

The CCROW Project



EMPOWERING WITNESSES THROUGH SUPPORT

Sergeant Jennifer Mitsch, Cincinnati Police Department

Karen Rumsey, Program Director/Victim's Advocate, Cincinnati Police
Department

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Cincinnati Police Department

Abstract

The “no snitch” mentality that has plagued our communities over that last few decades has made it difficult to prosecute known criminals for the heinous crimes they commit. There is growing concern over increasingly blatant witness intimidation occurring in and out of the courtrooms. With the popularity of social media, cell phones are being used to photograph witnesses and their families and post pictures labeling them “snitches”. Real and perceived fear of retaliation is making its impact on our communities. Successful intimidation efforts result in lower arrest rates, more violent offenders on the streets and obstacles to lowering our crime rates. Although a variety of victim-witness units exist throughout the country, there is an overwhelmingly insufficient amount of support for witnesses. While criminals have their entourage of support lining the hallways of the courthouse and sitting in the courtroom, witnesses are often left alone, expected to show up and do the right thing, with no support but plenty of intimidation. The specific key strategies of the Cincinnati Citizens Respect Our Witnesses (CCROW) innovative program are: (1) To work in collaboration with community residents, businesses and identified stakeholders to improve victim and witness support and cooperation; (2) To deliver in-depth training and technical assistance to communities wishing to implement trauma-informed, victim/witness centered comprehensive strategies to combat victim/witness intimidation; (3) To have in impact in lowering homicide rates and increasing unsolved homicides.

We focus on public awareness of witness intimidation and support, training and research related to outcomes. Our program facilitates the support and empowerment for our witnesses from the

time of the event throughout the course of trial. This program is focused on the break down of the no-snitch mentality so it no longer has credibility in the communities we serve. Our hope is that arrests and convictions will increase, our communities will become safer and a refreshed community created from support and acknowledgement will prevail.

Scanning

Since the beginning of 2015, the City of Cincinnati is at an all-time high rate of shootings. One underserved population of victims are the witnesses to homicide who often suffer in silence due to lack of support and services. Witnesses are afraid to speak out against perpetrators due to fear of retaliation, which results in more crime and more victims. It is a known fact that there is a no snitch mentality that has plagued many cities in the United States over the last several decades, making it difficult to prosecute known criminals for the heinous crimes they commit.

In Cincinnati, investigators, prosecutors and judges have noticed an intensification of this no-snitch mentality, resulting in blatant intimidation of witnesses. The defendants seem to have an entourage of support in the courtrooms, lining the hallways and posted outside the courthouse to follow witnesses. With the popularity of social media, cell phones are being used to photograph witnesses and their families. Their photos as well as findings from the Clerk of Court's website are posted on social media as a means of intimidation. It has been common for witnesses in homicide cases to share information with police, only to reject testifying at court because of fear. Without witness testimony, detectives may not be able to make an arrest. Over the last ten years, there have been approximately 243 unsolved homicides in Cincinnati, Ohio. A poll of Cincinnati Police Department Homicide Detectives has shown that they have 'known' suspects in about eighty-five percent of their unsolved cases because they have been unable to make an

arrest because witnesses fear retaliation and intimidation and refuse to come forward and/or testify.

In April of 2015, a Sweet Sixteen birthday party was held for a young woman at the YMCA in the Cincinnati neighborhood of Walnut Hills. A flyer was posted on social media and sent via text message from teen to teen. Eventually the party was at capacity and non-invited guests were turned away. In addition, non-invited guests were showing up just to gather outside the event and socialize. The responsible adults of the party instructed teens to call their parents to get them for the evening and also called police to advise them of the situation. Cincinnati Police District Four officers responded and advised the group outside to disperse and go home. Shortly after, as the teens were sent outside and the parents and guardians began to show up for their children, shots rang out from several areas of the street. In the end, three teens were shot. Two teens were shot and survived their injuries. Seventeen year-old Kelsie Crow was hit as she was pulling out of the parking lot to leave; she did not survive her injuries. This incident epitomized the sign of our times, and the anti-snitch culture we live in. There were at least one hundred citizens outside that fateful night, and no one who has shared information was willing to give information or testify at court. There were teenagers, adults, parents and grandparents present. This case embodies the countless other murders which remain unsolved for the same reasons and outrage the community.

