



Turn *Toward*

A Case Study in Rapid Civic Leadership After
Political Violence

Executive Summary

At 12:23 PM on Wednesday September 10, 2025 conservative political commentator Charlie Kirk was killed in an act of political violence as he was speaking to an outdoor crowd of 3,000 people at the Utah Valley University campus.

Within one hour of the shooting, a group of seven Utah-based leaders working nationally in bridging divides, peacebuilding, and democratic renewal moved from shock to coordination.

Building on preexisting networks and relationships, the group invited Nealin Parker, Executive Director of Common Ground USA and a national expert in political violence and conflict prevention, to outline what to expect following this kind of political violence.

The group's response included:

- ➔ Immediate coordination on narrative intervention with OpEds
- ➔ Promote sustained engagement with a website and pledge
- ➔ Amplify narrative nationally with a press conference including cross-sector coalition of civic leaders

A core reality of political violence is that public narratives form quickly, even as reliable information remains scarce.

Thoughtful leaders often hesitate, waiting for more information before speaking or wondering if they are the leader for the moment.

Meanwhile, partisan actors or media outlets fill the void with speculation or spin.

As Parker noted, "The people who have their talking points drafted... don't need to know the details... they fill a gap."

"I saw the news roll in and the temperature rise as people began to blame each political party and speculate in general panic. I realized that as a peacebuilding organization we could do something to create an off-ramp to the violence.... we were uniquely positioned because several leaders of national bridge building organizations were based here in Utah. We had been building relationships over the past year, attending each others' events, meeting for lunch to discuss where our work might intersect, etc. so I knew exactly who to call. I immediately sent out a text or call to each of them and three hours later, we convened to determine whether there was anything we could collectively do."

- Emma Petty Addams

Turn Toward Leadership

Emma Petty Addams, *Mormon Women for Ethical Government*
Marianne Viray, *Disagree Better*
Becca Kearn, *Living Room Conversations*

Maury Giles, *Braver Angels*
Tami Pyfer, *The Dignity Index*
Paul Edwards, *BYU Wheatley Institute*
Patrick Mason, *Waymaker*

This case study examines how the initiative emerged, what made it possible, and what other communities can learn from the experience.

Turn Toward demonstrates how preexisting relationships, shared values, and cross-organizational trust can enable rapid civic leadership in moments of crisis. It also highlights the role that narrative intervention can play in shaping the public response to political violence.

The Risk and the Opportunity

Political violence creates moments of acute uncertainty. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, the facts surrounding the event were still unfolding. At the same time, footage of the horrific violence quickly spread across social media and national news outlets, fueling speculation and fear.

Moments like this present several risks for communities:

