

Chattanooga police to embed social workers with officers

September 18th, 2015 | by [Shelly Bradbury](#) | in Local Regional News | Read Time: 3 mins. |



Police chief Fred Fletcher talks to the press in this file photo.

Photo by Doug Strickland /Times Free Press.

The Chattanooga Police Department will use \$600,000 in grant money to hire social workers who will embed with officers, respond to calls and help victims through the trauma of a crime, according to police.

Chief Fred Fletcher hopes the hires will fundamentally change the way officers support victims of crime and push the department to become more "victim-centered."

The first two social workers hired will focus on victims of gang-related violence in Chattanooga's Westside and the Alton Park area, Fletcher said. Another two social workers or counselors may be hired to create a training program for officers.

"We have way too many victims and way too many of their crimes go unsolved," Fletcher said. "And we need to acknowledge that. We are not going to solve every crime, but we need to support every victim."

The department will use three grants to jump-start what Fletcher hopes will be a fundamental shift in how officers treat victims. Police officers are trained to solve crimes by taking reports and following evidence, and at times officers are so focused on solving the

crime that they miss ways to show compassion or support victims.

Officers don't receive much formal training in how to help victims deal with the crime — emotionally or practically. Fletcher hopes that officers who work side-by-side with social workers will begin to see new ways to approach and treat victims — whether that's a change in the way an officer conducts an interview, connects a victim to social services or updates victims on the case's status.

The first grant, \$300,000, was originally awarded to the city in 2013 to fund an anti-gang program under former Mayor Ron Littlefield.

The Times Free Press reported that **the city lost the grant** after Mayor Andy Berke took office and the Ochs Center for Metropolitan Studies was disbanded. The city planned to return the money. But after that story, city officials were able to repurpose the grant to hire a case manager and victim services specialist and keep the money, the federal Bureau of Justice Assistance confirmed Thursday.

"This was the idea they finally liked," Fletcher said.

The repurposed Department of Justice grant, dispersed over two years, will fund two social workers who will focus on the Westside and Alton Park. A second \$300,000 grant from the DOJ and the International Association of Chiefs of Police will likely pay for a third social worker and a trainer, Fletcher said.

The details of that grant are still in flux, Fletcher said. The Enhancing Law Enforcement Response to Victims grant offers \$100,000 to police each year for three years.

A third, nonmonetary grant from the Police Executive Research Forum will allow the nonprofit organization to send researchers and analysts to Chattanooga to examine how the social workers can best work with officers and what policies Chattanooga Police Department should create to better serve victims.

The researchers will track details like who requests services from the police department's social workers, what services were provided and whether the victims are revictimized, Fletcher said.

"With these three grants and with the [Family Justice Center], we feel like we are in a momentous time when we can create a victim-centered organization, a victim-supportive organization," Fletcher said.

Social workers can help victims in ways police officers typically can't, said Valerie Radu, executive director of the city's new Family Justice Center. Social workers can do everything from counseling to finding lost pets to buying food, Radu said. The center is in the process of hiring four social workers as well, she added.

The work done by social workers from the Family Justice Center and Chattanooga Police Department will overlap, Radu said, although the justice center's social workers will focus more on domestic violence, especially against children and women. Police department social

workers will focus more on gang violence.

Fletcher hopes to begin the hiring process in January. If all goes according to plan, the police department will be able to fund between two and five social workers until the 2018 fiscal year, at which point Fletcher said he'll ask the city for operational funds to keep the program going.

"We want to do this holistically, not this grant, this grant, this grant," he said. "We want to build a victim-centered organization."

Contact staff writer Shelly Bradbury at 423-757-6525 or sbradbury@timesfreepress.com with tips or story ideas.