

DECEMBER 2025

THE CHARLES TOWN INITIATIVE

Monthly Newsletter



DEAR CHARLES TOWN,

This month, we're reminded how deeply connected our community truly is. We're excited to highlight Shepherd University's recently formed Youth Coalition, which is creating meaningful opportunities for young people to shape the future of our community through leadership and collaboration. You'll also read about the many ways Charles Town continues to show up for one another. From joyful moments at Toys for Joys, where generosity brings comfort and excitement to local families, to recent efforts focused on giving back across our community, these stories reflect the compassion that defines Charles Town. Thank you for being part of a community that cares, learns, and grows together.



Charles Town Initiative

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Success by Numbers

November 2025

School Support Specialist, Police Support Specialist, and Lead Mentor

Number of Students Receiving Mentoring

7

Number of Mentoring Sessions

25

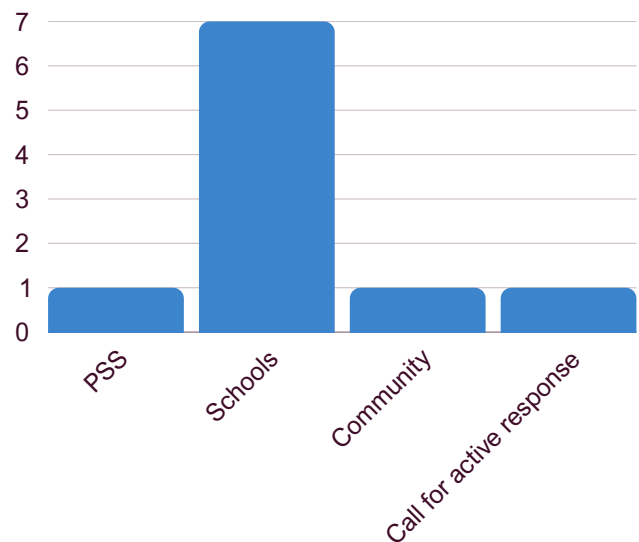
Number of Referrals to the SSS

9

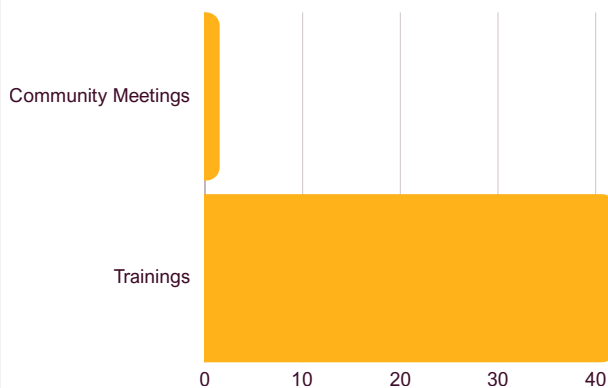
Number of Crisis Interventions Provided

5

Source of Referrals to SSS and PSS



Hours Spent at Community Events, Meetings, and Trainings



Specialized Skills Building Interventions to Moderate and High Risk Children

11

Number of ACEs Screenings

4

Indirect Case Management for Moderate and High Risk Children

5

COMMUNITY SPOTLIGHT: GIVING BACK IN CHARLES TOWN

Misty Waits, Police Support Specialist with the Charles Town Police Department, recently partnered with The Anthology Church to support the local homeless community. The church's youth group thoughtfully prepared 48 backpacks filled with essential items and personally delivered them to Misty. Pictured are Pastor Curtis, Youth Group Leader Michelle, her daughter Kendall, and Misty with the backpacks, an inspiring example of young people taking the lead to make a real difference in their community. Their efforts highlight the power of collaboration and compassion in addressing local needs.



CHECK OUT SHEPHERD UNIVERSITY'S NEW YOUTH COALITION!