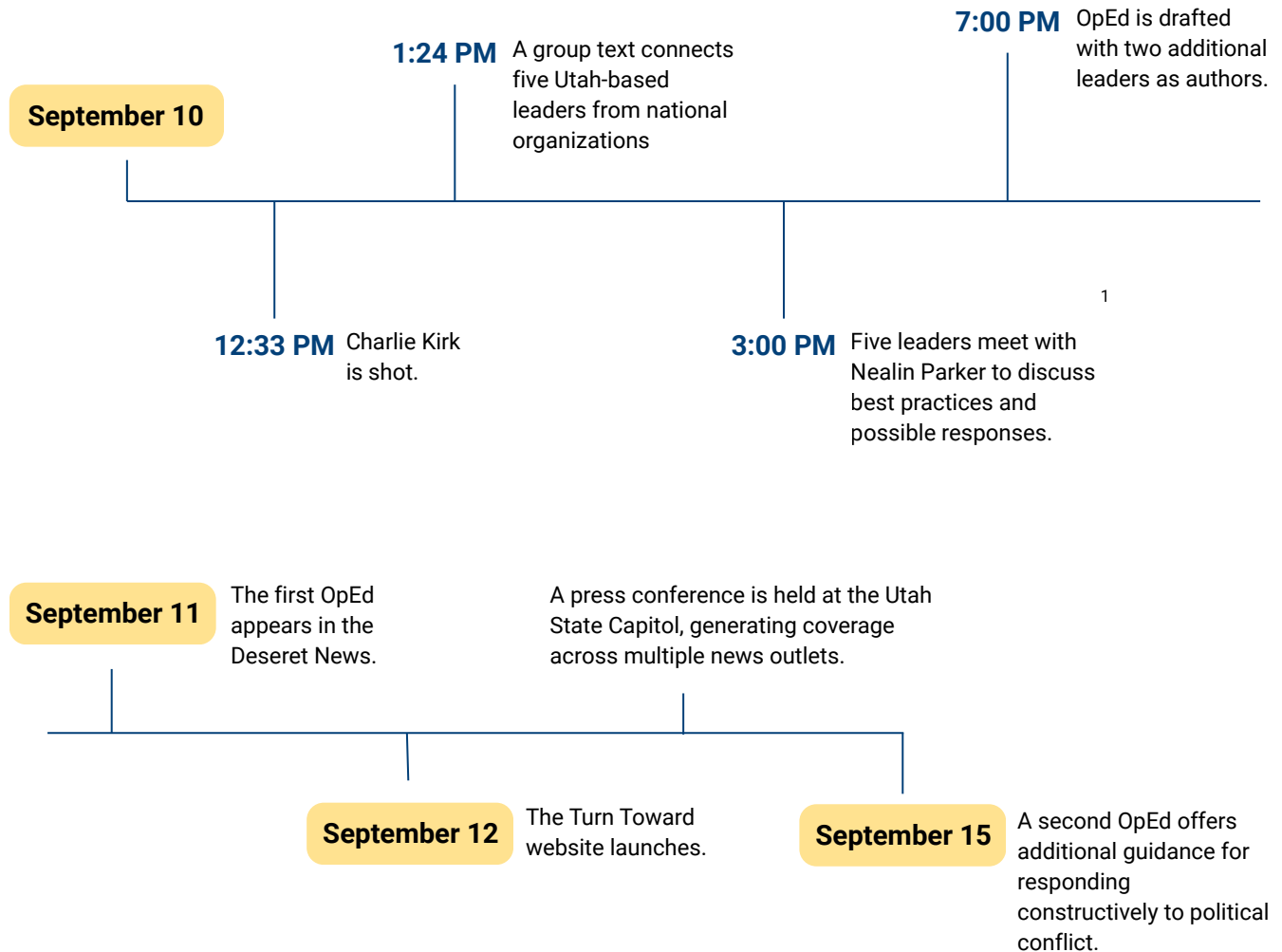
- ➔ Hardened partisan rhetoric and blame
- ➔ High potential of retaliatory violence
- ➔ National narratives overriding local context
- ➔ Political opportunism or exploitation of tragedy
- ➔ Withdrawal from civic engagement due to fear or exhaustion

In such moments, communities face a critical choice. Leaders can wait to respond as information unfolds in a reactive way, or they can intervene early to help shape the public narrative.

There is a moment that immediately follows these events in which public attention briefly shifts. People who normally pay little attention to political conflict become acutely aware of it. Even highly partisan individuals may pause and reconsider their assumptions. “These are moments when people who normally lean into partisan identity suddenly remember other identities—parent, neighbor, community member—and say, ‘I want no part of this.’”

During times of tragedy, people crave connection. While these moments may be brief, they represent a powerful opportunity for civic leadership to act. The Turn Toward coalition hoped to fill the gap the public was craving for connection.

The Response



1. Immediate Call and Development of Rapid Response

The speed and effectiveness of the Turn Toward response did not emerge from a spontaneous coalition formed in crisis. Instead, it was the product of years of relationship-building among leaders working in adjacent fields of democracy, civic engagement, and bridge-building.

The core leadership team repeatedly emphasized that the initiative was possible because their relationships and trust in each other's work already existed.

Several organizations were members of the Listen First Coalition, others had already done joint projects with each other, spoken at events organized by one of the organizations, or shared other's work. Marianne Viray of Disagree Better pointed to this "web of relationships" and the time and effort that led to them, "I'd spent the better part of the previous nine months building relationships... we had a regular cadence of checking in with each other at least every other month."

"The way everything coalesced so quickly was surprising, yet not surprising at the same time. We had pre-existing relationships, networks, resources, and both a local and national understanding of the work before us. There are times like this when things fall into place," recalled Becca Kearn of Living Room Conversations.

