

Community leaders hold forum in wake of teen shootings

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MIAMI (WSVN) -- Police and community leaders gathered, Thursday, for a public forum triggered by the fatal shootings of two teenagers this week. Sixty minors have been shot over the past year alone. Thirty of them were killed, according to the school district.

The forum, "Goals not Guns," was held to discuss solutions to end gun violence among the youth. The event was held at Miami-Dade College's historic Tower Theater in Little Havana and included stake holders from the community, federal, state and local governments.

The parents of a 15-year-old accused of murder showed up in court Thursday morning, where they heard the details of how police said their son killed a 16-year-old in a gang fight, Tuesday.

One gunshot victim, Aaron Willis, said he still doesn't know who pulled the trigger in his case. "Still to this day, I don't really know who did it. All I heard was the shots, and I felt a couple bullets fly by my ear," he said. "When I first got injured, the doctors were saying that it was unlikely for me to walk, ever."



Willis was shot while he rode his bicycle, four years ago. The bullet paralyzed him when he was 15 years old. However, even now, shootings continue to impact his life. "Just this year alone, I lost two friends already," he said.

It was just one of the reasons why he attended the forum. "I know how it feels to be a part of gun violence, and I also know how it feels to lose friends to gun violence," Willis said.

Leaders from all parts of the community sat down to discuss how to make the violence stop. The forum focused on how to protect witnesses, to find teens jobs and after-school activities to get them off the street. "I am frustrated at the fact that our victims and offenders are getting younger and younger," said the City of Miami Chief of Police, Rodolfo Llanes, "and we're losing kids to prosecution and death."

Miami-Dade Public Schools Superintendent Alberto M. Carvalho was one of many speakers to comment on the recent string of shootings in Miami-Dade that have left so many teens and children dead. "Kids continue to die. Within hours, 16- and 17-year-olds died," said Carvalho. "These were kids with promising futures."

Carvalho also called for better witness protection rights. "We need to lift the fear that exists in our community," said the superintendent. "People are afraid of speaking out because you could be next."

Leaders said accountability is a big part of the equation, not only for police and government but for parents. "Words alone, prayers, marches, vigils are not going to be sufficient," said Carvalho. "We need to get beyond the prayer and the march, the protests and actually roll up our sleeves, hold people like me, and those who hold public office, accountable for what's happening."

Willis said he has watched the violence worsen since he was shot. "Now, it's like you can't even go down the block without looking back, without having the worry that someone be coming or not," he said.

Another major factor is social media. According to Llanes, many of the gang-related fights in the area are originating online on social networking websites like Facebook, and by the time detectives find the online posts, it's usually too late.