The Cincinnati Police Department's Homicide and Victim's Advocate Unit began brainstorming ways to combat the problem of witness intimidation and lack of cooperation that were the catalysts to the no-snitch mentality. A need was identified within the system where there was insufficient support provided to our witnesses to feel safe and empowered to testify. While there were several existing frameworks offering some support to witnesses, it is overwhelmingly

insufficient. The prosecutor's office historically offers one victim's advocate per case. This advocate is usually responsible for maintaining contact with the victim's family and informing them of the court proceedings and sitting with the family during court. The advocate cannot manage both the victim's family as well as potentially numerous witnesses. The courthouse was equipped with two rooms separate from the courtrooms in which witnesses can sit and wait. It would not be unusual for a witness to spend an entire day, if not several days in a row, in this room. Usually, a detective that is not serving as the State's representative sits with them. Many times, in order to maintain separation of witnesses, there is not enough staff to fit the need. The witnesses become an island among themselves, while the defendant's entourage lay in wait. Homicide detectives do a good job of ensuring witnesses are assessed as to their safety and try to ensure that witnesses are kept informed of court proceedings. However, when the incident and court proceedings are often a year or two away, it is not uncommon for witnesses to have changed numbers and/or moved to a new location, leaving the detective unable to locate the witness.

Analysis

The identification of barriers to witness participation was the first step in developing the program. Common barriers identified included transportation to and from court, daycare during the court day, emergency housing, support and escorting during the court day, maintaining telephone contact, breakfast and or lunch during the court day, and safety and security during the process. Part of the strategic plan was to remove these barriers. With the common barriers taken care of, victims advocates could then focus on trauma-informed care for the witness for a well-rounded service which would aid in program success and the treatment of the victim/witness.

Open cases within the homicide unit were reviewed, detectives were interviewed and cases with witnesses (cooperative and non-cooperative) were identified. The project manager and victim's advocate attended community meetings in each of Cincinnati's neighborhoods and interviewed community members about the issue. Another strategy of the program was to involve community members as volunteers in the support of the witness.

Yet another barrier was witness intimidation in the courthouse. Issues with witness cooperation are historically a problem in most homicide cases and the problem has been getting worse for the last decade. With the rise in social media, the ways witnesses can be intimidated have taken on a global capacity. What used to be limited to a neighborhood, phone calls or face-to-face is now visible to the whole world on social media. We knew we had to address the issue of cell phones in the courtroom and intimidation in the halls and to and from court.

The no-snitch mentality and problem of witness non-cooperation involves witnesses, family members of the homicide victims, jury members, community members, as well as the police agencies involved and the prosecutor's office who are charged with the safety protection of our communities. Addressing the issue of witness non-cooperation will serve all parties involved.

Court proceedings will become safer, community members will have a say in empowering others, and witnesses will feel supported and get the care they need for the trauma they have encountered.

There is no doubt that there have been retaliatory murders, shootings, assaults and threats. Communities are living in fear of retaliation and fear of being shunned. Retaliation is not limited to the witnesses themselves, family members, loved ones, jurors and the legal system are also targeted.

Prior to the problem-solving project, the issue of witness intimidation was handled as best it could be. When there was probable cause, arrests were made. However, witnesses were not reporting the crime for the same reasons they were not coming to court, because of fear. There were services geared toward crime victims, but the witnesses had been left behind.

Our analysis revealed the nature and extent of the problem goes beyond the walls of the courthouse, beyond the limitations of immediate family members and witnesses. This was an invasive, evolving problem that could not be solved with a single solution. The analysis also revealed that because of the pervasive no-snitch mentality, communities had been paralyzed in fear and unable to come up with solutions. Unlike some other crimes, witness intimidation in homicide cases occurs regardless of time of occurrence or location.

Community members want the violence to stop, but were limited as to how they could be a part of the solution. Additionally, neighborhoods tended to focus on themselves and seemed confined to their boundaries, as opposed to a whole-community effort. Every citizen, employee and business owner of Cincinnati is a stakeholder in solutions to crime and a reduction in violence, regardless of what neighborhood they live or work. By offering ways community members can get involved and support those who are doing the right thing by cooperating in the investigation of violent crimes, the community becomes empowered.