Parker often uses a phrase common in disaster response: "You never exchange business cards at the earthquake." When a crisis occurs, the time for building relationships has already passed. The people who will respond effectively are those who already know and trust one another. Turn Toward benefited from exactly this kind of preexisting infrastructure. These leaders were already well-positioned to respond with collective action only hours after the event.

Thoughtful leaders may be cautious and wonder if they are the leader for the moment. Across social media and communities in Utah, there were varied calls for lowering political tension and resisting a cycle of escalation. This group recognized they were well positioned to help de-escalate the situation as Utah residents deeply invested in local communities while leading national bridgebuilding organizations. The group's collective skills and relationships were uniquely suited to the challenge. As the group convened for the first time, they answered that question both individually and collectively, reassured by their ability to work together– "We are the leaders for this moment."

Two things were immediately clear during that first conversation: (1) each individual was committed to some kind of action and response, (2) the moment called for the putting aside of egos in favor of unified voice and action. This clarity required a decision around roles and capacity.

That was [Emma's] first mandate to us all on that call. That we're going to do something together, we will be more powerful if we speak as a collective, as leaders, than any of us will be in our individual silos." said Viray, "So, we all need to put our egos aside in order to speak to this moment and help our community."

Braver Angels CEO Maury Giles described it as a simple decision, "We have to collaborate and align our efforts to really have meaningful impact on culture."

The fledgling effort embraced "an abundance mentality, first and foremost." Participants were explicit about what they could contribute and what they could not. Some would write. Others would organize events, mobilize networks, provide resources, or allocate staff time. As Tami Pyfer of Dignity Index explained, "There were skills and capacity in partner groups that my organization doesn't have. For example, we are able to amplify messages and have some members with national visibility, but didn't have someone who could have turned around an OpEd as quickly as it was done."

“This division of labor created agility while the collective leadership shared responsibility, utilizing their strengths, assets, and networks for a single purpose. The group determined the best way to communicate for the quickest response and opted for a Signal chat rather than emails where messages are more likely to fall through the cracks.

Although seven different leaders were involved, the operational structure evolved quickly into a smaller “engine” team responsible for day-to-day decisions.

This approach allowed the initiative to move quickly without requiring consensus from every participant at every step. “That was the difference between this working and not working,” Parker later reflected.

In a crisis response, speed often determines whether a narrative intervention succeeds or fails. Rapid decision making can be an overlooked, yet critical component of collective action.

2. The Op-Eds: Turn Toward Each Other

The coalition decided to publicly come together in opposition to political violence. Participants considered several possible responses, including statements, events, and a social media campaign. Ultimately, the group chose to focus first on a written piece that served as an organizing document for the initiative. The Op-Ed established:

- ➔ The tone of the response
- ➔ The core principles guiding the group initiative
- ➔ A shared language for public discussion
- ➔ A framework for future actions

 **DeseretNews**

Turn toward each other: A Utah response to tragedy



Photo by Scott G Winterton, Deseret News

Viray took the pen in drafting the Op-Ed, with significant involvement from Kearn. The wider group was invited to review and suggest edits – all within the first 10 hours. On September 11, the day after Charlie Kirk was killed, the group ran an op-ed in The Deseret News, entitled: “Turn Toward Each Other: A Utah Response to Tragedy.” It included four simple appeals:

² Addams

Choose to lower the temperature
and resist blame

Recognize our **shared values**
as Utahns

Reach out to those around you
with support

Seek **reliable** information

Once the Op-Ed existed, additional actions were built around it—including the press event, the website and the library of resources and future event offerings, and future Op-Eds. After Turn Toward's initial response with the first Op-Ed, more facts became known (perpetrator in custody, more information about his background and mental state) and local tensions increased. The group determined the need for a second Op-Ed, building upon the first set of principles and themes, but speaking to the new moment we were in. Viray and Kearl again first took steps to frame the second public statement which ran in *The Deseret News* on Monday, September 15.

 **DeseretNews**

The off-ramp from high conflict starts here and now



Photo by Tess Crowley, Deseret News

This second Op-Ed, [The Off-ramp from High Conflict Starts Here and Now](#), outlined a shared opportunity and responsibility all Utahns could embrace:

Interrupt the us vs. them story

Resist the urge to label

Model moral courage

Gather together

These four suggestions created the foundation for the Turn Toward Pledge, a primary call to action on the website.

