 193 parents participated in safety workshops and seminars and 18 community leader workshops were completed.

Results From Partner Surveys About the Collaboration Project

To help supplement the monthly calls and site visits, the evaluation team also conducted a comprehensive survey.³ Partner surveys were sent to contacts identified by the prime grantee. The purpose was to obtain feedback on partner interactions with the prime and each other in regard to the grant. Four people from Houston completed the partner survey. For identification purposes, the Community Collaborative was referred to as the Crisis Intervention Program. In the tables below, we provide a selection of the survey items. The first item addresses perception of community experiences with violent extremism. The second item gauges whether partners felt valued and utilized by Crisis Intervention of Houston. The third and fourth items address the local and national political climate and how it may affect CVE-related work. It is also worth noting that Crisis Intervention identified few key partners, and it is difficult to make determinations about partner-prime working relationships with such a small sample size.

³ These survey results are a summation of received partner responses; most grantees had a small number of partners. These responses are representative of partner perspectives; they are not intended to be generalized to the broader population.

Perception of Community Experiences With Violent Extremism

In terms of history of violent extremism incidents, one of the respondents referenced the arson of several local mosques and threats of violence as incidents of violent extremism in the Houston area. Alternatively, the other three respondents said that no incidents of violent extremism had occurred in the area. The inconsistency may reflect the larger confusion about how to define "violent extremism." While the survey provided a specific definition, the determination of when an incident is motivated by religious or political ideology is fraught with subjective perceptual issues, and an overall uncertainty about interpreting a perpetrator's motivation is difficult to overcome.

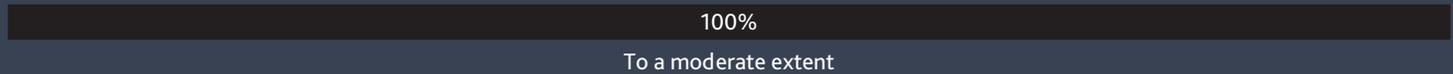
In the last ten years, has your community experienced an incident of violent extremism?



Whether Partners Felt Valued and Utilized by Crisis Intervention of Houston

The responses to the survey item addressing whether partners' contributions were valued and utilized were unanimous. Each partner expressed feeling moderately valued and utilized. During the site visits, respondents expressed feeling disconnected from and underutilized by the project, suggesting that, in general, the grant program was not especially cohesive and additional team building at the outset of the project would have been beneficial.

Throughout the grant period, how much do you feel that your contributions to the Crisis Intervention Program were valued and utilized?



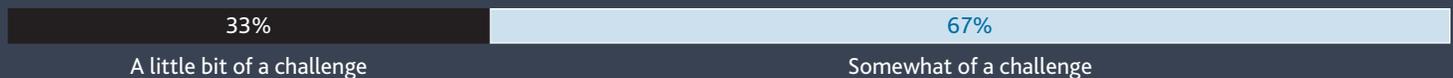
Local and National Political Climate and How It May Affect CVE-related Work

Last, two survey items were selected that measured perceived challenges related to local and national political climate. The results were similar in terms of both the local and national items and, overall, suggest that respondents perceived relatively few local or national challenges. In light of other responses, these responses may reflect the sense that most of the challenges to this particular grant project were internal.

Please indicate how much of a challenge the *local political climate* has been to the successful implementation of the Crisis Intervention Program in your jurisdiction? (Not at all a challenge, A little bit of a challenge, Somewhat of a challenge, A substantial challenge)*



Please indicate how much of a challenge the *national political climate* has been to the successful implementation of the Crisis Intervention Program in your jurisdiction? (Not at all a challenge, A little bit of a challenge, Somewhat of a challenge, A substantial challenge)*



*These totals omit the 25% of respondents who chose "Not applicable."

Recommendations

In this section we rely on information the evaluation team collected during monthly calls, site visits, review of PIEP data, and the survey results to discuss several recommendations. Each recommendation is followed by a further explanation why we think these changes would enhance the DHS CVE grant program moving forward.

Recommendation 1: Allocate evaluation funds to support involving an evaluation team from the beginning of the grant award to measure program performance.

The current outcome measures are helpful in terms of establishing the frequency of activities but are unsuitable for establishing any type of change in attitude or behavior. Most of Crisis Intervention of Houston's data tracking appears primarily to involve tabulating the number of attendees at events.

One outcome goal involved measuring whether a person on a pathway to violent extremism had been redirected, but we were unable to identify any data collection that would allow Crisis Intervention to assess this issue. Another outcome goal involved increasing attitudinal qualities such as "sense of belonging." To gauge whether a person's sense of belonging had changed, Crisis Intervention would need to collect measures of this construct at multiple points in time, both preceding the initiation of the program and at the end of the program.

Recommendation 2: Rename the CVE grant program in a way that highlights emphasis on building community resilience and harm reduction.

During site visits, many of those interviewed discussed challenges associated with the use of CVE terminology. As such, Crisis Intervention generally avoided reference to "countering violent extremism" for two primary reasons: (1) to overcome concerns within the Houston community that CVE is really a surveillance program designed to monitor specific individuals and (2) to place greater emphasis on the importance of "early prevention" efforts. The same grant under another name may attract less controversial attention.

Developed for:
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**Homeland
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