Response

The Cincinnati Police Department's Homicide Unit developed the CCROW (Cincinnati Citizens Respect Our Witnesses) program. CCROW is a comprehensive program that seeks to care for the basic needs of the witnesses in an effort to treat the whole person. The witness is a person who should be recognized for the moral and ethical decision to do the right thing for the victim

and the community as a whole. Removing the criminal element off the streets and empowering citizens to take back their community is a win for all. The goals of the project were:

- 1.) Reduction in violent crime and homicides measured by decreases in crime rates.
- 2.) A decrease in the number of unsolved homicides as measured by arrests made in cold cases.
- 3.) An increase in the positive outcome of murder trials as measured by convictions, either by trial or by plea.
- 4.) A positive change in the culture of the no-snitch mentality as measured by survey data.
- 5.) Participation of witnesses in CCROW program in at least 80% of new homicide cases.

Our strategy was to address each of the barriers we identified, create policy regarding witness support volunteers, and create a sustainable program while collecting data and research on the epidemic. Because of the complex nature of the problem, we knew that we had to come up with a detailed, multidisciplinary focus to the problem. There would not be one solution, but a series of problem-solving measures that remove whatever obstacle could be put in the way of witness cooperation and community fear.

We created an eight part strategy in the form of a project proposal which was awarded two hundred thousand dollars by the Mayor of Cincinnati to pilot the project. Included in the budget was salary for a Coordinator, stipends for student interns, materials and supplies, cell phones, a minivan to transport witnesses to and

from court, parking expenses for witnesses, emergency and temporary housing funds, funds for food during trials, amenities such as a refrigerator and televisions for witness waiting rooms at the courthouse separate from the courtroom, and panic alarm key-fobs that would give witnesses direct access to police dispatch in the event of a threat. At the inception of the program, any witness who came forward with information on a homicide case, current or unsolved was offered participation in the program. A needs assessment was conducted by the victims advocate office and the witness was educated about the program. Mothers and other family members of homicide victims whose cases were unsolved reported their support for the program in hopes that someone who had previously been scared to come forward would find the support from the program enough to testify. Thirteen volunteers from the community volunteered to be trained during our first training session and have since been termed our “wing-men and women”. We collaborated with other community outreach organizations to offer referral services for ongoing witness needs. We began to do public service announcements and spots on local radio and television in an effort to educate the public and request help. Donations from businesses in the area began to offer financial support and donated goods.

We began with cases detectives were already managing and preparing for court and began attending to those witnesses whom we call “CCROWS”. Stakeholders were identified and included in strategic planning. We tackled the issue of courthouse intimidation by collaborating with the Hamilton County Prosecutor’s Office. At the discretion of the Judge, Deputies were placed outside the courtroom with a mobile data computer. Anyone wishing to come into the courtroom for the trial was asked to

present identification and run for any warrants before entry. This in itself turned much of the criminal element away from the courtroom. In addition, a video camera on a tripod was placed in the hallway to film those coming and going. No cell phones were allowed in the courtrooms. Those with cellphones were told to take them to their cars or find a way to get rid of them. Any cell phones found in the courtroom were confiscated.

CCROW volunteers were available to escort a witness into the courthouse if necessary, sit with them in the waiting rooms, and be in the courtroom during testimony if needed. Safety of all participants was paramount. The CCROW program differs from other projects and organizations in many ways. The first difference is that we are housed within the Cincinnati Police Department's Homicide Unit. We have developed a positive working partnership with the detectives and supervisors assigned to the homicide unit and have access to case files, written reports and victim/witness information immediately. The close proximity allows us to help victims and witnesses obtain information regarding their case that an outside agency would not have easy access. The CCROW program helps law enforcement concentrate on the task at hand, which is solving homicides, yet keeps the witnesses informed and up to date on their cases and engages witnesses with clinical needs. Staff within the CCROW program are either Licensed Social Workers by the State of Ohio, or active BSW or MSW Social Work students. This allows us to provide on-scene crisis intervention as well as follow-up assessments and therapeutic services as needed. There is not another agency in the nation that provides the scope of services offered by the CCROW program. Partnerships have been developed with agencies

such as: Cincinnati Works/Phoenix Program, CIRV (Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence), Women Helping Women, Parents of Murdered Children, Who Killed Our Kids, Catholic Charities, CenterPoint Health, You Can Speak for Me, University of Cincinnati Criminal Justice and Social Work Programs, Northern Kentucky University School of Social Work, Compassionate Friends, Fernside Center for Grief, and Talbert House Victim Services to name a few.

Assessment

Because the program has just entered its second year, data related to reduction in violence and decrease in the number of unsolved homicides is not yet available.