3. Promoting Sustained Civic Engagement: TurnToward.Us

One feature of Turn Toward that stood out to observers was its integration of communications and organizing. Parker described this as a rare combination, “What was amazing was the layering of a communications strategy and an organizing strategy.”

We wanted a practical way for people to engage with and practice the values articulated in the Op-Ed. In order to do this, we reached out to additional Utah networks to create a clearinghouse of resources and opportunities for individuals and organizations to do the work. Within 48 hours, the website TurnToward.US was built and offered:

- ➔ A public Turn Toward pledge
- ➔ Curated resources for healthy conflict across various settings, as offered by 17 different national and local partner groups
- ➔ Notification of future public events and community conversations to build connection and understanding both online and in person (20+ events from 14 organizations were offered to the public in immediate weeks after September 10 alone)

Building the website moved the work beyond symbolic statements and toward sustained civic engagement. In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, the Turn Toward website had over 7000 page visits.



4. Press Event and Communications Outreach

Two days after the tragedy, Turn Toward hosted a press event at the Utah Capital building to acknowledge community helpers and leaders unified in condemning political violence. More than 35 community leaders and students from 4 different campuses stood alongside the 7 core team members. The event was livestreamed and included:

Announcing the launch of the TurnToward.Us website and library of resources

Opportunity for invited media to visit with multiple community leaders for segment interviews and quotes

Demonstrate shared purpose and assistance

Speakers included local leaders from the business sector, former state officials, the chairs of the Utah Young Democrats and Republicans, and two of the coalition leaders. Two press firms—both right and left leaning—supported the press event and coordinated all the outward facing communications, invitations, follow up engagement. The PR team helped to amplify our collective voices, drive media coverage of the press conference, and set up subsequent interviews on local TV and radio for multiple leaders in the days and weeks that followed. The goal was to elevate trusted voices committed to: (1) accurate information rather than speculation; (2) de-escalation and a call for peace; (3) offer resources and events for the public. The event brought together over 50 in-person attendees and generated 14 pieces of media coverage across 10 outlets, helping bring a more constructive approach to the public conversation.

Similar messaging from political and civic organizations played a significant role in strengthening the narrative intervention. As the founder of Disagree Better, Governor Cox's calls for compassionate rhetoric aligned with the principles and values of the Turn Toward effort.

Key Insights

1 Crisis Moments Create Openings

Incidents of violence are tragic, and they cut through the daily noise and get attention. And in those times, there is an opportunity for reflection and change. As Parker described, crises cause people who normally do not engage deeply with political conflict to tune in. Those who are deeply partisan can pause and have more willingness to lean into a shared humanity identity.

Communities that are prepared can build on these moments to reinforce norms of restraint, empathy, and civic responsibility.

2 Relationships of Trust Form Critical Infrastructure

The most significant factor in the initiative's success was trust among participants.

Relationships of trust, built over time around areas of alignment allowed leaders to move quickly, without ego, to share responsibility, and make decisions without lengthy deliberation.

"We can move quickly when we don't overthink it and align and don't get worried about who gets credit."³

3 The Power of Narrative Intervention

In the absence of a strong local response, national narratives often dominate coverage of political violence. Local voices can provide important context and model constructive responses.

By publishing an OpEd quickly and coordinating media engagement, Turn Toward helped shape how the event was discussed within Utah. In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, the Turn Toward website had more than 7000 site visits.

³ Giles

4 Combine Bridging and Mobilization Strategies

Bridge-building organizations often emphasize listening, relationship-building, and careful dialogue. While these practices are essential, they can also slow responses in moments of crisis.

Turn Toward demonstrated the importance of combining bridge-building sensibilities with mobilization. While the group initially mobilized to write an Op-Ed, it was also committed to sharing the spotlight with other Utah based organizations. This included drawing on existing networks to gather these organizations for a press event as well as spotlighting their resources and events on the Turn Toward website. The website also provided opportunity and access for community members to lean in and take action. “Having the combination of organizing sensibility and bridging sensibilities married in one group of people was pretty rad,” Parker observed.