Shepherd University's newly formed Drug-Free Student Coalition, led by faculty advisor Albina Laskovtsov, is hitting the ground running! Focused on educating, preventing, and reducing stigma around substance use, this



student-led group is all about promoting personal and community well-being. They recently hosted a tabling event at the Rams Den, engaging students on the importance of stigma-free language around substance use. Attendees learned how bias-free language and understanding substance use can make a real difference in creating a supportive campus environment. The Youth Coalition is excited to continue their mission and welcomes students to join the coalition and be part of positive change.

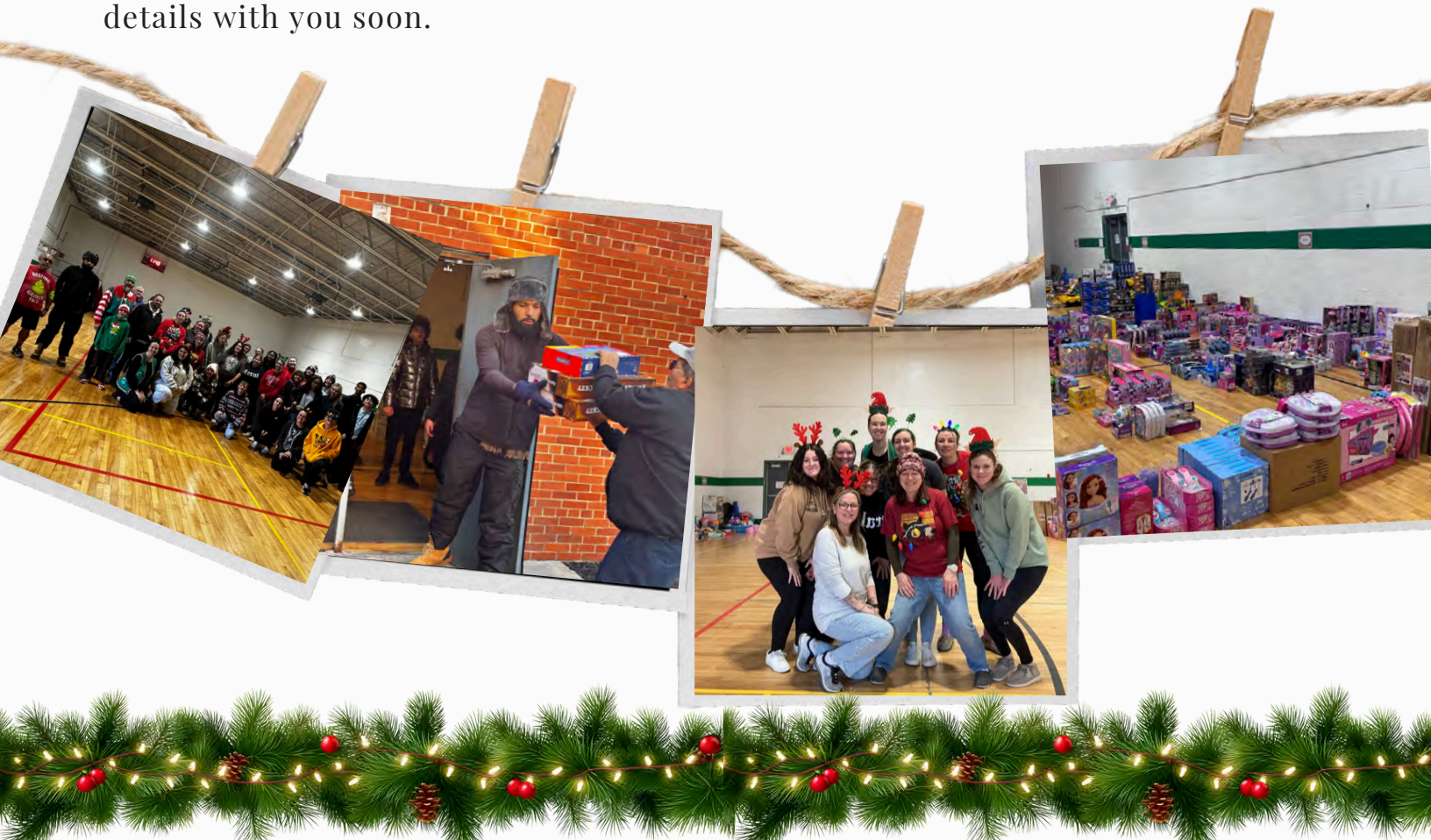


TOYS FOR JOYS

Spreading Cheer, One Toy at a Time

This month, CTI School Support Specialist Danielle Baker and Lead Mentor Brian Hairston participated in the annual Joys and Toys giveaway, an event that has truly become one of the most heartfelt traditions in our community. Thanks to a generous Secret Santa, who once again donated full tractor-trailers of toys, clothing, hygiene items, and household goods, thousands of items were made available to local families. Volunteers from a wide variety of community organizations worked side-by-side to unload, sort, and prepare these gifts.

Throughout the week, school counselors, social workers, and community organizations “shopped” for the children and families they serve, ensuring that hundreds of local kids will wake up to joy on Christmas morning. Joys and Toys is more than an event: it is a testament to how compassion, collaboration, and generosity can transform lives. We look forward to sharing photos and more details with you soon.



EDVENTURE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT TRAINING

On November 20, School Support Specialist Danielle Baker and Lead Mentor Brian Hairston attended a dynamic regional training, hosted by the WV Family Engagement Center and The Martinsburg Initiative, that brought educators, caregivers, and community partners together for a powerful day of connection and learning. Participants explored how to strengthen family-school relationships, elevate Appalachian cultural strengths, build trust, and use play and engagement strategies that support families statewide. These conversations reaffirmed a core truth: when families, schools, and communities work together, everyone thrives. We extend our thanks to all who participated and contributed to this meaningful day.



Learn. Engage. Create.



Martinsburg, WV

In partnership with The Martinsburg Initiative and West Virginia Department of Education.

Overview

