

Local

Program that showed gang members 'a different way' loses funding

DAWN HOBBS, NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

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A six-year-old gang prevention program has lost its funding, just as gang membership in Santa Barbara is surging. The Gang Risk Intervention Program, which worked with youths who attend La Cuesta Continuation schools, recently held its last weekend retreat for gang members. "Three of the toughest ones came up to me afterwards and told me that during the closing ceremony they were thinking about all of their friends or family who had been killed or hurt or had been imprisoned because of gangs," said Keith Terry, GRIP coordinator. "When all was said and done, they thanked me for showing them a different way."

But now, the \$100,000 the program received annually from the state is gone, Mr. Terry said. It funded weekly meetings with more than 100 youths and their families, along with the annual retreat where kids from rival gangs interacted. As for other gang programs, there is still Turf to Surf, a two-week surf camp, and One for All, a group whose members have already committed to leave their gangs. But neither provides ongoing support for kids still in gangs. Police Sgt. Ralph Molina is looking into a successful gang intervention program in San Jose that he may try to get city backing to replicate here.

At the GRIP retreats, the kids are first divided into teams to get them out of their comfort zones. "I think they get to realize that people they normally don't hang out with are just the same as they are," Mr. Terry said. By the end, the kids had listened to speakers, had participated in numerous team-building exercises and had even cooked, eaten, swum and played basketball together. Youths who participated in the final retreat in mid-June offered their perspective:

* One 16-year-old girl said she wanted to learn how to get out of a gang: "I like it because of my friends, but I don't because of all of the problems it's brought me." She said she's having a hard time leaving the life because her father, brothers and uncles are all gang members.

* A 15-year-old boy, who recently left a gang, said he was there to meet new people: "I got out because of my family. My future. To be able to walk down the street. . . . It's hard because if you're jumped in, you have to get jumped out. . . . But ever since, things have been better."

* A 17-year-old girl, who also attended the retreat last year, said: "Support programs like these help kids understand the damage they're doing to our community and to understand how they can change that."

* A 17-year-old boy, who had just graduated from La Cuesta, said he plans to attend Santa Barbara City College in the fall and apply to Brooks Institute of Photography. He said: "I love my freedom. And I love to take pictures." However, he still occasionally slips back into gang ways. Since the retreat, one 16-year-old attendee was stabbed on the Westside by people he said he didn't even know.

GRIP was the last program of the Pro-Youth Coalition founded in 1998 by Babatunde Folayemi, a former city councilman. "In 1997, we had eight gang-related murders here < that's what it took for people to react," Mr. Folayemi said. "But when the police stats came out in 2001 that we had reduced gang-related crime by 81 percent, the money pulled out and interest pulled out because they didn't see any violence and thought we solved the problem. "Dealing with the problem, however, is a long-term commitment < otherwise, violence spikes and kids inevitably get killed, he said. "Santa Barbara has a generational gang problem," he said. "Unless you change the societal ills that breed it, this will never go away < it will subside and come back, like it has been. "You have to address education, jobs, the inequities that are causing this in the first place," he said, citing the successful truce between the Crips and the Bloods gangs in Los Angeles. "The whole community got involved."

Mr. Terry said his group has even downloaded the Tookie Williams truce protocol the former Crips founder set up from death row to facilitate the truce between the Bloods and Crips. "But we just never had the chance to go through that process," Mr. Terry said. The Tookie Protocol for Peace is a multi-stage process that calls for involvement from gang members, schools, police, city officials and the business community. The process of a truce starts with getting gang members involved in their own communities first and then expanding outward. Eventually, there's a laying down of weapons and the addition of activities, such as handball tournaments.

"It's doable," Mr. Folayemi said. "But unless the city sits down and decides once again as a city to address this issue, we're going to have a hard, long summer."

Dawn Hobbs
Crime Reporter
Santa Barbara News-Press
805/564-5252
e-mail: dhobbs@newspress.com

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