



Leading the Way 2025 Tour

MOUNT VERNON REPORT

HIGHLIGHTING WHAT WORKS

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LETTER FROM CITIES UNITED EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: **AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Dear Partners and Friends,

Our visit to Mount Vernon reaffirmed what we at Cities United have always believed, **lasting change begins with strong partnerships, authentic leadership, and the courage to align around a shared vision** for safety and hope.

Mount Vernon's strengths are clear: a strong base of young leader-serving organizations, decades of grassroots investment, and a population where nearly one in three residents is under 25—making young leader engagement both vital and impactful. The city's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (ONSE), launched in 2021, reflects a formal step toward institutionalizing these values and anchoring coordination around care and accountability.

That foundation is **strengthened by intentional partnerships with organizations that know and serve Mount Vernon's young leaders best. The Youth Shelter Program of Westchester (YSOW)** provides court-involved young leaders with safe housing, education, and counseling—offering a path forward when options may feel limited. **SNUG**, the city's community violence intervention (CVI) team, works directly in neighborhoods to mediate conflicts, prevent retaliation, and connect individuals to services, often stepping in at the very moment when lives hang in the balance. **The Mount Vernon Youth Bureau** focuses on development and opportunity, creating after-school programs, job training, and leadership pathways that help young leaders see and step into their full potential.

Together, these partners form a coordinated force: addressing immediate safety needs while building the skills, connections, and opportunities that allow young leaders to thrive.

The Leading the Way tour revealed momentum that is both promising and fragile. Participants voiced a shared desire to move beyond conversation and into collective action—naming the need for stronger infrastructure, clearer roles, and consistent accountability. A recurring message across sessions was that **Mount Vernon already has what it needs—its people, its partnerships, and its purpose.** The next step is organizing those assets into a lasting ecosystem that transforms energy into structure and commitment into sustained change.

Cities United remains honored to walk alongside Mount Vernon as a partner in this journey. We stand ready to offer continued thought partnership, tools, and technical assistance to help translate today's momentum into measurable, lasting impact.

Thank you to Mayor Shawyn Patterson-Howard, the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement, our community partners, and the young leaders who welcomed us into this important work. Together, we can build the safer, healthier, and more hopeful communities our young people deserve.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

BRIDGING VISION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

This report synthesizes insights from full transcripts, collaborative SWOT analysis, local data, and participant reflections. It highlights four core areas of progress, names tensions that must be addressed, and outlines **five actionable recommendations** for moving the work forward. It also identifies opportunities for Cities United to continue providing support through technical assistance, relationship-building, and resource navigation.

Above all, this stop reaffirmed the city’s potential to define a **safety strategy rooted in healing, care, and long-term collaboration**—one built not just for young leaders, but with them at the center. As one young participant shared, “We’re already doing the work—what we need is to be treated like we’re part of the solution, not just a story.”

With gratitude and solidarity,

Anthony D. Smith
Executive Director, Cities United



INTRODUCTION

Cities United's Leading the Way Tour is designed to **strengthen commitment to community-led public safety** by highlighting local efforts, building alignment, and identifying paths toward sustainable change. At each stop, the tour centers local leadership, fosters young leader engagement, and creates space for partners to reflect, learn, and build together. In Mount Vernon—a city defined by its history, cultural pride, and longstanding civic institutions—leaders and residents are working to reimagine public safety through healing, collaboration, and opportunity.

THE LEADING THE WAY TOUR SEEK TO:

- Highlight effective, comprehensive public safety practices and models
- Foster cross-sector collaboration
- Amplify community-led solutions
- Enhance local capacity
- Evaluate progress and impact through the Cities United Roadmap Framework
- Assess and foster young leader engagement

Mount Vernon is currently in Phase 2 of the Cities United Roadmap, constructing a multi-year public safety plan.



We've got ideas. What we need now is a timeline, a structure, and support to make it happen."

