

Faith groups step up to work on San Antonio's gun violence problem

by [Iris Dimmick](#)
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Two initiatives announced this month highlight the growing collaboration among San Antonio's faith groups, local government and nonprofits: a voluntary gun exchange and a memorial for more 2,600 people.

Both are focused on reducing the city's prevalence of gun violence.

"If we, through getting these weapons out of circulation, can save one life, then it's worth 10 times the investment that all of us are putting into this," Councilman John Courage (D9) said at a Wednesday press conference announcing a voluntary gun exchange event on Nov. 19 at the Alamodome.

It's an effort the councilman has been working on for years — and marks San Antonio's first large-scale, public gun buyback in partnership with the San Antonio Police Department.

At the event, anyone can bring in unwanted guns for H-E-B gift cards ranging from \$50-\$300, funded by donations made to the [Safe Weapons Exchange and Education Transfer \(SWEET\) Fund](#), which was kickstarted with a \$100,000 contribution from the councilman's discretionary budget of public money his office has accumulated over his six years in office.

The drive-through, voluntary gun exchange is semi-anonymous, meaning that if someone exchanges a stolen gun or if the serial number is missing, the police will question them.

While Courage and partner organizations continue to fundraise and attract volunteers for the event, a coalition of congregations, advocacy groups and COPS Metro Alliance is also calling for people to participate in the Memorial to the Lost, which aims to recognize all the lives lost to gun violence in Bexar County over the last five years.

More than 2,600 T-shirts will be printed over the next two months with the names of people killed by guns, how old they were and the date they were killed. For those who died by suicide, the shirt will bear only a date to protect their family's privacy. The names were gathered from the Bexar County Coroner's Office.

Roughly 50 to 100 shirts will be displayed at various congregations on a rotating basis throughout the city, according to Texas Impact, a faith-based advocacy group that plans to organize similar memorials in all major Texas cities. Memorial to the Lost started in Philadelphia by the nonprofit Heeding God's Call to End Gun Violence. The local initiative will be called "Vidas Robadas," or Stolen Lives.

"It's important that congregations have opportunities to demonstrate their commitment to ending gun violence to the wider community," said Bobby Watson, human rights fellow with Texas Impact. "Vidas Robadas localizes and connects communities to the reality of gun violence, honoring gun violence victims and at the same time witnessing to the need for change,"

Organizers hope to line the streets surrounding the Alamodome with the T-shirts ahead of and during the gun buyback, Pastor Robert Mueller of Divine Redeemer Presbyterian Church told the San Antonio Report last week. They also hope it will spread to other major Texas cities, and they plan to take the shirts to the state capitol to advocate for gun control legislation.

"Almost three-quarters of voters of every persuasion support about three to four common gun safety laws that are not about taking guns away from anybody," said Mueller, who is a member of COPS Metro Alliance. "It's about elevating the responsibility of gun ownership."

Because gun laws in Texas are largely passed by an anti-gun control legislature, there's little that local municipalities can do to regulate guns beyond awareness and voting campaigns.

“The Legislature and the governor have only made it harder to protect our communities and have exacerbated the plague of gun violence in our state,” said Mayor Ron Nirenberg. “Councilman Courage is leading a noble effort to reduce the number of guns that could fall into the wrong hands and result in violence.”

The gun exchange and memorial will serve to educate the community while making a statement, said Rev. Ann Helmke, the city’s faith liaison.

“In its basic sense, it’s a protest,” Helmke said. “The memorial is so that the community can see the magnitude of the impact.”



Anne Helmke, the City of San Antonio’s faith liaison, speaks during a press conference hosted by Councilman John Courage about an upcoming event to buy back firearms from the community. Credit: Scott Ball / San Antonio Report

In recent years, more local houses of worship have started to actively participate in conversations and actions surrounding social issues such as gun violence, domestic violence and mental health, Helmke said.

“There has always been this separation of church and state. There has always been a trust issue between congregations and government and politics,” she said.

Through collaborative efforts, those obstacles appear to be melting.

How the buyback will work

Studies performed in the 1990s have shown that gun buybacks do very little to reduce gun-related crimes.

“The thing is, if you’re a bad guy, you’re not going to turn in your gun,” Courage said, acknowledging these criticisms. It’s the same pushback he received from SAPD Chief William McManus and others in 2019, when the councilman proposed using \$250,000 in city funds to create a gun buyback program.

At the time, McManus also cited concerns over effectiveness, the source of funding — the proposal would draw from the city’s confiscated property fund — and the complete anonymity the program would have provided participants.

But over the years, they arrived at a compromise, McManus said.

“It was an agreement between the council member and I that it would not be totally anonymous,” he told reporters earlier this week.