This powerful combination allowed the group to act quickly while maintaining the values of the bridge-building and peacebuilding fields.

5 Know the Local Ecosystem and Have a Higher Level Expert to Ensure Best Practices and Avoid Pitfalls

Each of the 7 leaders had deep connections and knowledge within Utah communities, culture, and politics. Their involvement in national efforts offered awareness of resources and expertise outside the state. The group invited Nealin Parker, a longtime leader in addressing polarization and political violence, to share common pitfalls and help the group lean into best practices for responding to political violence. Already connected to the group through national coalitions, Parker brought a broader national perspective while building on the relationships and work already underway in Utah.

“What we had here were leaders of national organizations who lived in Utah, were familiar with the Utah ecosystem and addressing an issue in their state, but then were all connected with the larger national context and resources.... And the reality is, their instincts are going to be correct in terms of the local... understanding of the local culture and character. But they may not have access to best practices, and you need both.”⁴

⁴ Parker

Resilient Communities Can Lead National Progress

The Peace Impact Framework⁵ suggests that a community's vulnerability or resilience to political violence is shaped by several interconnected factors: levels of agency and hope, belonging and social trust, institutional trust, the frequency of crises, and whether resources and incentives flow toward unifying or divisive forces.

Communities experiencing repeated incidents of political violence often face deficits across multiple dimensions, even as they become more skilled in addressing conflict. Each new crisis can further erode trust, weaken social bonds, and diminish confidence that collective action can make a difference. As a result, community leaders and institutions can become trapped in a cycle of response rather than transformation, devoting energy to addressing immediate harms while having fewer opportunities to strengthen the underlying conditions that support long-term peace.

The Turn Toward response highlights what is possible when many of the conditions identified by the Peace Impact Framework are already strong. Utah ranks first nationally in social capital, community life, volunteerism, charitable giving, and neighborhood participation, and second in social trust—indicators of strong civic engagement, belonging, and agency⁶. The state experiences comparatively few incidents of political violence, and

Peace Impact Framework

1. Personal agency and empowerment
2. Social cohesion and trust
3. Institutional legitimacy and trust
4. Exposure to violence and crises
5. Resource flows that either reinforce or undermine peace

Utah

- ➔ Ranks #1 in community life, volunteerism, charitable giving, and neighborhood participation
- ➔ Ranks #1 in social capital and #2 in social trust
- ➔ Political leaders have been rewarded electorally for unifying messages rather than divisive ones
- ➔ Utah has comparatively fewer incidents of political violence and conflict
- ➔ Less zero-sum political messaging and campaign spending than major battleground states

⁵ Peace Impact Framework, ConnexUS

⁶ Neighborhoods and Networks: How Community Life Links with Social Capital, Utah Foundation

many of its most prominent political leaders have been rewarded electorally for unifying rather than divisive messages. Because Utah is not a major electoral battleground, it is also less exposed to the zero-sum political messaging and campaign spending that often intensify polarization elsewhere.

Turn Toward demonstrated how these assets could be intentionally leveraged to strengthen civic participation, cohesion, and constructive engagement during moments of tension. As Nealin Parker observed, states with "deep social community, rich cultural norms, and national leaders rooted in place" can help push the field forward by revealing how resilient communities sustain peace. Utah's experience suggests that peacebuilding should be understood not only as a crisis response, but also as an investment in the civic, relational, and institutional conditions that cultivate trust, agency, and resilience before crises emerge.

Blueprint: What Other Communities Can Do

The Turn Toward experience suggests several lessons for other communities seeking to respond constructively to political violence in a collaborative way.

Build Relationships Before a Crisis

Trust is not created quickly. There are possibilities and impossibilities in moments of crisis, "The impossible thing is building a core team with deep trust in that moment. You can't do it. It's either there or it's not there." (Parker)

Communities should invest in building networks among civic leaders, bridge-building organizations, faith leaders, and media professionals long before emergencies occur.