MT. VERNON LOCAL NON-PROFIT PARTNER

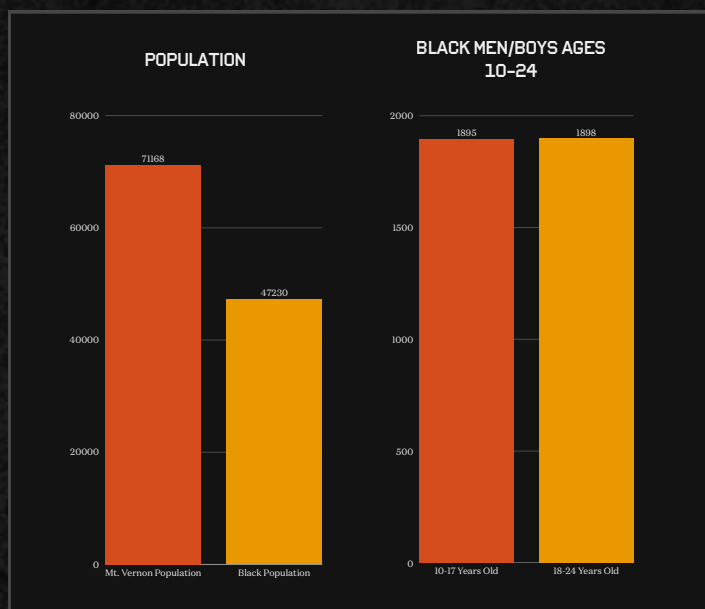
The tour stop offered a vital opportunity to **assess progress to date, identify alignment gaps, and build the strategic clarity and cross-sector trust** necessary to move into Phase 3: implementing that plan. By engaging leaders across community and government, surfacing actionable priorities, and lifting up the voices of young leaders, the stop helped lay groundwork for shared ownership, stronger infrastructure, and long-term coordination.

This report lifts up the strengths and vision of local leaders, identifies core challenges, and offers **five actionable recommendations**. It draws from full-session transcripts, local data, and reflections from young leaders and institutional partners—and affirms Cities United's commitment to walking alongside Mount Vernon as it builds the structure and momentum to move from planning to sustained impact.

UNDERSTANDING THE LOCAL LANDSCAPE: MOUNT VERNON

Grounded Strengths: Current Anchors for Future Work

Mount Vernon's public safety ecosystem is rooted in **trusted institutions, credible messengers, and an enduring commitment to youth**. Across the Core Leadership Meeting, Young Leader Presentation, and SWOT workshop, participants pointed to the city's tight-knit networks, cultural legacy, and institutional memory as foundational strengths.



Organizations like the Youth Shelter Program of Westchester and the Mount Vernon Youth Bureau are central to this ecosystem, offering mentorship, reentry support, and long-standing relationships with young people at the highest risk. **Over 65% of surveyed young leaders reported recent involvement with a youth-serving organization—many citing these institutions by name.**

These strengths are not abstract. In the SWOT analysis, participants consistently named the city's credible messengers, long-standing organizations, and community-wide willingness to do the work. These attributes surfaced not as ideals, but as lived realities across young leader programs, faith institutions, and grassroots spaces. Mount Vernon's size, diversity, and deep relationships allow for a **unique level of personalized engagement**.

Mount Vernon's Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (ONSE), launched in 2021 with HUD support, reflects the city's formal investment in an equity-driven strategy. ONSE has led community forums and convened partners like SNUG, Project RISE, and YouthCred. Though still growing, the office reinforces a shift toward **non-enforcement infrastructure rooted in healing and care**. To strengthen its foundation, ONSE will need to intentionally lean on the broader community violence intervention ecosystem to help address existing capacity gaps. At this stage, internal program development should not be the primary focus.

