

Houston Countering Violent Extremism Training and Engagement Initiative

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This document focuses on the work that the City of Houston (Texas) Mayor's Office of Public Safety and Homeland Security (MOPSHS) completed under the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) grant award for its project, Houston Countering Violent Extremism Training and Engagement Initiative. To understand the work that the City of Houston and its subcontractors did, 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, the City of Houston implemented training for teachers, mental health professionals, and parents about the vulnerabilities among youth that increase the risk of violent extremism.

City of Houston Mayor's Office of Public Safety and Homeland Security

When the Houston MOPSHS prepared its proposal for the current DHS grant, the main purpose of the initiative was to develop a training module that would invite youth and parents to address violent extremism within their local communities. MOPSHS referred to its proposed initiative as being "government supported" rather than "government driven" as an indication that broad-based community involvement would be essential for a successful effort.

For this reason, the MOPSHS proposed collaborating with a subcontractor to develop the training curriculum and partnering with the Houston Regional CVE Steering Committee to engage the community stakeholders and have a broad reach to families in Houston and the surrounding areas. Furthermore, as part of the program development phase, MOPSHS designed a sustainable model by creating a train-the-trainers curriculum that individual stakeholders from various sectors would carry into their respective communities, where it would be best received. In 2017, MOPSHS was awarded a 2-year DHS CVE grant to develop its training and engagement initiative. The purpose of the curriculum was to equip adults who interact with youth (i.e., teachers, mental health professionals, and social workers) with the knowledge to identify the risk factors associated with youth vulnerabilities to extremist group recruitment and with strategies to mitigate these risk

factors. The curriculum was designed to include pertinent information regarding terrorism ideologies, the root causes of extremism, risk factors for youth recruitment and engagement, community connections, and social support programs. MOPSHS intended to share the curriculum with the greater Houston region through its relationships with partners in academia and nonprofit organizations. To address existing concerns related to CVE, MOPSHS thought it best to avoid explicitly including law enforcement agency partners in this initiative. As such, the role of law enforcement was limited; however, law enforcement expertise was used in the curriculum development.

The original plan to achieve the initiative was three pronged:

- 1. Establish a cadre of trained, culturally competent community educators/facilitators to support CVE workshops for parents and youth.**
- 2. Increase parental engagement and understanding of radicalization, risk factors, and available social resources through community-based Empowered Parents workshops.**
- 3. Increase youth understanding and engagement through the Three Cities program, which involves facilitated dialogue, scenario discussions, and critical thinking challenges.**

On the basis of their knowledge of the local context and community concerns, MOPSHS and its subcontractor Outreach Strategists ultimately decided to implement changes to the planned approach. The changes in scope are addressed in further detail below.

The Houston CVE Training and Engagement Initiative

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 offer recommendations for local efforts to prevent violent extremism. Their findings revealed that Muslim youth, in particular, feel a sense of isolation and disenfranchisement; that community members lack trust in law enforcement; and that respondents want interfaith, education, and civic organizations to collaborate to meet community needs. The recommendations included hosting parent workshops highlighting available resources; increasing communication and collaboration between interfaith, education, and community organizations; building capacity among interfaith leaders; and responding to at-risk youth in ways that mirror anti-gang models to improve relationships between law enforcement and community members. MOPSHS recognized that these recommendations aligned with the focus areas of the FY2016 DHS CVE grant program and used them to write its proposal. MOPSHS proposed to partner with a vendor (later chosen to be Outreach Strategists) to develop both the parent- and youth-oriented curricula; MOPSHS would support the vendor with connections to local partners and with managerial oversight. MOPSHS relied on its reputation as well as that of Outreach Strategists to convene a steering committee comprising local government, law enforcement, education, and nonprofit organizations.

Barriers and 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 being "at risk" for terrorism.

To mitigate this concern, MOPSHS aimed to create a steering committee that was inclusive for the purpose of demonstrating that this initiative was aimed at CVE efforts across the spectrum, not focused solely on Islamist extremism. Delays caused by bureaucratic processes and a major hurricane (Harvey), however, delayed the project's initiation, and some of the partners that had committed at the time of the proposal were less engaged 2 years

Houston CVE Training and Engagement Initiative Methodology

- Develop curricula and videos
- Develop communication strategy
- Identify and vet trainers
- Train the trainers
- Conduct parent workshops
- Conduct youth workshops
- Engage with national and international partners

later when the program kicked off. The absence of some key interfaith partners unintentionally contributed to the belief that this initiative was narrowly focused on Islamist extremism.