However, we have seen what appears to be a positive correlation between the program and convictions by plea. Initial surveys indicate that the witnesses say they would not have followed through or cooperated if it had not been for the CCROW program.

Often times, a plea may occur because defendants know that the witnesses are present, supported and ready to cooperate in the court proceeding.

Data continues to be collected, but the results appear to show a positive correlation between community support and witness cooperation.

We monitor the number of CCROW participants who have taken advantage of the program. In addition, we collect the following data: Age, sex, race, level of education, volunteer assigned, whether or not referrals have been made and to where, whether or not transportation and/or parking has been used, whether or not we sat with the witness during court, follow up dates, one on one counseling dates, telephone assistance, housing assistance, whether or not the witness used our panic alarm

system, when surveys were completed and how the case was resolved (conviction, plea, etc.)

As of May 2017, we have assisted sixty-four witnesses and have had eighteen convictions. Many cases have not yet gone to trial. The program is still being evaluated, but has taken off to a positive start. All evaluations are conducted under the supervision of Karen Rumsey, Program Director and Sergeant Jennifer Mitsch. Data has been collected in the form of surveys administered to detectives and can be found in the appendix.

Because of the nature and unpredictability of trials, it is difficult to get the same volunteers for more than one day. To combat this issue, we try to get more than one volunteer involved with the witness. We encourage businesses to offer volunteer hours for employees wishing to help with the program.

There has been no evidence of any problem displacement; in fact, the results have exceeded our expectations. One young CCROW participant now has his first 'legitimate' job of his adult life. Other cities such as Indianapolis and New York City have inquired about the program model. The response from the community is very positive, especially in the communities in which gun violence and homicide is greatest. The CCROW program has been asked to present at local stop-the-violence marches, churches, schools, and news media outlets. More importantly, the Attorney General's Office has included CCROW with funding along with the VALU (Victims Advocate Liaison Unit) to further our efforts, and the City of Cincinnati has added a classified position for the Coordination of both programs.

Continued monitoring and gathering of data will be necessary to develop outcomes and rationale for continuance of the program. Each CCROW is surveyed at three months, six months and at the completion of trial to determine their satisfaction with the program. Detectives will continue to be surveyed, as well as the prosecutor's office, and community members.

We believe our model will continue to show success and more cities will model our program. Our hope is for future research to be conducted on the relationship between community support and witness engagement, using our model in the study. We expect to see real data results at the completion of the first three years of the program due to the nature of the timeline homicide trials.

Agency and Officer Information

Key Project Team Members:

1. Jennifer Mitsch

Sergeant

3295 Erie Avenue

Cincinnati, Ohio 45208

513-979-4400

jennifer.mitsch@cincinnati-oh.gov

2. Karen Rumsey

Program Director/Victim's Advocate

801 Linn Street 6th Floor

Cincinnati, Ohio 45208

513-352-3542

karen.rumsey@cincinnati-oh.gov

Appendix

Figure 1.1 - Comments taken from homicide detectives' surveys regarding the program and charts with survey results:

"They are the most valuable source in dealing w/ witnesses and victim families. Pure joy to work with."

"Having been in Homicide for over 16 years VALU/ CCROW is a valuable program that has a positive impact on the units overall mission statement."

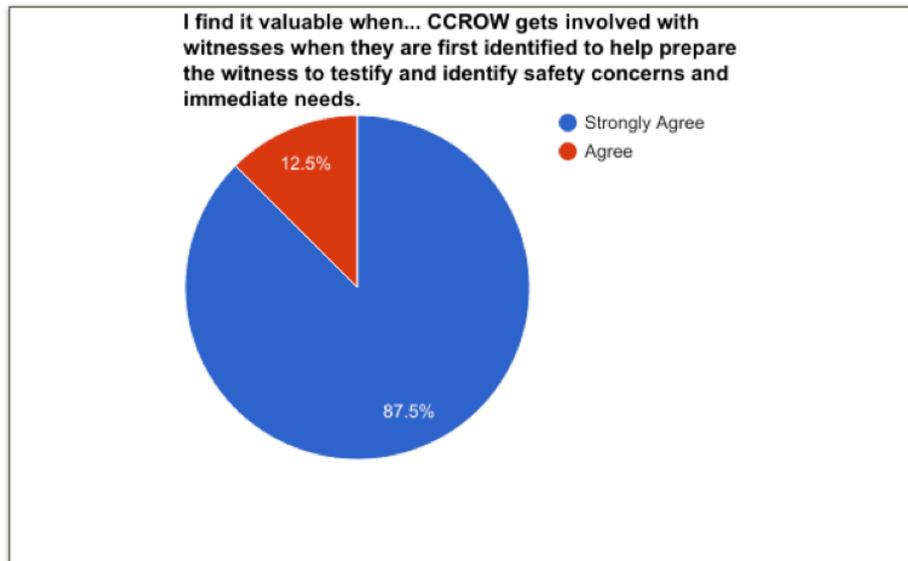
"Great work by all- so valuable to our mission. Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! "