UNDERSTANDING THE LOCAL LANDSCAPE: MOUNT VERNON

Grounded Strengths: Current Anchors for Future Work

Instead, priority should be placed on conducting a comprehensive asset mapping process to fully understand the existing work, partnerships, and resources on the ground. This will ensure that future strategies are aligned with current efforts, avoid duplication, and maximize the impact of collective action.

Targeted professional development, particularly around CVI strategies and ecosystem alignment best practices, will be instrumental in supporting the Director's growth and enhancing the office's overall capacity. Building this skill base, coupled with strategic use of the city's strong partner network, will position ONS to serve as an **effective convener and driver of a coordinated, healing-centered public safety strategy**.

Finally, there is **growing cross-sector momentum**. Representatives from government, public health, education, and nonprofit spaces participated actively in the tour. These emerging partnerships, along with new regional connections, signal readiness to deepen strategy and attract external resources for sustainability.

MOMENT THAT MATTERED

*A young leader who had planned to leave Mount Vernon described how support from the **Youth Shelter helped him stay, rebuild his life, and commit to changing his city from within**. The story, shared during the Community Dinner, was met with cheers and visible emotion from peers and adults, underscoring the power of trusted relationships in anchoring belonging and preventing violence.*



PERSISTENT CHALLENGES: TENSIONS THAT MUST BE FACED

Mount Vernon's network of young leader-serving organizations and civic leaders is strong, but the tour revealed persistent structural barriers slowing progress. The most pressing is fragmentation—important work is happening across departments and organizations, but without shared goals, aligned timelines, or coordinated referrals. As one participant put it, **“Everyone’s doing good work, but we’re not doing it together. There’s no glue.”** This disconnection forces young leaders to navigate complex systems (education, reentry, housing, employment) without coordinated support.

Distrust in civic systems also emerged as a significant barrier. Young leaders shared that while they’re invited into decision-making spaces, they often feel excluded from shaping outcomes. **“You bring us into these spaces to check a box, but the system was already built without us,”** one said during Roadmap Academy.

The Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement (ONSE), recognized as a lead agency, has the potential to serve as the **city’s coordinating hub**, but only with increased capacity. This means sustainable funding, added staffing, professional development in CVI and trauma-informed practices, clear governance, and a well-defined role as a convener rather than a direct service provider. Partnerships for data collection and regular cross-sector collaboration will be key to aligning efforts and reducing duplication.

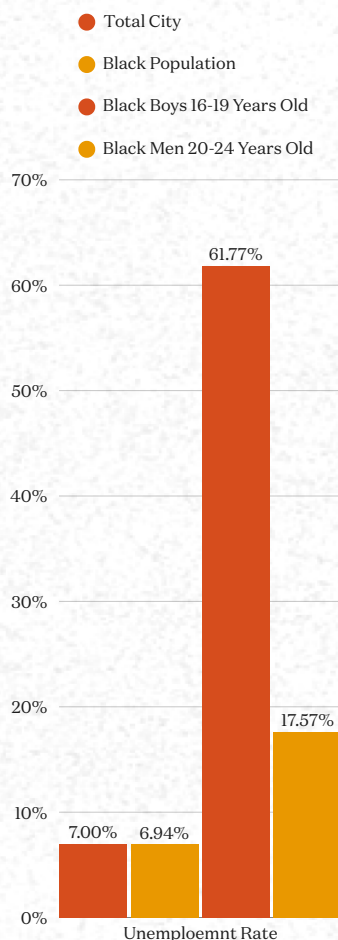
Beyond coordination, systemic challenges like unstable housing, limited job opportunities, and education gaps continue to undermine safety and growth. With a **61.77% unemployment rate for Black males ages 16–19**, economic instability remains a critical driver of risk and disengagement.

Passion has brought Mount Vernon’s stakeholders together; progress will depend on **alignment**. Moving from parallel workstreams to a unified strategy, supported by strong infrastructure, shared accountability, and clear communication, can turn momentum into measurable, lasting change.

