

Our view: New funding helps defend Erie peace

By the Editorial Board

Posted Apr 20, 2020 at 12:01 AM

The fight to contain gun violence must continue.

The COVID-19 pandemic has swept aside life as we knew it and poses many questions for the future.

We can't know yet what life will look like as we begin to restart the economy. Ongoing safety precautions might change our daily business, events, habits and more.

But life will go on and many problems that existed prior to the pandemic will remain, perhaps even worsen.

We had previously strongly advocated for funding for the Erie County Re-entry Services and Support Alliance, a key component of Erie's anti-gun violence strategy. ECRSSA pairs ex-offenders with the resources and support they need to successfully reintegrate into the community, rather than commit new crimes and return to prison.

Now amid the pandemic crisis comes a piece of good news. Local lawmakers came together across the aisle to help deliver the money urgently needed to keep ECRSSA operational for another year.

As reporter Madeleine O'Neill detailed, the Pennsylvania Department of Education has granted \$455,000 to ECRSSA.

According to the Greater Erie Community Action Committee, under which ECRSSA operates, state Sen. Dan Laughlin, R-49th Dist.; and state Reps. Pat Harkins, D-1st Dist., and Bob Merski, D-2nd Dist., worked together to obtain the funding.

ECRSSA faced a possible shutdown after startup funding first awarded in 2016 by the Erie

Community Foundation and the United Way of Erie County ran out.

The Community Foundation and the United Way had provided bridge funding to keep ECRSSA in operation until the money announced Thursday was obtained.

Erie County District Attorney Jack Daneri said he was “extremely pleased” by the grant. We agree. Loss of re-entry services would have marked a big step backward after important progress, and weakened the community’s response to violence.

Erie County’s average recidivism rate for ex-inmates is 41 percent. As O’Neill has detailed, among the 152 clients who received intensive case management from ECRSSA between 2016 and 2018, just 7 percent received new charges that resulted in a conviction and incarceration.

Helping those individuals avoid a return to prison is a key component of Unified Erie’s successful gun violence reduction strategy. ECRSSA also coordinates community intervention sessions referred to as “call-ins” for those who are involved in networks of violence. The funding announced Thursday will cover continuation of those meetings, as well.

With help from Mercyhurst University Civic Institute researchers, Unified Erie deploys a data-driven, three-pronged strategy of prevention, enforcement and re-entry. It has been credited with halting gang-related shooting deaths.

This is no time to let up. As reporter Tim Hahn recently detailed, shots-fired reports in the city of Erie nearly doubled in the first quarter of 2020.

“Our shots-fired, our gun crimes are still our highest priority here,” Police Chief Dan Spizarny told Hahn.