



'It starts with the parents': Community leaders issue call to families to help end gun violence



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Community members gathered at Lighthouse Church on Mt. Oliver on Friday evening and passed around the obituary of De'Avry Thomas, an 18-month-old, who was shot and killed in a drive-by shooting near One PPG Place last month.

The obituary showed an infant full of life surrounded by his favorite cartoon character, the PJ Mask. De'Avry is just one of many who have lost their lives due to gun violence in Pittsburgh.

Leaders from around the city announced the National Summit on Fatherhood initiative. The event was sponsored by Community and Family Builders and the South Pittsburgh Coalition for Peace and supported by the Black Political Empowerment Project, the Greater Pittsburgh Coalition Against Violence and Washington, D.C.-based 100 Fathers, Inc.

They issued a call to unite families and end gun violence.

“I call gun violence a chronic disease,” Rev. Eileen Smith, of Penn Hills and co-founder of South Pittsburgh Coalition for Peace, told the crowd. “But how many know that diseases can be treated? It starts with the parents.”

Just two days before Father’s Day, community leaders encouraged parents — specifically fathers — to become more active in their children’s lives. They believe that when parents are actively involved with their children, it lowers their chances of being involved in gun violence.

“Society has said fathers do not matter,” Pastor Maurice Trent said. “But we have proof that is not true.”

He said that some of the most “disgusting” crimes are done by those who grew up in fatherless homes. But children with fathers who are present have someone to guide them away from violence.

The U.S. Children’s Bureau found that 85% of those in prison have absent fathers and children without fathers at home are more likely to go to jail as adults.

As Father’s Day approaches, Rev. Smith pointed out that many families will not be able to celebrate with their fathers. She says some aren’t able to because their parents are incarcerated or lost to gun violence.

According to the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police’s annual report, 70% of last year’s homicide victims were Black people. Yet, Black people make up only 23% of the city’s population.

The Lighthouse Church believes that this could be due to the lack of outreach within the Black community. The group highlighted that other racial groups in surrounding areas, such as Mt. Washington, has provided their communities with Recreational Centers. Yet, in the Hill District, there are very few places for children to spend their free time.

Tim Stevens, president and CEO of the Black Political Empowerment Project believes that gun violence can be cured. The project, along with over 300 people, created the [Greater Pittsburgh Coalition Against Violence Strategies for Change](#). Within the coalition, it is recommended that the community encourage the youth and become more active. The document suggests the community create “a web of block watch programs” to connect

with one another. This strategy will help with community engagement and “empower neighborhood communities.”

“It takes an entire village to raise a child,” the document reads. “If our village does not, youth may seek another kind of family—a family that is fostered in violence.”

Rev. Smith issued a challenge to Pittsburgh fathers: “Get involved with your children and never give up on them.”

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