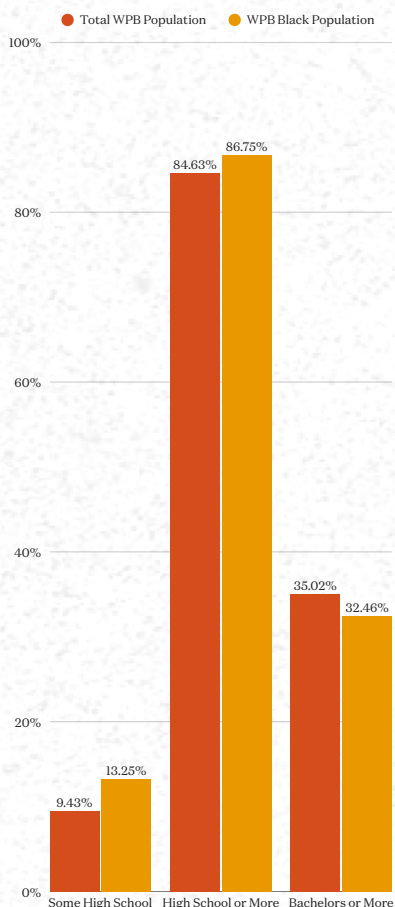
EXECUTIVE INSIGHT

Mount Vernon’s biggest barrier is not a lack of passion or programs, it’s the **absence of alignment**. Closing gaps between strong but siloed efforts, building ONS’s capacity as a true convener, and addressing economic instability (especially for young Black males) are essential to turning momentum into measurable change.

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE



EDUCATIONAL LEVEL



MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME



Compounding these challenges is a **lack of consistent implementation and feedback loops**. Participants named frustration with past assessments that “led to reports, but not results.” Without transparent follow-up or clear mechanisms for accountability, community trust erodes and momentum is lost.

Lastly, the city’s **capacity limitations (particularly among frontline CBOs)** were emphasized throughout the stop. Many organizations are overextended and underfunded, making it difficult to grow or take on additional leadership without deeper investment. “We’re in the room,” one nonprofit leader said, “but that doesn’t mean we have the staff to actually run what gets built here.”

EMERGING MOMENTUM: SIGNALS OF WHAT'S POSSIBLE

Despite long-standing barriers, Mount Vernon is experiencing a **renewed sense of purpose, leadership, and community-wide commitment** to advancing a comprehensive public safety strategy. Throughout the tour, participants shared examples of new partnerships, growing trust between young leaders and city leadership, and a shared desire to implement a long-term strategy rooted in care, opportunity, and accountability.

One of the clearest signals of this momentum is the **increasing visibility and influence of young leaders**. From the Young Leader Collective Workshop to the Community Dinner, young leaders were not only present but central, framing safety through their lived experience and offering practical, forward-looking ideas. Many voiced a desire to move from being seen as “program participants” to being recognized as strategic partners in shaping the city’s direction.

MOMENT THAT MATTERED

*At the Community Dinner, one young leader said, “**We’ve been doing the work. We just need you to make space for it.**” The room fell silent before breaking into applause, a powerful affirmation of their role as both narrators and navigators of Mount Vernon’s future.*

Momentum is also building around **shared vision and narrative alignment**. Participants from both city government and community institutions expressed that this moment feels different (not because the challenges are new) but because there’s a stronger collective willingness to act together. Many acknowledged the need to move past cycles of fragmented efforts and toward a countywide plan that is strategic, inclusive, and rooted in lived experience.

The Roadmap Academy Bootcamp was a major contributor to this shift. It brought together representatives from city departments, community-based organizations, faith partners, and local institutions to explore definitions of safety, map out key actors, and name gaps in current coordination. Several attendees described it as “the most transparent space we’ve had in a long time,” emphasizing the value of its honesty, intergenerational dialogue, and **strategic framing**.

