

# SNUG program gets off to encouraging start

**BY PATRICK J. BRADLEY**  
Contributing Writer

A not-for-profit agency best known for providing crisis and community support services is off to promising start with an innovative program aimed at reducing gun violence.

Named SNUG – that’s guns spelled backward – it sends outreach workers into targeted areas of Niagara Falls to interact with teens and young adults who are believed to be at risk for involvement in gun violence. It’s the newest service provided by Community Missions of Niagara Frontier – and one of 14 in the state funded through state Department of Criminal Justice grants.

Unlike other crime prevention crime programs, the outreach workers SNUG employs are uniquely qualified by their criminal backgrounds and life experiences.

“There are two criteria for being an outreach worker,” said SNUG Program Manager Eric Boerdner, vice president for specialized services at Community Missions. “They have to be from the community, and have been involved in gun-related events and the criminal lifestyle.”

They must also have done prison time. Tommy Sanders, a SNUG outreach worker who spent 17 years behind bars for armed robbery, credits his incarceration for his ability to connect with at-risk



Images courtesy of Community Missions

teens and young adults.

“The person they will listen to is someone who has been like them,” Sanders said. “They respect me because of my life experience.”

SNUG treats gun violence like a disease by identifying its symptoms and intervening to halt its spread. It’s a proactive approach that involves meeting teens and young adults in their environ-

ments, talking to them about the consequences of their actions, and emphasizing the pitfalls of gang membership and gun violence. Outreach workers also counsel at-risk youths on the importance of making good decisions that don’t involve using guns to solve their problems.

The SNUG team also responds to shooting scenes and hospital emergency rooms, where it ad-



resses emotional conflicts between the supporters of shooting victims and their accused shooters to prevent further violence. Members don’t always work alone.

“Clergy response can also play a big part in SNUG’s response,” Boerdner said. “Trust in the clergy is big in our community.”

Community Missions Vice President of Public Relations and Development Christian Hoffman said providing support to the families of gun violence victims is another way SNUG demonstrates a commitment to the community. That support has included delivering a week’s worth of groceries, assuming expenses for the repass – an informal post-funeral gather-

ing for family and friends – and providing linkages to crime victims assistance programs.

SNUG was launched in January, so it’s too early to measure its effectiveness in a meaningful way. However, the early indications are promising. Monthly programs held in its center city target area including a free community meal, a presentation by 16 small business owners on the basics of entrepreneurship and an Easter basket giveaway, have been well received and relationships are being formed.

“You have to give these kids something different,” Sanders said. “I don’t want these young kids going to jail. If we can save one life, we’ve done our job.”

# Fall off in donations, increased demand challenge pantry program at Community Missions

**BY PATRICK J. BRADLEY**  
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The soaring cost of food, combined with a seasonal decline in donations, is challenging efforts by Community Missions of Niagara Frontier to provide critically needed support to those who need it most.

As they do every year, donations to the mission have fallen off after

the winter holiday season, said agency Vice President of Public Relations and Development Christian Hoffman.

“Between Christmas and the May postal workers food drive, we’re not seeing nearly as much in donations,” Hoffman said. “But demands on the food pantry are the same throughout.”

In fact, the needs of those who

rely on Community Mission’s food pantry have been heightened by the elimination of emergency Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits that were paid during the COVID-19 public health emergency.

The SNAP supplement ended Feb. 28.

“Benefits have gone down a

pretty substantial amount compared to what (recipients) were getting,” said Eric Boerdner, the mission’s vice president for specialized services. “At the same time, prices are going up and putting more demand on the pantry.”

The Community Missions food pantry consistently serves 210 unique households a week.

“Toward the end of the month, there’s a 30 to 40% increase,” Boerdner added.

FeedMore WNY, a Buffalo-based organization dedicated to ending hunger, has provided food to the pantry. Community Missions also relies heavily on donations from Wegmans, DiCamillo’s, Sam’s Club and other local merchants.

“We’re still spread really thin,” Boerdner said.

For information about donating to Community Missions, visit [communitymissions.org](http://communitymissions.org).

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Volunteers donated time during Easter week (hence the outfits). (Images courtesy of Community Missions)