Based on survey results, participants noted the importance of communication, building trust, creative engagement strategies, and forming stronger school-family-community partnerships through consistency and creativity. They appreciated opportunities to collaborate with peers, share ideas, and explore practical, low barrier family engagement approaches.

Impact

Nearly all participants (**94%**) agreed or strongly agreed that they left the training with new insights or strategies to strengthen family engagement.



Key Takeaways & Participant Voice



Family engagement can be simple, consistent, and intentional.

"Family engagement doesn't have to be a big deal just frequent."
"Engagements is small moments."



Family engagement & connection can be strengthened through hands-on strategies like art and LEGO® play.

"You can add play to engage in the simplest of ways."
"[There are] so many more opportunities for family engagement than I thought before."



Family engagement is built through partnership and trust.

"Loved the connection between trust and engagement."
"Learning what family engagement is and how we can all work together."

Strategies Learned

- Learning more about the **definition** of family engagement
- **Art** as a way to communicate
- Importance of **building trust** when working with families
- Utilizing **communication** with everyone involved with a student.

Notes to EdVenture

- *I am grateful to have taken part in this training and networking opportunity. They have assisted with my own motivation to be more strategic with how we engage families.*
- *Great training. Love the activities and diversity.*
- *This was great opportunity to improve and network with other professions.*
- *[I am] thinking about ways to create school-community connections.*
- *Everything is relevant and was pieced together collaboratively.*

WHEN COMMUNITY SAFETY BECOMES A HEART HEALTH ISSUE

A growing body of public health research is showing that the impacts of firearm violence extend far beyond immediate injuries and loss of life.



A recent study from the University of Michigan School of Public Health highlights an important and often overlooked connection: living in communities with higher levels of gun violence may increase residents' risk of dying from cardiovascular disease. The research found that for every 10 additional firearm incidents in a neighborhood each year, residents faced a 1.6% higher risk of death from stress-related heart disease, even after accounting for individual and community factors such as age, income, tobacco use, and urban versus rural location.

This study underscores a powerful insight for public health: violence isn't just about crime statistics, it's an environmental stressor that can wear down residents' bodies over time.