Beyond narrative and leadership shifts, there are early signs of **structural alignment**. The Mayor’s Office, Office of Neighborhood Safety, Youth Bureau, and Youth Shelter Program have all expressed interest in developing consistent communication mechanisms and identifying opportunities for formal coordination. Several participants named the tour itself, and the relationships built through it, as a key accountability lever and motivator for sustained collaboration.

This momentum is still fragile. It will require intention, infrastructure, and long-term support. But as one city staff member shared during the Jurisdiction Debrief:

“This is the first time in a long time that it feels like we have the people, the urgency, and the chance to actually build something lasting.”

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS: READINESS MEETS RESPONSIBILITY

As Mount Vernon prepares to re-think their initial plan by engaging more stakeholders across the county, several **key themes** emerged during the tour that can help guide its next phase. Many of these themes echoed the opportunities and threats identified during the collaborative SWOT analysis workshop, where participants highlighted both what's possible and what must be addressed to make lasting progress. Across sessions, there was strong agreement around the need for structure, shared accountability, and clearer alignment between institutions, young leaders, and community members. The city has momentum but without strong infrastructure and clarity around how to move forward together, progress risks stalling.

One of the most common recommendations was to define **roles and coordination structures** that can support the work over time. Participants described the need for a lead organizing body to operate as a convener, collaborator, and facilitator. Others suggested establishing practical tools like shared referral processes, MOUs, or communication protocols to clarify how organizations work together. Several attendees noted that too often, momentum fades when it's unclear who's responsible for follow-up.



MOMENT THAT MATTERED

*During the Jurisdiction Debrief, one city staff member reflected, “**We’ve had plans before. The difference now is everyone’s in the room but someone’s still got to drive.**”*

Another recurring theme was the importance of **deeper integration of young leaders**. Across the Roadmap Academy, dinner, and leadership sessions, participants called for more than token inclusion. They pushed for pathways that give young leaders real influence like compensated advisory roles, leadership pipelines, or co-created programming.

One adult ally reflected, “**They’re already doing the work. We need to start treating them like partners, not guests.**”

According to the Young Leader Survey, over **65% of respondents reported participating in local programs over the past year**, yet only 34% felt they had any meaningful influence on public safety decisions.

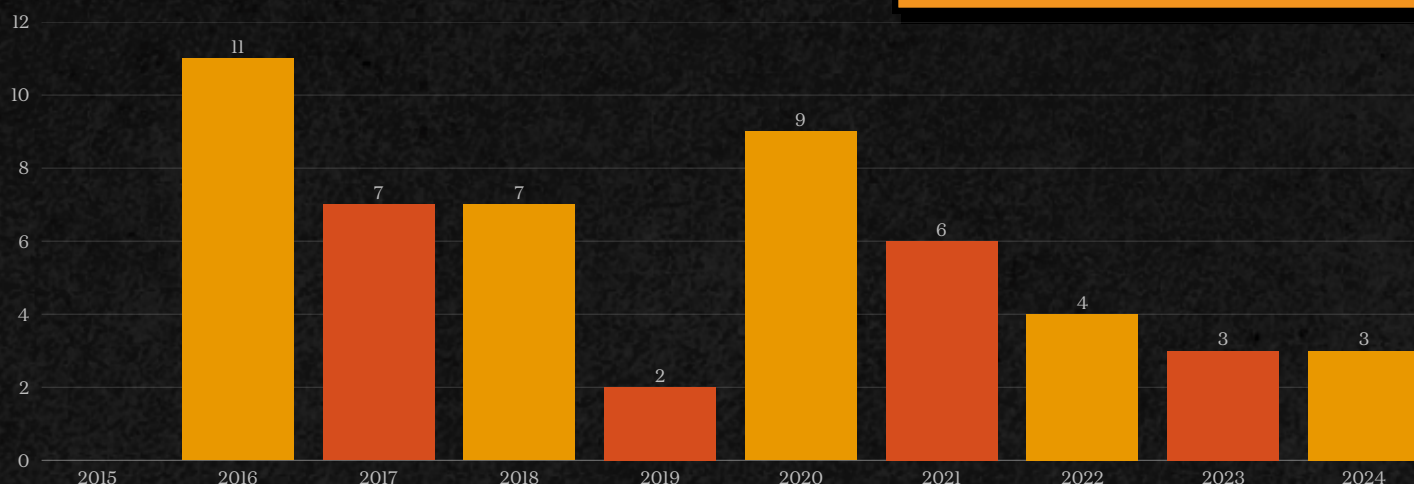
Participants repeatedly emphasized the need to move from discussion to delivery. The city has hosted many powerful conversations in recent years, including during the tour, but several attendees emphasized the need for a detailed plan that outlines next steps, identifies lead actors, and includes mechanisms for accountability. “We’ve got ideas. What we need now is a timeline, a structure, and support to make it happen,” one nonprofit staffer shared. **This urgency is grounded in reality: from 2015 to 2023, Mount Vernon recorded over 1,400 firearm offenses and 54 homicides.** Delaying implementation risks momentum, and lives.