MOPSHS was officially informed of its award in June 2017; in August 2017, Hurricane Harvey devastated the greater Houston area and MOPSHS staff were forced to turn their attention to emergency management. The aftermath of the hurricane delayed the project's initiation; later, City Council was reluctant to accept the funding because of the controversial nature of the grant. In August 2018, MOPSHS internally kicked off the grant program and launched the steering committee the following month; this kickoff came 2 years after it had initially reached out to partners about supporting the proposal. The delay prevented some partners from engaging in the project as much as they had at first planned to do.

Key Partners Connecting With the Community

Outreach Strategists, the City of Houston's key partner and subcontractor, is described in the nearby box. MOPSHS also involved interfaith, education, and community service organizations in its steering committee.

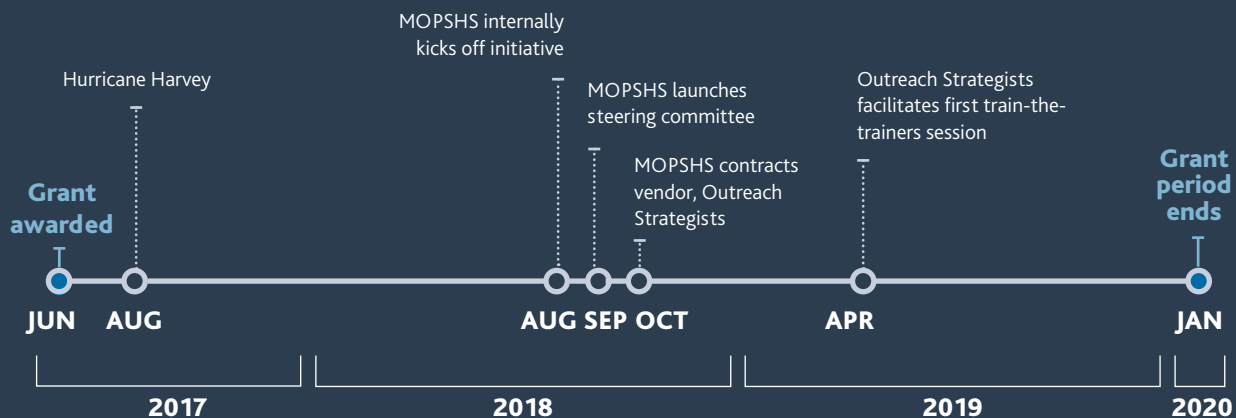
During the award period, the Houston CVE Training and Engagement Initiative partnered with some local principals, school-based clinical counselors and social workers, and other community leaders to further the training curriculum within their communities. The partnership with educators and school-based staff was used to begin a dialogue with teachers and parents about students who may be susceptible to recruitment by violent extremist groups.

Baylor College of Medicine — A health sciences university that creates knowledge and applies science and discoveries to further education, health care, and community service locally and globally. Baylor psychiatrists were instrumental in bringing colleagues to the trainings, hosting trainings for their staff, and collaborating with MOPSHS to plan for the sustainability of the program.

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.

The 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 on the basis of race, religion, or ethnicity.

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

Outcome 1: Increase capacity of the Houston CVE Training and Engagement Initiative by building a sustainable approach to training implementation and program socialization.

Outcome indicators

- Number of vetted trainers who have completed the train-the-trainer program and are certified to teach the curriculum to parents
- Number of certified trainers who have effectively conducted at least one training event to positive reviews

Midterm Outcome 1.1: Increase Houston's regional capacity to counter violent extremism through the development of training tools, curricula, and guides.

Midterm Outcome 1.2: Build community support for the program through all types of media via a structured communications strategy.

Midterm Outcome 1.3: Enhance program sustainability through the development of a train-the-trainer program, with appropriate vetting and certification.

Results

- 26 trainers (87% of goal) have successfully completed the train-the-trainer program and are able to conduct programs.
- No additional information was provided about how many trainers have conducted at least one training event and received generally positive reviews.¹

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

Outcome 2: Increase community engagement and resource awareness to counter violent extremism through participation in scenario-driven workshops and events and resource awareness.

Outcome indicators

- Percent increase in score from pre- to posttest in workshops
- Percentage of workshop reviews that are positive (average 4 out of 5)
- Percentage of trainer/facilitator reviews that are positive (average 4 out of 5)
- Number of social media engagements (likes, retweets, and impressions)

Midterm Outcome 2.1: Increase public engagement through implementation of comprehensive communications plan.