"Thank you! "

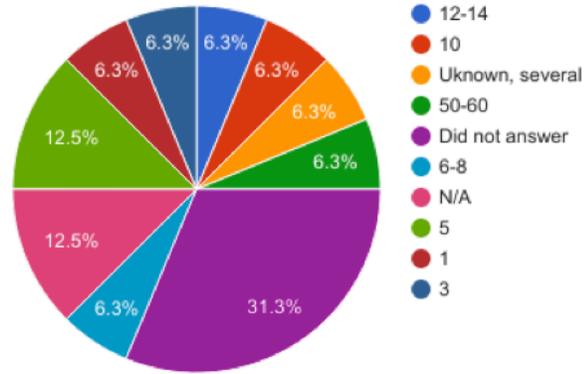
"I know CCROW, I am not familiar with VALU."

"The students came in with open minds & stayed professional. The knock on college students is often 'they think they know everything.' But I wouldn't attach that label to any of the students who have participated in VALU/ CCROW."

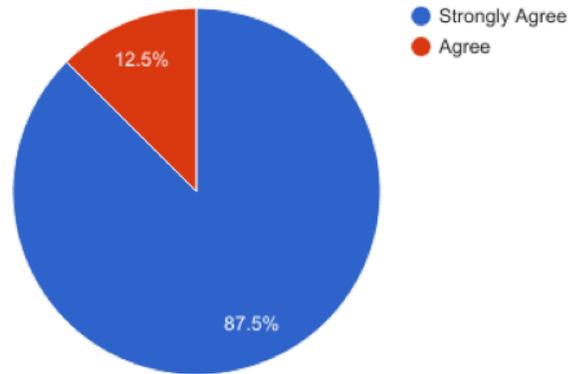
"Great job guys! Lots of hesitancy to come forward and talk- you bridge that difficult gap."



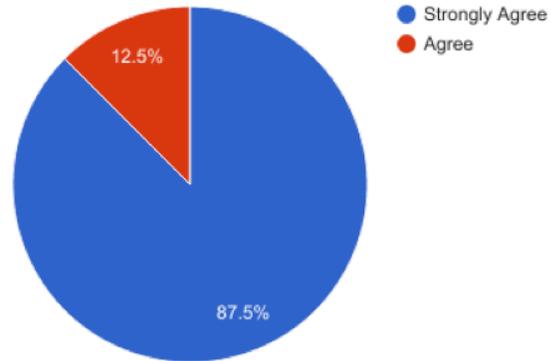
In the last year... Approximately how many times has VALU/ CCROW assisted witnesses in your cases in court?



I find it valuable when... CCROW accompanies witnesses to court for support.



I find it valuable when... CCROW provides support and assistance for witnesses to remove barriers that prohibit witnesses from testifying.



Count of The VALU/ CCROW Program helps to bridge the gap between detectives and families and assists witnesses.

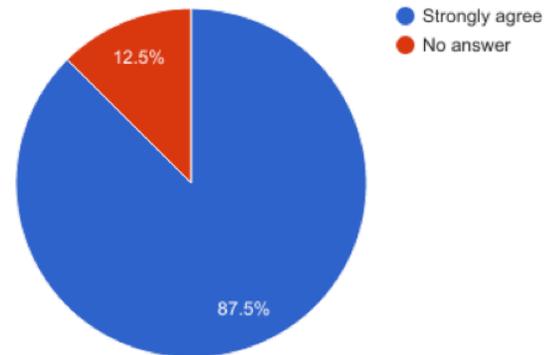


Figure 1.2 - Strategic plan of CCROW project proposal



Figure 1.3 CCROW in the media



XAVIER HRD GRADS USE CLASSROOM TOOLS TO TACKLE 'NO SNITCH' MENTALITY

<http://www.xavier.edu/now/Xavier-HRD-Grads-Use-Classroom-Tools-to-Tackle-No-Snitch-Mentality.xm>

SUPERIOR ACHIEVEMENT

Sergeant Jennifer Mitsch and **Ms. Karen Rumsey, Victim/Witness Advocate** are recognized as the Rotary Club of Cincinnati Award for Superior Achievement for their development and implementation of the CCROW Program for Witness Support.