Number of people “At Highest Risk” of being directly impacted by gun violence

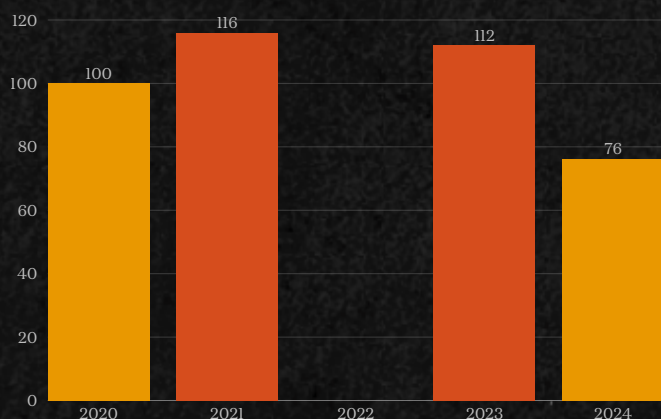
71

(0.1% of population)

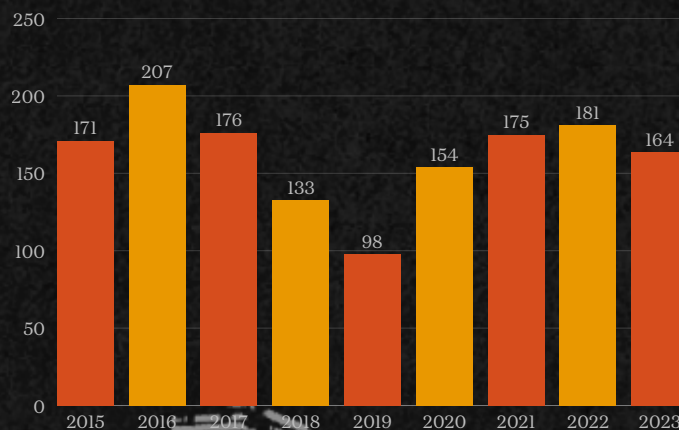
MT. VERNON HOMICIDES



MT. VERNON FIREARM RELATED CRIMES



MT. VERNON FIREARM RELATED OFFENCES



	Number of violent crimes	Violent crime rate per 100,000 residents	Murder Rate per 100,000 residents
County	381	535	4
State	76,298	390	3
Country	1,253,813	374	6

They also pointed to **ONSE (the Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement)** as a **promising structure** to anchor coordination (although stronger staffing is needed). However, they emphasized the need for deeper investment and stronger alignment with broader community goals for it to fulfill that role.

Many also spoke about the need to invest in **capacity, especially among trusted frontline organizations**. Community-based groups and credible messengers are doing critical work but are often stretched thin. Participants encouraged local government and philanthropic leaders to consider flexible, multi-year support that reduces administrative burdens and allows these groups to focus on programming, relationships, and long-term stability.

