



GOVERNMENT & REGULATIONS

SAFETY FIRST

Downtown Baltimore's new security measures are inspired by other city centers

Roca began in Massachusetts and has expanded its model to Baltimore.

ROCA BALTIMORE

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This article is the second of two pieces on public safety in the BBJ's ongoing series about the city's potential. Read the first piece about how businesses are contributing to the recent drop in crime [here](#).

If the criteria for a vibrant downtown were mapped onto Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, public safety would be at the pyramid's base.

David Downey, president and CEO of the International Downtown Association, has used the analogy often over his 16-year tenure after a member put together a graphic illustrating the scheme. It's a tidy model for how the association's 600 member organizations should think about building better downtowns. The hallmarks of a thriving urban core — events and festivals, heavy foot traffic, a diverse range of long-term commercial tenants — can only come after safety and cleanliness.

"Having a clean and safe environment is the foundation of all the work that our organizations do," Downey told the Baltimore Business Journal.



David Downey is president and CEO of the International Downtown Association.

INTERNATIONAL DOWNTOWN ASSOCIATION

Downtown organizations across the country have pieced together broad strategies in recent years to build those environments. Downey points to Cleveland; Memphis, Tennessee; Minneapolis, Minnesota, and other cities that have made strides. Their initiatives include advanced camera networks, downtown safety workers and more collaboration with social workers.

Those strategies have inspired similar work in downtown Baltimore, where retail and [office vacancies have surged](#) in recent years. Paired with the recent success of violence prevention efforts outside of downtown and a steep drop in murders, many leaders are more optimistic than they've been in years.

Commanding downtown

Communicating those improvements and making businesses feel safe could be key to attracting and retaining more investment and companies. To that end, the Downtown Partnership of Baltimore, a member of the International Downtown Association, has tapped into the group's sprawling network.

The local nonprofit launched a [\\$20 million initiative with the University of Maryland, Baltimore](#) to bring dozens of security cameras and an around-the-clock Strategic Operations Center to downtown. They drew inspiration from a similar program in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, said Maria Martins-Evora, chief operations officer for the Downtown Partnership. Other success stories abound: Memphis' network of public and private cameras; downtown Cleveland's around-the-clock safety hotline; a surveillance and assistance network in Minneapolis' Downtown Improvement District.

Downtown Partnership President Shelonda Stokes sees her group's initiative as a "primary tool for business retention" as downtown vacancies have worsened.



Shelonda Stokes is president of the Downtown Partnership of Baltimore.
ELIJAH CAMERA ART LLC

The partners hope to have all cameras installed by the end of the summer and a temporary space to test the technology by the end of the year, said Martins-Evora. The cameras will be taught to flag certain situations — overflowing trash cans, unusual movement patterns by people or objects — that could require responses. Police, crisis workers, mental health professionals and more will be connected to the command center and can respond appropriately.

For many downtown institutions, it's a welcome intervention.

"Every organization we've talked to is like, 'Yes, I want it yesterday,'" Stokes said.

Expanding the network

The coordination between social workers, police, mental health professionals and other experts the Downtown Partnership hopes to implement isn't just a model for maintaining clean city centers. The interdisciplinary approach is key to many successful violence reduction programs around the country, said Sasha Cotton, executive director at the National Network for Safe Communities.

"In public safety, people often think of police, but what we're trying to do is build out a range of services so people can get what they need," Cotton said.



Sasha Cotton helped launch Minneapolis' Office of Violence Prevention.

SASHA COTTON

Before her current role, Cotton was inaugural director of the Minneapolis Office of Violence Prevention. Strategies she used there have been put to work, with some variations, in cities as large as Philadelphia and as small as Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

Baltimore is a uniquely successful case in point. In July, the city recorded seven murders, the [fewest ever for a July on record](#). The combination of targeted violence programs like Safe Streets and public-private partnerships, some with employers in the city, has contributed to the stunning turnaround.

One of those partners, Roca Baltimore, has contributed to the effort with a model first developed in cities across Massachusetts. Roca works exclusively with young men who are at risk of falling into patterns of violence and offers them everything from cognitive behavioral therapy to career training.

Kurt Palermo arrived from Massachusetts and worked with JT Timpson, a former Safe Streets leader and Baltimore native, to launch Roca Baltimore in 2018. Their initial staff of 12 has grown to 30, and their first cohort of 75 young men has grown to more than 200.



Kurt Palermo helped launch Roca Baltimore in 2018.

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When Roca Baltimore launched, the city was in the middle of a five-year span with more than 300 annual murders. Now, Timpson said, Baltimore is seen as an example for other violence reduction efforts around the country — even if the public perception of the city hasn't fully caught up.

“Within the violence prevention community, they look at Baltimore as an example, a standard of how to operate,” Timpson said.



JT Timpson, a Baltimore native and former Safe Streets leader, now helps lead Roca.

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Palermo said Roca's behavior-change model has gotten a boost from local businesses and groups willing to partner with them, like the Baltimore Ravens, Patterson and Clifton parks, Up to Date Laundry, the Waterfront Partnership and MedStar Health.

Timpson is optimistic that Baltimore's efforts are working — just take a look at the headlines.

"I enjoyed the news for the first time ever the other day," he said, "because everyone was just complaining about the potholes."



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Read the rest of the BBJ's summer series on the city's potential [here](#).