The Cincinnati Police Department's Homicide Unit recognized a critical need to provide support to witnesses testifying in trials for homicides and other serious crimes. Many witnesses feel vulnerable when testifying and are often intimidated by a defendant's family and friends in the court room. A pervasive 'no-snitch' mentality has increasingly plagued communities making it difficult to prosecute known criminals for their crimes. As a result, a strategic plan was developed by the Homicide Unit to create a city-wide witness support unit. This program is the first witness advocacy program of its kind in the country.

Named in honor of homicide victim Kelsie "CROW", CCROW (Cincinnati Citizens Respect Our Witnesses) involves collaboration between key stakeholders in other city departments, the Hamilton County Sheriff's Office and Prosecutor's Office, business owners and volunteers from the community. On February, the CCROW program officially started. Although the program will continue to develop and grow over the next year, it is already providing critical support and services to CPD witnesses.



Karen Rumsey

Victims Practitioner

*Cincinnati Police Department Victims Assistance Liaison Unit
Cincinnati, Ohio*

"Karen was recognized by the Rotary Club in Cincinnati for superior achievement in 2016 and was also recognized for exemplary achievement in the community by Cincinnati Christian University in 2016. Karen works directly with the surviving family members of homicide to provide crisis intervention, group and individual counseling, as well as court accompaniment. Karen has also helped develop our newest program CCROW (Cincinnati Citizens Respect Our Witnesses) which helps support and assist witnesses willing to come forward to testify against perpetrators of violence. Overall, Karen is a hard-working and selfless advocate who puts her heart and soul into her work. "

Community talks about CCROW program for witness support

by Deb Dixon, WKRC | Tuesday, March 28th 2017



Community talks about CCROW program for witness support (WKRC)

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<http://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2016/12/31/cincinnati-police-witness-protection-program-here-to-stay/95188882/>

Cincinnati Mayor John Cranley: Give \$200,000 to program for intimidated murder witnesses

Chris Graves, cgraves@enquirer.com Published 9:14 p.m. ET Oct. 5, 2015 | Updated 12:22 p.m. ET Oct. 6, 2015

Mayor John Cranley will ask City Council to direct \$200,000 to a fledging program to help support murder witnesses, in an attempt to decrease all-too-common witness intimidation.



(Photo: The Enquirer/Patrick Reddy)

259 CONNECT TWEET LINKEDIN COMMENT 3 EMAIL MORE

Cincinnati Police homicide detective Jennifer Mitsch said Monday night that she was thrilled that Mayor John Cranley will ask City Council to direct \$200,000 to a fledging program to help support murder witnesses, in an attempt to decrease all-too-common witness intimidation.

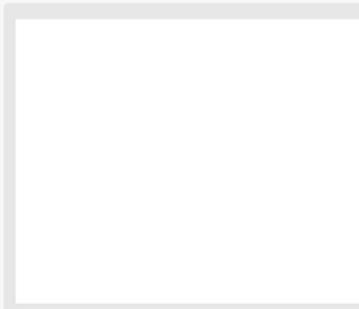
STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Program looking for more help

lives."

"We couldn't be more excited and ready to get to work," said Mitsch, who came up with the idea and is working with the homicide team and its victim advocate to implement it. "We have faith the city knows what a difference this could make in people's

The program, first reported by the Enquirer, is called CCROW and stands for Cincinnati Citizens Respecting Our Witnesses. It is loosely named for Kelsie Crow, the 17-year-old Purcell-Marian soccer player gunned down in a barrage of gunfire six months ago. Crow was killed outside a Sweet 16 birthday party at the Melrose YMCA in Walnut Hills on April 4. Two other teens were also shot, but survived those injuries.