The topic of data and measurement came up throughout the stop. Stakeholders shared concerns about how success is defined, and how progress will be tracked. While some data exists, it's often siloed or underused. The Young Leader Survey showed clear interest in engagement but revealed gaps in influence, with only **1 in 3 respondents feeling they had meaningful input on public safety decisions**. There was broad agreement on the value of shared metrics, regular check-ins, and using data to improve, not just report.

Finally, participants spoke to the importance of shaping a **shared message about where the city is headed**. Mount Vernon's public safety narrative is often driven by crisis, but many saw the tour as an opportunity to shift that lens and begin to focus on resilience, relationships, and the power of local leadership. "We need to start telling the story we're actually trying to live," one young leader said.

MOUNT VERNON: SAFETY & EQUITY SNAPSHOT

Building on the themes surfaced through the SWOT analysis and community discussions, the following snapshot provides key data points that further illustrate the structural conditions shaping Mount Vernon's public safety landscape—a community working toward healing amid real structural challenges.

Population: 71,168 (66% Black)

Youth under 25: ~47,230

Individuals at Highest Risk (per RMG model): ~71

Homicides (2015–2025): 54

Firearm Offenses (2015–2023): 1,459

Unemployment (Black males ages 16–19): 61.77%

Graduation Rate: 60–70%

Median Household Income (Black households): \$59,481

These indicators reinforce why Mount Vernon's next steps must be rooted in coordination, equity, and sustained commitment to community-led safety solutions.



OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUNG LEADERS

From our conversations with Mount Vernon’s young leaders, two priorities rose to the top: **the need for jobs and the need to feel safe**. While local stakeholders currently offer a range of programs, young leaders made it clear that stable employment provides hope, independence, and a sense of security. They also expressed a strong desire to understand what comes next and to have a real seat at the table in shaping those next steps. Establishing a Young Leaders Council would help meet this need, creating a space for shared decision-making and sustained engagement.

There is an opportunity to move quickly. Funds provided by Cities United at the close of the visit can be used as a **gap-filler to offer stipends for young leaders** who participated in the session, compensating them for roles such as planning meetings, outreach, and co-facilitation. In the near term, the host agency could work with local partners to identify additional stipend-based opportunities and short-term paid placements, such as event support, social media, and neighborhood activations. Hosting a Youth Employment Huddle within the next 90 days would allow partners to map available openings, align referrals, and explore creative partnerships with local businesses, city departments, and community-based organizations.

Over the longer term, Mount Vernon can build a bridge from stipends to **sustainable employment** by piloting programs that start with paid contributions and transition strong performers into seasonal or part-time roles. An employer compact, committing to guaranteed interviews, workplace mentorship, and flexible hours for young leaders, could further strengthen these pathways. With coordinated follow-through, a clearly defined Young Leaders Council, and tangible employment opportunities, the city can turn the insights shared during this tour stop into visible, measurable progress that meets both immediate needs and long-term aspirations.

RECOMMENDATIONS & OPPORTUNITIES FOR CITIES UNITED SUPPORT

The Mount Vernon stop of the Leading the Way Tour surfaced clear **priorities for advancing a community-led, comprehensive public safety strategy**. The following recommendations reflect a combination of end-of-stop reflections, young leader feedback, and facilitated dialogue throughout the tour. Each is paired with potential opportunities for Cities United to provide continued support.

1. Work collaboratively with the County to revise the current strategy while developing a clear implementation plan:

Participants emphasized the need to move from strategy to execution while being flexible as new partners are engaged. This includes establishing timelines, assigning lead partners, and naming accountability mechanisms to carry the work forward.