"Utah isn't perfect -- we face many of the same challenges of disunity, polarization, and hyperpartisanship that the rest of the country does. But I really do believe that we have a special and unique opportunity here. It's a small enough state that a lot of people know each other -- and those personal relationships matter. There's a reservoir of social trust and goodwill -- maybe smaller than it used to be, but not totally evaporated. And most of all, there's a sense that we shouldn't govern ourselves by the exercise of raw power. Principles matter, people matter, relationships matter. We don't always live up to those ideals, but at least we have those ideals. And there are a lot of very talented and focused people committed to doing politics in a different, better way. If we can do that, and be a model for other places around the country, that would be special," said Mason



Consider This

Look to convening organizations, funders, and existing coalitions to **foster connection**

Find ways to partner, amplify and collaborate **ahead of a crisis**

Do your homework by **understanding the work** of other organizations in your area

Move Quickly

Narratives surrounding violent events form rapidly.

Communities seeking to promote unity must act quickly to offer alternative narratives grounded in shared values.

“The amazing thing was the speed with which the forces of unity came into motion. People were prepared for this, in ways that wouldn't have been true just a decade earlier...Whether by providence or coincidence, a lot of those folks were in Utah and had at least some familiarity with one another. Although each organization has its own perspective and approach, we all share a broader commitment to nonviolent political and social engagement.”⁷

- ➔ Identify the strengths, connections, and capacity within the group
- ➔ Encourage honesty about what you can and cannot provide

Start with a Clear Narrative

An organizing document—such as an Op-Ed, public letter, or statement—can provide a foundation for coordinated action.

⁷ Mason



This document
should articulate:

- ✓ Shared principles and values
- ✓ Clear calls to action
- ✓ A tone of empathy and restraint
- ✓ Combine Messaging with Action
- ✓ Public messaging alone is not enough

Consider creating opportunities for individuals to participate constructively in the calls to action surfaced in your document. Low lift options like uplifting the good work already happening in your community, signing a pledge or a simple symbolic act of solidarity are effective without overly stressing capacity.

- ➔ Assess who has media connections, writing skills, time and capacity
- ➔ Consider having primary author and editor to collaborate on a draft before having the larger group weigh in

Use a Core Leadership Team

Small decision-making teams enable faster responses. Assess who is able to lean in and allow the larger group to provide legitimacy and support without slowing operational decisions.

- ➔ Be clear about timeline and how others are expected to check in
- ➔ Establish the best way to communicate

What We Would Do Differently

Turn Toward leaders identified areas for improvement.

Social Media Engagement

Several leaders felt the initiative could have amplified its message more effectively online with stronger social media engagement.

Direct Engagement with Elected Officials

While many members of the group had trusted relationships with state and federal leaders, those connections were not leveraged as intentionally as they could have been to encourage and offer consistent public messaging focused on peace, restraint, and civic responsibility. Elected officials can play an important role in reinforcing community norms during moments of crisis, particularly when their messaging models calm, dignity, and non-escalation. There was an opportunity to engage elected officials more directly and strategically.

Simple Symbolic Action

Leaders also discussed the value of providing simple symbolic actions that individuals could take from home. Visible gestures—such as signs, lights, or symbols displayed publicly—can help individuals express solidarity even if they are unable to attend events in person. Common Ground USA’s Crisis Playbook offers additional examples and practical resources for communities seeking constructive responses to political violence.

Conclusion: Turning Toward as a Practice

Turn Toward was not simply a one-time response to a tragic event. It reflected a broader philosophy of civic leadership grounded in relationships of trust, aligned values of peacebuilding, and a sense of shared responsibility.

The initiative demonstrated that communities can respond to political violence in ways that reduce polarization rather than intensify it. Providing infrastructure for people to “have a way to find, discover, and connect with each other”⁸ is valuable. These responses are strengthened when they emerge from long-term investments in trust, collaboration, and civic capacity.

As political tensions continue to shape public life in the United States, these investments may become increasingly important. Turn Toward offers one example of how communities can prepare for these moments—and how they can choose, even in times of crisis, to turn toward one another rather than away.

⁸ Giles

The next phase of Turn Toward is preparing for the future by shifting its focus to the long term investment in conflict fluency throughout the state in response to needs that have surfaced since September 2025. As Addams observed, “We were able to collectively meet our initial objective, which was to avoid violence in the immediate aftermath. But the public conversation after the shooting exposed deep existing fractures and wounds and divisions within the state.”