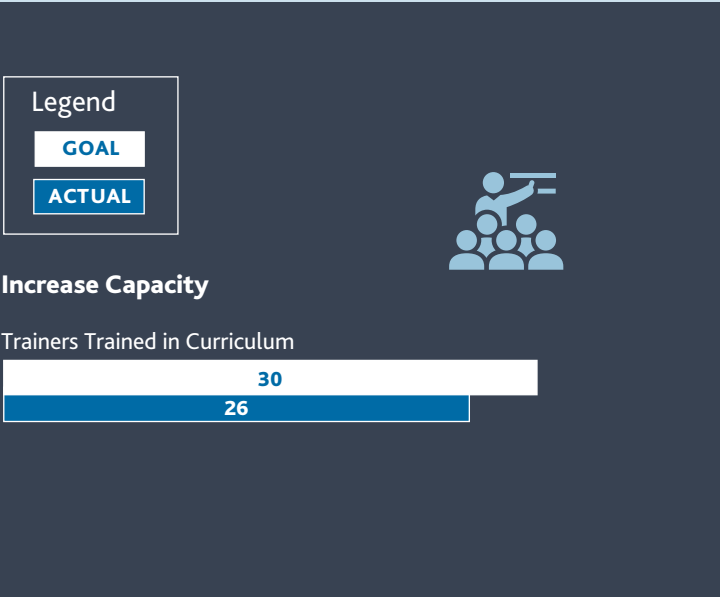
Midterm Outcome 2.2: Increase access and knowledge of support resources and services to parents with at-risk youth.

Midterm Outcome 2.3: Enhance educational opportunities for youth specific to countering violent extremism in the Houston Urban Area.

Results

No results for these outcomes indicators have been reported at this time.²

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



Change of Scope

As noted above, MOPSHS's original proposal included three key components: a culturally competent coalition of trainers and increased parental and youth engagement and understanding. However, MOPSHS, in tandem with its subcontractor Outreach Strategists, decided to omit the third component—youth engagement through a youth-specific curriculum—to concentrate its efforts on engaging parents, who would be best situated to address concerns about youth engagement with extremist groups by speaking to their own children. Furthermore, because of concerns about the potential for community backlash and negative media attention, MOPSHS decided not to engage the local community through social media promoting either the training curriculum or the current CVE Grant Program. Thus, a comprehensive communication plan about the initiative was not implemented.

Results from Partner Surveys About the Heartland Project

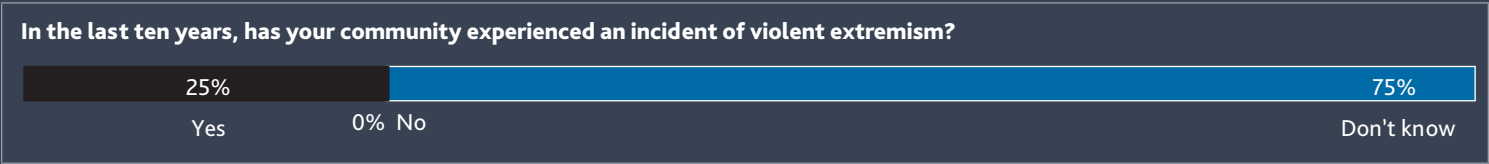
To help supplement the monthly calls and site visits, the evaluation team also conducted a comprehensive survey.³ Partner surveys were sent to contacts identified by the prime grantee. The purpose was to obtain feedback on partner interactions with the prime, each other, and the community regarding the grant. Two respondents from the grantee completed the prime survey; four respondents from partner organizations completed the partner survey.

The tables below show responses to 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 MOPSHS of Houston. The third and fourth items address local and national political climate and how it may affect CVE-related work.

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.

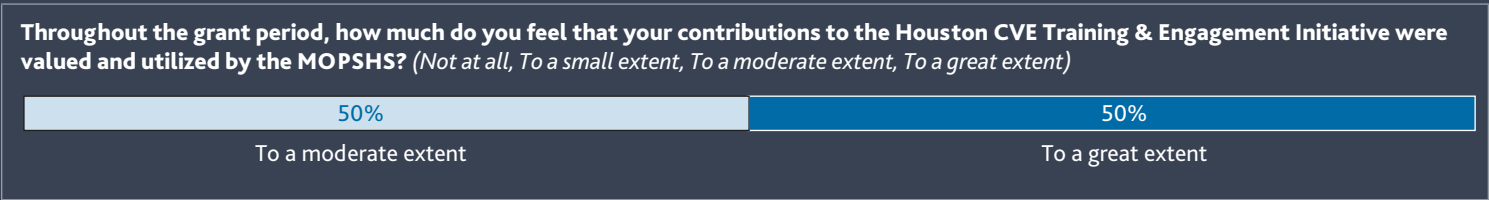
Perception of Community Experiences with Violent Extremism

Regarding a local history of violent extremism incidents, one respondent answered that the Houston region had experienced incidents of violent extremism, listing school shootings and religiously or racially motivated hate crimes such as mosque bombings, stabbings of individuals in religious garb, and honor killings. Most respondents were not sure whether the region had been victimized by violent extremism. The inconsistency may reflect the larger confusion about how to define “violent extremism.” Although 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.