Opportunity for CU Support:

- Facilitate planning workshops with city, county and community partners
- Provide tools or templates for managing multi-stakeholder workplans
- Offer education and technical assistance to help local partners come together around and operationalize a fully implemented strategy

2. Strengthen alignment between city representatives, county partners and young leaders:

There is a strong desire to center young leaders not only in programming but also in strategy development and decision-making. Tour discussions emphasized co-creation, ongoing dialogue, and formalized roles for young leaders in public safety work.

Opportunity for CU Support:

- Support the city, county and partners in exploring intergenerational governance models
- Assist in designing a compensated young leader leadership body or fellowship
- Facilitate follow-up engagements that build on insights from the young leader session

RECOMMENDATIONS & OPPORTUNITIES

FOR CITIES UNITED SUPPORT

3. Identify a formal convener or lead coordinating body:

The stop reaffirmed that Mount Vernon needs a central infrastructure, whether through an agency, backbone organization, or coalition, to anchor and coordinate the broader ecosystem.

Opportunity for CU Support:

- Share examples of backbone structures from other jurisdictions
- Host a cross-site learning session on governance and coordination models
- Offer input on defining the role and structure of the local convener
- Host regularly scheduled ecosystem meetings to strengthen partner collaboration.

4. Secure flexible, multi-year funding for frontline partners:

Reflections pointed to grant fatigue, administrative strain, and inconsistent funding streams that limit the work of CBOs and credible messengers.

Opportunity for CU Support:

- Connect partners to philanthropic allies or regranting opportunities
- Support development of public safety investment narratives
- Assist with materials that communicate value and need to funders

RECOMMENDATIONS & OPPORTUNITIES FOR CITIES UNITED SUPPORT

5. Build shared metrics and a culture of accountability:

Stakeholders named the need for clear, community-informed indicators that track public safety progress. Several requested technical assistance on how to make data actionable.

Opportunity for CU Support:

- Support development of shared outcome metrics to track progress across partners
- Facilitate a data mapping and capacity-building session
- Help integrate accountability into local planning tools

Conclusion:

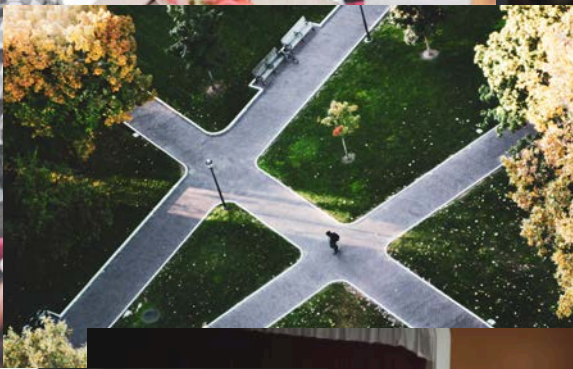
A Call for Aligned Action

The Mount Vernon stop of the Leading the Way Tour revealed **both the urgency and the readiness** to advance a more coordinated, equitable, and healing-centered approach to public safety. Young leaders, community-based organizations, and city representatives voiced a shared desire to shift from conversation to action, and from fragmented efforts to long-term solutions.

Mount Vernon has all the core pieces of the puzzle in place: engaged stakeholders, strong programs, committed leadership, and a visible presence in the community. These assets position the city to advance young leader development and strengthen public safety. What's needed now is a **deeper commitment to clarifying a shared vision, defining roles, and aligning efforts** across sectors. When every partner is working toward the same goal (guided by open communication and shared accountability) resources go further, duplication is reduced, and young leaders and families experience a seamless network of support.

The high level of community engagement we witnessed, especially the active role of young leaders in shaping conversations, was a powerful sign of a **responsive ecosystem**. The foundation is strong, but coordinated follow-through and power-sharing will determine whether that foundation leads to lasting impact.

Cities United stands ready to continue supporting Mount Vernon as it moves from having the pieces to completing the picture offering partnership, tools, and thought leadership to help local leaders turn **potential into measurable change**. The road ahead will take time and intention, but this tour stop made one thing clear: the will to move forward is strong, and the moment to act is now.







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