

UVA, Charlottesville, Albemarle Collaborate To Address Gun Violence Trends



University Police Department officer Wallace Goode patrols along the Corner district on Tuesday morning. (Photo by Sanjay Suchak, University Communications)

In the wake of the Nov. 13 tragedy on Grounds and increases in gun violence in the greater Charlottesville area, University of Virginia leaders are taking steps to better understand the root causes of gun violence in our region and across the nation, develop strategies to enhance safety in the short term, and to find solutions for the longer term.

At the most recent Board of Visitors meeting, UVA President Jim Ryan said the trends are concerning – nationally and locally – and demand time and attention.

“It’s critical that we’re working with our partners in the city and in the county to do what we can to keep our students, employees, patients and community safe,” he said.

The University has implemented several initial changes in response to Nov. 13 and regional gun violence, adding public safety resources to key areas, adjusting how it manages its threat-assessment process, and how it administers no-trespass orders. More enhancements are being explored.

UVA Chief Operating Officer Jennifer “J.J.” Davis said she and other UVA representatives meet regularly with colleagues from Charlottesville and Albemarle County to gather and review crime data and to focus on key initiatives to promote a safe, healthy living and learning environment, including community access to mental health and youth engagement resources.

Davis said the group, which includes University Police Chief Tim Longo, also has tapped into UVA’s well of public safety expertise in areas such as threat assessment, school safety, gun violence and mental health. The group is also leveraging the knowledge of law enforcement professionals from across the country who participate in the various public safety programs sponsored through the School of Continuing and Professional Studies, including the Master of Public Safety degree program, the National Criminal Justice Command College and the FBI National Academy.



President Jim Ryan reviewed issues related to rising gun violence and crime during a discussion at the Board of Visitors meeting earlier this month. (Photo by Sanjay Suchak, University Communications)

Charlottesville Police Chief Michael Kochis, a recent graduate of the Master of Public Safety program developed by Longo, recently announced increased city police patrols and presence in several areas that have experienced an increase in reports of gun violence or criminal activity.

City and county police have made multiple arrests over the past several months in connection with recent local shootings, including a fatal shooting on Hardy Drive and another that occurred at a Cherry Avenue convenience store.

Longo told the UVA board that he and his colleagues in the city and county have begun to meet monthly to assess emerging crime trends across the region and discuss ways in which the

departments can “collaborate on implementing long-term and sustainable public safety strategies.”

“Crime doesn’t happen in a vacuum and certainly can’t be solved in a vacuum,” Longo said. “To think we can do anything in this community without collaboration with our partners would be a serious mistake.”

The meetings include representatives from the Virginia State Police and the other law enforcement partners that serve the region. Collectively, Longo said, the group reviews real-time data to identify emerging trends and patterns that affect community safety.

“Having all the right resources in the room at the same time allows commanders to develop response strategies, rapidly deploy appropriate supportive resources, and begin the process of assessing and reassessing results,” he told UVA Today this week. Longo said he and his colleagues hope the meetings will also lead to more strategies addressing a host of issues including how local police partner with mental health service providers.

Longo also announced that the University, in collaboration with Charlottesville Police, has extended the public safety Ambassador Program to increase visibility and reduce crime. Since October 2021, University Police have leveraged the concurrent jurisdiction agreement that the University has shared with the city since 2005 to expand police resources into neighborhoods adjacent to Grounds where students live and gather. In addition to their presence on the Corner during

the late-night hours, University Police officers and Ambassadors have increased their visibility in an effort to complement the city's policing efforts, Longo said.

The Ambassador Program serves as an additional safety resource to students, faculty, staff and the broader University community. The Ambassadors, who wear bright green vests, are unarmed security officers who have a regular presence on the Corner and across other areas on and near Grounds.

In addition to maintaining a presence, their roles include connecting students and others with resources such as Safe Ride, or walking them to a destination or waiting at a bus stop with them. Ambassadors also are in communication with the local emergency dispatch center as needed. In addition to their visibility in areas where there is a high level of pedestrian traffic, Longo said, the Ambassadors "serve as a force multiplier for local law enforcement."

UVA requested an independent review of how it handled events that led up to the fatal on-Grounds shootings on Nov. 13, including the role of its threat assessment team. The University plans to use those independent findings to understand more clearly what happened, and to identify what processes to improve for the future. The shootings took the lives of student-athletes Devin Chandler, Lavel Davis Jr. and D'Sean Perry. Two other students, Marlee Morgan and Mike Hollins, suffered injuries as well.

The review is ongoing, but UVA officials already have made some changes since Nov. 13 to the processes of the threat

assessment team, which includes representatives from across the University's academic and medical center departments who gather to review emerging reports of potential threats to public safety on Grounds.

Having any firearm on Grounds is prohibited by University policy, with few and well-defined exceptions. According to Virginia law, firearms are prohibited in any state-owned or -leased building, and violating that law can incur potential criminal charges. Public universities, however, are the only state agency exempt from this law, which arguably weakens the University's remedies when enforcing violations of existing administrative policy, UVA officials said.

Because the University's current policy is administrative and a violation would not result in criminal liability, law enforcement does not have the full range of investigative and enforcement options that are typically associated with violations of criminal law, Longo said. One example would be the ability to obtain a search warrant when officials have probable cause to believe a firearm is inside a dorm room. Currently, non-law enforcement officials could be called upon to look into suspicion of a firearm in such spaces, potentially putting them at risk.

Longo and others from public higher education supported a change in that law during the most recent General Assembly session, but the bill failed.

Ryan said UVA also is pursuing broader-based and longer-term potential solutions to gun violence. In one example, the

Karsh Institute of Democracy has created a research lab dedicated to studying the national issue of gun violence, and plans eventually to make recommendations on how communities can take steps to reduce it. That work has begun with a review of practices that communities across the country have put into place with good results.

Davis said the University and its partners in Charlottesville and Albemarle County will continue to work together to identify new approaches to further enhance public safety. She encouraged members of the University and broader communities to report concerns and to take advantage of resources such as the Ambassadors.

“Providing a safe environment is our top priority. We are committed to working with the entire community in pursuit of that fundamental goal,” she said.

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