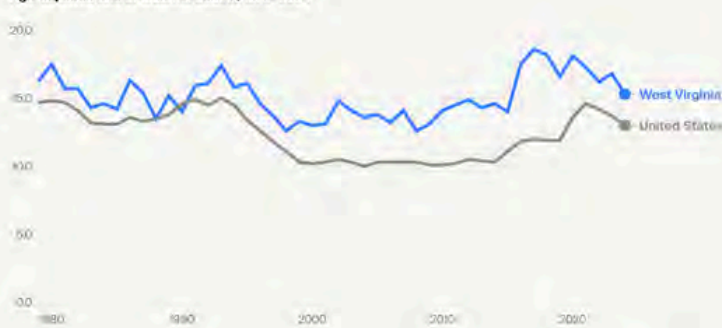
READ THE **STUDY**

Why This Matters Locally

In West Virginia, firearm-related deaths remain a significant public health concern. The state's firearm death rate is higher than the national average, with roughly 15–17 gun deaths per 100,000 residents each year, including homicides, suicides, and other gun-related fatalities. Heart disease is also the leading cause of death in West Virginia, with the state historically showing some of the highest rates of heart disease and related mortality in the nation. Taken together, these facts make the new Michigan study especially relevant for our communities: if firearm violence contributes to chronic stress that raises cardiovascular risk, then areas of West Virginia with higher rates of gun violence may also be grappling with greater heart health burdens—beyond what traditional risk factors alone can explain.

In 2024, the gun death rate was 17% higher in West Virginia than in the US.

Age-adjusted rate of firearms deaths, 1979–2024

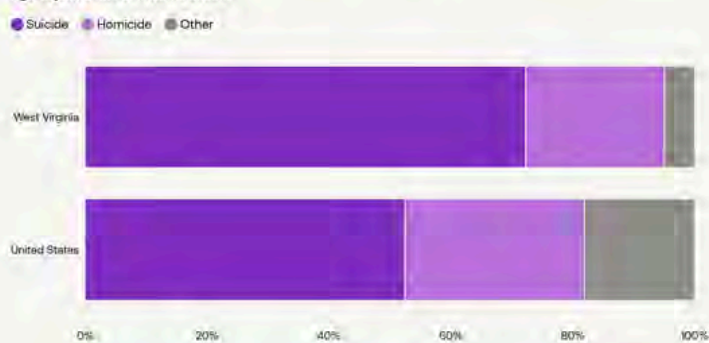


Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

USAFacts

In 2024, 72% of gun deaths in West Virginia were suicide.

Age-adjusted rate of firearms deaths



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

USAFacts

How Violence “Gets Under the Skin”

Repeated exposure to violence, whether through direct experience, witnessing it, or simply living in a neighborhood where it happens frequently, activates the body's stress response. Over time, this chronic stress can lead to inflammation, higher blood pressure, and damage to the heart and blood vessels. The body literally stays in “high alert” mode, which increases the risk of heart attacks, strokes, and other cardiovascular events. This connection suggests that violence prevention isn't just a matter of improving public safety—it could also be a strategy for improving population heart health.

Heart Disease and Violence in West Virginia: A Snapshot

- Firearm deaths in West Virginia average more than the U.S. average and include homicides and suicides, with the majority of gun deaths being suicides.
- Heart disease remains the state's top cause of death, with higher prevalence compared to many other states.

Many communities here already face social and economic challenges that can compound both stress and health risks—including limited access to healthcare, higher rates of smoking and obesity, and fewer opportunities for safe physical activity.

What This Means for Prevention

Traditionally, efforts to prevent heart disease focus on things like diet, smoking cessation, and encouraging exercise. While all of these remain important, the Michigan research suggests that reducing community violence could be another piece of the cardiovascular health puzzle.

Evidence-informed strategies that could make a difference include:

- Investing in safe, green public spaces that encourage exercise and reduce stress.
- Expanding mental health and community support services to help residents cope with trauma and chronic stress.
- Hospital-based and community intervention programs that support victims and reduce retaliation cycles.

