



**Swords into Plowshares Northeast Program
Dr. Pina Violano, Bishop Jim Curry, Co-Founders**

Swords to Plowshares Northeast (S2PNE) was created in 2017 as a violence prevention outreach program focused on reducing senseless firearm injuries and deaths among vulnerable populations. Our strengths lie in building municipal partnerships and coalitions with law enforcement, religious organizations, healthcare, universities, after-school programs, faith-based & community-based organizations, Survivors of Homicide, Department of Corrections, businesses media and national organizations. All with the common goal of *building sustainable violence prevention efforts throughout Connecticut and across the country.*

Our vision is to be a national leader for managing gun buyback events that simultaneously reduce the number of guns on our streets and repurpose them into something positive and productive for the betterment of our communities. S2PNE is a founding partner in Guns to Gardens, a coalition of gun violence prevention groups across the country. The program has a front-end component, where there are longstanding strong partnerships with local and state police departments to coordinate gun buyback and gun safe storage events throughout the state that in turn provides a safe venue for community members to turn in a firearm that is no longer needed/wanted. The outcome of this program is preventing firearms from getting into the hands of a curious child, someone contemplating suicide, someone with dementia or Alzheimer's or someone with intentions to commit a criminal act.

S2PNE is a unique program in that weapons are received for destruction once they have been screened, vetted and dismantled in the presence of the participating police departments. Next, the gun pieces are forged and repurposed into various gardening tools. Before the Pandemic, S2PNE was able to work with inmates incarcerated in the New Haven Correctional Center, and crew members from re-entry programs (EMERGE). S2PNE now relies primarily on volunteer blacksmiths and hopes to reconnect with the Correctional Center and EMERGE. Garden tools are created and donated to community gardens, violence interruption programs and agricultural high schools and other education programs throughout the state from the communities which they came and now also nationally. They symbolize the ability of communities to take positive steps to save lives, and to sustain the lives of those in need. They are used to plant gardens, cultivate produce that are shared with the local communities, including homeless shelters and soup kitchens. These gardening tools provide incentives for turning vacant land into gardens, or to expand and enrich existing gardens in designated neighborhoods. These gardens will provide the residents of those neighborhoods with positive reinforcement and a heightened sense of community pride.

Another unique aspect of the community outreach of Swords to Plowshares Northeast is its ability to take the experience of transforming guns into garden tools into local communities. The Swords to Plowshares Northeast forge is mobile. Over 2022 the forge has been set up in about thirty different communities across Connecticut and Washington, DC, Pennsylvania, and the Northeast. At each event there is a community discussion about the epidemic of gun violence and the reality that no community is immune from that violence. Often there are survivors of gun violence and family members of the victims of violence who lead the discussion. Discussions include the topics of the safe storage of guns and the choice individuals have to give up the guns they have. Leaders from local community gardens are invited to receive tools as gifts and to

speak of their work creating green spaces and nurturing community environments. People of all ages are invited to work at the forge, beating barrels of guns (all of which represent the potential harm which guns can inflict) into garden tools and heart pendants. Teenagers especially welcome the conversation and physical nature of blacksmithing. At present Swords to Plowshares Northeast is seeking grants for a paid blacksmithing internship program to train and hire young adults most vulnerable to gun violence to forge garden tools from guns and to help lead community outreach programs.

This unique 360-degree process allows us to find a creative way to make something inspiring and symbolic out of a weapon of death into something that will symbolize the transformation we believe is possible if Americans step back from the heated gun debate and try to listen to each other.

The biblical prophecy of Isaiah that the people will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks and will learn violence no more is taking concrete form as literally instruments of death and harm are being transformed into tools for life. Victims of gun violence, their families and friends, and members of communities at risk for gun violence, police, and healthcare professionals have expressed their gratitude for being able to beat guns into tools at our forging events.

Death by firearm is a serious public health concern backed by decades of evidence showing a direct and robust correlation between the rate of firearm ownership and the rate of deaths in any given community. Over the last 30 years while gun buyback programs have steadily gained notoriety and support, the paucity of evidence-based outcomes has yet to coalesce community and government officials around an established purpose. Even though beliefs and attitudes towards firearms differ among communities, the S2PNE program explores the reasoning behind turning in firearms prior to repurposing guns for making garden tools and jewelry. S2PNE community-level data indicate that guns found in homes that are used in violent crimes range from 6-30% state-to-state. Securing home safety for youth and elders, increased mental health awareness, and not knowing what to do with an inherited firearm, are common reasons for turning in firearms. Understanding why people participate in gun buyback programs is critical in providing policymakers useful insight when tailoring gun violence prevention programs in different communities.