Current efforts include:



Implications for Funders

Turn Toward offers important lessons for philanthropic organizations seeking to strengthen resilience in times of crisis.

- ➔ Rapid response requires flexible funding
- ➔ Crisis often occurs outside traditional grant cycles
- ➔ Organizations must be able to mobilize quickly without waiting for new funding approvals
- ➔ Relationships are long-term investments

The relationships that made Turn Toward possible developed over years of collaboration. Funders who invest in networks and partnerships create the conditions for effective crisis response.

Media Coverage

Date	Outlet	Reporter	Article Link
9/11/2025	Deseret News		<u>Opinion: Turn toward each other: A Utah response to tragedy</u>
9/12/2025	ABC4 Utah	Ryan Bittan	<u>'Build bridges, depolarize': Leaders congregate at Utah State Capitol after Charlie Kirk assassination</u>
9/12/2025	Fox 13	Julia Sandor	<u>Utahns on both sides of political divide come together in show of unity</u>
9/12/2025	Deseret News	Brigham Tomco	<u>Gov. Cox: Utah can lead the nation in addressing political polarization after the Kirk assassination</u>
9/12/2025	KSL	Bridger Beal-Cvetko	<u>'This is our moment': Cox calls for an 'off-ramp' after Charlie Kirk assassination</u>
9/12/2025	Deseret News	Dennis Romboy	<u>Through tragedy there is humanity</u>
9/13/2025	Salt Lake Tribune	Julia Jag	<u>'It was one of us' — Gov. Spencer Cox and fellow Utahns come to terms with a suspected assassin in their midst</u>
9/13/2025	KSL 5 TV		<u>Political depolarization group speaks about efforts on deescalate the narrative</u>

9/14/2025	Utah Policy		<u>Utah leaders launch national bridge-building tool kit following the assassination of Charlie Kirk at UVU.</u>
9/15/2025	Deseret News	Opinion	<u>Perspective: The off-ramp from high conflict starts here and now</u>
9/15/2025	Utah News Dispatch	Alixel Cabrera	<u>In the wake of Charlie Kirk assassination, Utah coalition releases toolkit to avoid polarization</u>
9/16/2025	Deseret News	Holly Richardson	<u>Opinion: Words matter</u>
9/16/2025	News Nation Now	Jeff Arnold	<u>Braver Angels CEO hopes Charlie Kirk's death sparks civility, respect</u>
9/30/2025	KRCL		<u>Climb, Rally, Explore: Public Lands in Focus</u>

Core Team

Name	Organization Description
Emma Petty Addams <i>Co-executive director, Mormon Women for Ethical Government</i>	<u>Mormon Women for Ethical Government (MWEG)</u> is a faith-based nonprofit organization built to inspire and empower women to be ambassadors of peace who transcend partisanship and courageously advocate for ethical government.
Marianne Viray <i>Executive Director, Disagree Better</i>	<u>Disagree Better</u> is a national organization founded by Governor Spencer Cox that champions healthy conflict for better policy outcomes.
Becca Kearl <i>Executive Director, Living Room Conversations</i>	<u>Living Room Conversations</u> offers proven tools to facilitate structured dialogue among people with differing views and backgrounds to increase understanding of various issues, build relationships, and pave the way for collaborative problem-solving.
Maury Giles <i>CEO, Braver Angels</i>	<u>Braver Angels</u> inspires and equips Americans to practice courageous citizenship across political differences through skill-building, convening, and collaborative action.
Tami Pyfer <i>Chief Impact Officer, Dignity.U.s and Co-creator, the Dignity Index</i>	<u>The Dignity Index</u> is an eight-point scale for measuring how we talk to and treat each other when we disagree, which voters from opposite ends of the political spectrum have agreed on scores for.
Paul Edwards <i>Director, BYU Wheatley Institute</i>	<u>BYU Wheatley Institute</u> fortifies the core social institutions of the family, religion, and constitutional government by supporting and sharing academic research at events, both in-person at on-campus conferences and digitally through social media.
Patrick Mason <i>Cofounder, Waymakers</i>	<u>Waymakers</u> is an organization dedicated to bringing hope to those struggling to make a way out of no way and helping those in conflict find their way back home.