When communities work to reduce violence, they can also help create environments where people feel safer, more connected, and less stressed—conditions that support heart health in the long run.

Looking Ahead

While the Michigan study doesn't prove that firearm violence causes cardiovascular deaths, it adds to a growing understanding that where we live and the stressors we face as a community can shape health outcomes. For West Virginia, this means seeing violence prevention and heart health promotion not as separate goals, but as linked priorities that can strengthen the wellbeing of families and neighborhoods across the state.





"TALK. THEY HEAR YOU."®
CAMPAIGN



What You Can Do to Prevent Your Child From Drinking Alcohol or Using Other Drugs

Be aware of potential risk factors, including:

- Significant life transitions, such as graduating from middle or high school or getting a driver's license;
- A history of social and emotional problems;
- Depression, anxiety disorders, or other mental health issues;
- A family history of alcohol or other substance use disorders; and
- Hanging out with friends or peers who drink alcohol or use other drugs.

Be a positive role model.

- Don't drink alcohol or use other drugs and drive, and don't get in a car if the driver has been drinking or using other drugs.
- Don't use prescription medication that wasn't prescribed by your doctor. And don't misuse medication that was prescribed to you.
- Get help if you think you have an alcohol- or other drug use-related problem.
- Don't give alcohol or other drugs to your child or their friends and peers. Explain that underage drinking and other drug use are never acceptable inside or outside your home.
- Know where you keep all of your alcohol and prescription medication, and always remind your child and their friends and peers that these substances are off-limits.



Work with schools and communities to ensure that they:

- Support and reward young people's decisions not to drink alcohol and use other drugs;
- Identify and intervene with kids who are engaged in alcohol and other drug use;
- Create, enforce, and promote rules that prevent underage drinking and other drug use; and
- Develop acceptable behavior agreements that are established, well-known, and applied consistently.

Provide support and give space for growth.

- Be involved in your child's life. Go to their school events and extracurricular activities, ask about their day, follow through on your commitments to them, and set aside time to do things together.
- Stay actively engaged in their social media activity. Talk with them about the differences between appropriate and inappropriate content and emphasize that what gets posted online can be there forever.
- Encourage their independence while establishing appropriate limits.
- Make it easy for them to share information about their life by actively listening and asking open-ended questions.
- Know where they are, what they're doing, and whom they're spending time with.

- Meet and get to know the parents or caregivers of their friends and peers. Share your rules about not allowing underage drinking or other drug use.
- Find ways for them to be involved in family life, such as participating in fun family activities and events, helping with house projects or weekly meal planning, doing chores, or volunteering together in the community.
- Tell them to never drink alcohol or use other drugs and drive or get in a car driven by someone who has been drinking or using other drugs.
- Help them find services and support if you're worried that they're using substances.
- Create and sign a family agreement form where you agree to help keep them substance-free and they agree to not drink alcohol or use other drugs.
- Learn more about the risks and dangers of underage drinking and other drug use by visiting talktheyhearyou.samhsa.gov and using #TalkTheyHearYou on social media. Share and discuss this information with them.



Set clear rules and expectations.

- Brainstorm with your child about ways they can have fun without drinking alcohol or using other drugs.
- Encourage them to avoid parties and other gatherings where alcohol or other drugs are present. And don't allow underage drinking or other drug use at get-togethers in your home.

Use Screen4Success.

Talking with kids early and often about the risks and dangers of underage drinking and other drug use can help keep them safe. But how do you know if your child needs more support, and where do you go to find it? Screen4Success will help you better understand your child's health, wellness, and wellbeing and find resources to help address their needs.

HELPFUL RESOURCES



Use and share Screen4Success.



Download and use "Talk. They Hear You." mobile app.



Subscribe and listen to "What Parents Are Saying" podcast.



Download and order "Talk. They Hear You." materials online from SAMHSA Store.



Download and read full "Tips for Teens" fact sheet series.



Download and read other SAMHSA underage drinking prevention and reduction materials.



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