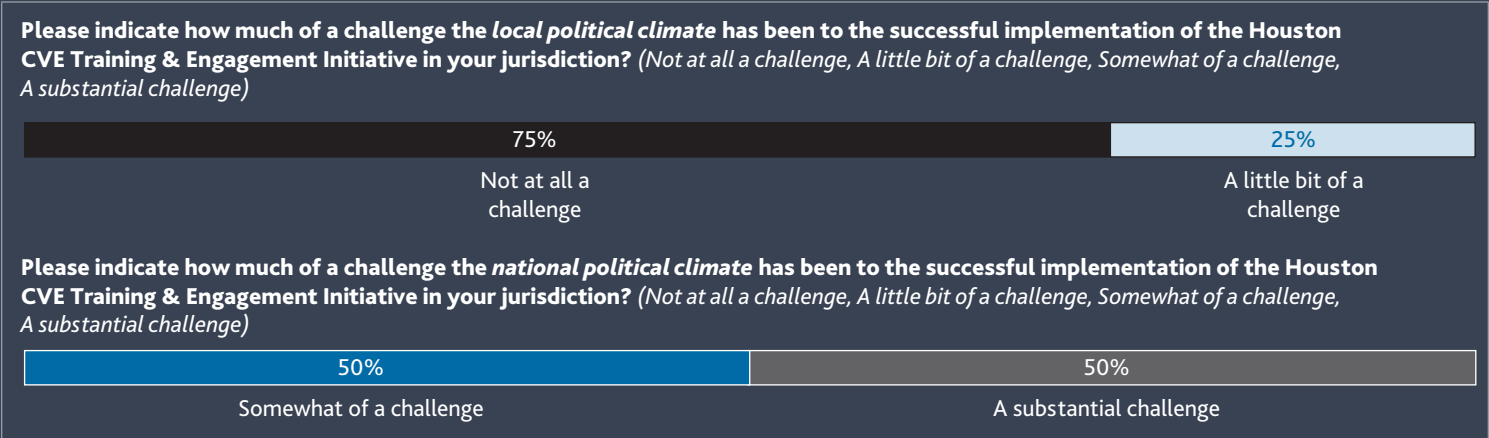
Whether Partners Felt Valued and Utilized

All four partners felt their contributions were valued and utilized to some extent. Two partners expressed feeling moderately valued and utilized; two others said that they felt that their contributions were greatly valued and utilized. The discrepancy between organizations suggests that the grant program was not especially cohesive and that additional team building at the outset of the project would have been beneficial.



Local and National Political Climate and How It May Affect Related Work

Last, two survey items measured perceived challenges related to local and national political climate. The results were disparate in that the local political climate seems to have less bearing on the success of the local CVE effort than does the current national political climate.



Recommendations

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

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

If funds for evaluation were allocated from the outset of the grant, the evaluation team would have been better positioned to provide technical assistance to MOPSHS. This type of evaluation support would have aided the development and use of a logic model to conceptualize the grant program's activities, outputs, and intended impact. Additional assistance would have emphasized the importance of more clearly communicating the train-the-trainers model before extending invitations to the initial workshop. An evaluation team also could have helped to develop survey items to measure the extent to which prospective trainers felt familiar and comfortable with the curriculum. One outcome goal, measuring whether trainees had increased their CVE knowledge, was designed to rely on pre- and posttests administered during the award period. Although such an instrument was developed, the survey was not conducted. Last, the evaluation team could have collaborated with MOPSHS and Outreach Strategists to find a mechanism to track trainers and learn which audiences they were engaging.

Recommendation 2: Rename the CVE grant program in a way that emphasizes building community resilience and reducing harm.

During site visits, many of those interviewed discussed challenges associated with the use of CVE terminology. As such, MOPSHS generally avoided reference to "countering violent extremism" for two primary reasons: (1) to overcome concerns in the Houston community that CVE is really a surveillance program designed to monitor specific individuals and (2) to more clearly emphasize the importance of emotional vulnerability in rendering some youth susceptible to extremist group recruitment. The same grant under another name may attract less controversial attention.

Developed for:
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