TOP VIDEOS



<http://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2015/10/05/cincinnati-mayor-john-cranley-give-200000-program-intimidated-murder-witnesses/73423370/>

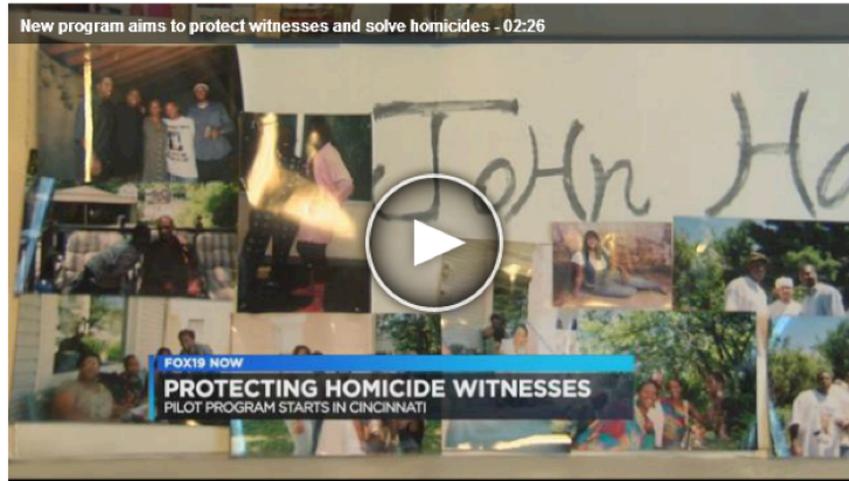
http://www.cincymagazine.com/Main/Articles/BronsonAtLarge_4607.aspx

New program aims to protect witnesses and solve homicides

Published: Thursday, March 3rd 2016, 10:11 pm EDT

Updated: Thursday, March 3rd 2016, 10:50 pm EDT

Posted by Megan O'Rourke, Reporter CONNECT



John Harris (PHOTO: Provided)

CINCINNATI, OH (FOX19) - There are over 500 unsolved homicides in the city of Cincinnati, but investigators hope that number will drop with the support of a new witness protection program.

It's called CCROW for Cincinnati Citizens Respect Our Witnesses.

The program was spearheaded by Detective Jennifer Mitsch who says the "No Snitch" mentality makes it difficult to prosecute known criminals for the crimes they commit.

With the city's backing, CCROW will offer support and safety for witnesses.

"Some people might need to be relocated. Some people might not want to move, but they want some alarm systems. We have alarm systems we can put in with panic buttons so that they have immediate contact with dispatch," said Mitsch.

Det. Mitsch is hopeful the program will lead to more prosecutions. Victim's family members like Peggy Harris are too.

Will this help solve killings like Kelsie Crow's?

Chris Graves and Patrick Brennan , Cincinnati Published 7:57 p.m. ET Oct. 2, 2015 | Updated 11:35 a.m. ET Oct. 5, 2015



(Photo: The Enquirer/Patrick Reddy)

CONNECT TWEET LINKEDIN COMMENT EMAIL MORE

Cincinnati Police homicide detective Jennifer Mitsch has a message for the those who intimidate and threaten murder witnesses: You have met your match.

Mitsch, a 10-year homicide investigator, is so fed up with threats against murder witnesses that she is spearheading a new program to support those who come forward to talk to the police and testify at trial.

The program is called CCROW and stands for Cincinnati Citizens Respecting Our Witnesses. It is loosely named for Kelsie Crow, the 17-year-old Purcell-Marian soccer player gunned down in a barrage of gunfire six months ago. Crow was killed outside a Sweet 16 birthday party at the Melrose YMCA in Walnut Hills on April 4. Two other teens were also shot, but survived those injuries.

More than 100 people — teenagers, adults and residents — witnessed the shooting. But no one has been willing to testify in the case that has frustrated Crow's family, friends as well as those like Mitsch working on her case. An [\\$11,000 reward for information leading to the conviction](#) of the suspect also is spurring movement.

Mitsch, who is the lead detective on the Crow case, said she has a suspect but she can neither arrest nor charge that person.

"Witnesses will come forward to a point. A couple people came in and talked to me and gave me information but nothing I can take to court because they are scared," Mitsch said. "They are scared of retaliation. Scared of being labeled a snitch."

And this isn't just a problem in the Crow case, but witness intimidation plays a role in nearly all of the city's homicide cases, she said.

POPULAR STORIES

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2015/10/03/cincinnati-police-have-new-effort-help-murder-witnesses-come-forward/73200064/>