At the event, the gun’s serial number will be immediately checked to verify if the gun is stolen. If it is stolen or otherwise flagged in the system, the person will be questioned by police and the gun will be returned to its legal owner. If the gun’s serial number has been filed off or otherwise removed, “then we are going to talk with that person,” McManus said.

If the gun is not reported stolen and the serial number is intact, then that person is free to go, he said.

The goal for the November event is to collect 1,000 guns, but a more realistic total will be fewer than 500, Courage said.

“It’s a real opportunity for [residents] to maybe feed their family at Thanksgiving or buy Christmas gifts for their kids or their grandkids,” he said.

San Antonio gun buyback

- **Location:** Alamodome Lot B, 100 Montana St.
- **Date:** Nov. 19
- **Time:** 12 p.m. to 5 p.m.
- **Drive-through:** Arrive with unloaded gun in trunk or rear of vehicle
- **Gift cards:** \$50 for nonfunctioning/home manufactured guns, \$150 for rifle/shotgun, \$200 for handgun, \$300 for semi-automatic rifle
- All operable guns will undergo ballistic tests and checked for involvement in crimes
- All guns, including those unclaimed by owners, will ultimately be destroyed

If someone does not know how to safely unload a gun, they can still participate, but should let officers know upon arrival that the gun is loaded, a spokesperson said.

Regardless of if the gun is found to be stolen or otherwise flagged by police, each participant will get a gift card, Courage said.

“I want to get that gun out of circulation so it doesn’t fall into the wrong hands,” he said. “I’m not going to say, ‘Well, we’re not going to reward you for that.’”

The amount of the gift card will roughly correlate to the value of the gun, based on SAPD officer estimates, up to \$300.

Volunteers with local congregations and the PEACE Initiative, a nonprofit that provides training and support surrounding domestic violence, will be handing out the gift cards.

PEACE and other community groups will also be tabling at the event to spread awareness of resources available for domestic violence survivors and other vulnerable populations.

“I hope people will use this opportunity to make their home environment safer,” said Patricia Castillo, executive director of PEACE. “Domestic violence and firearms are a deadly combination in any home.”

Courage would like to use the melted-down guns to make a public art installation of some kind, but that will depend on how much money is raised and how many guns come in. Courage said he aims to raise another \$150,000 before the event, and Nirenberg has already contributed \$25,000 from his own discretionary fund for the cause.

Anyone can voluntarily — but not anonymously — [turn in a gun](#) at any time in San Antonio by calling the non-emergency police line to have an officer pick it up.

Faith and gun violence

The faith community’s involvement in recent mental health and these gun violence initiatives did not happen overnight, Helmke said.

A few years ago, SAPD and other partners started organizing an annual Faith and Blue Symposium to connect the faith community to public safety agencies, she said.

This year’s symposium took place Friday, when nearly 100 people packed into a large conference room at SAPD headquarters downtown.

The first two years were fairly “one-sided” conversations, with law enforcement doing most of the talking, Helmke said. “We need to learn from each other. We need to be talking with each other.”

This year featured presentations about hate crimes from an FBI agent, the [Southwest Texas Fusion Center](#)’s liaison training program, security risk assessments and grants available for places of worship as well as a panel conversation with law enforcement and faith leaders.



Faith and public safety leaders gather in prayer on the roof of Public Safety Headquarters as part of the 2023 Faith and Blue Symposium on Friday. Credit: Courtesy / Ann Helmke

When Mueller, who sat on the panel, witnessed the murder of a drug dealer by another drug dealer across the street from his near-West Side church about 8 years ago, he came to understand the fear of the drug-related and violent crimes that his community was facing.

“I feel like I’ve got a target on my back — they know who I am,” he said of the time. His neighbors were afraid to talk to police out of fear of retribution. “So I basically said: I’m already a target, so ... you tell me what you know, and I will tell the police.”

Over the next 18 months, he and the church acted as a “trustworthy conduit” to the police and eventually closed down drug dealing operations in five nearby homes.

“We could not have done that ourselves. The police could not have done that without us,” Mueller said.

This kind of dialogue and information sharing needs to happen more often, McManus said during his opening remarks at the symposium.

“We don’t do it enough because, fortunately, there’s not always a crisis or a concern within all the different religious communities,” he said.

Helmke was hired in 2019 as the city’s first faith liaison to facilitate these intersections of the faith community with government, nonprofits, businesses, schools, “and whoever is willing to work with us toward the most vulnerable needs in our city.”

She feels momentum building behind local houses of worship becoming more engaged in civic and social matters.

“I believe that we’re seeing the results of that intentionality,” she said. As a constitutional right and legal premise, there should be a separation of church and state, Helmke added: “But how does that separation work when it comes to caring for society? Separation doesn’t work.”