

The California Cities Gang Prevention Network

Welcome to the seventh bulletin of the California Cities Gang Prevention Network! In addition to updating you about the June meeting of the city leads of this Network, we will spotlight several organizations that have employed former gang members for outreach work. These outreach workers are responsible for the difficult face-to-face street work of trying to stop violence, move gang members towards positive non-violent behavior, and keep at-risk youth from joining gangs.

Save the Date!

The next meeting, for full city teams, will take place February 28-29, 2008, in Los Angeles.

The 2nd Meeting of the Network

The second meeting of the California Cities Gang Prevention Network, held in San Jose on June 21st and 22nd was attended by the 13 city leads, as well as additional representatives, such as Salinas' Mayor Donohue. In addition, representatives from The California Endowment, the East Bay Community Foundation, and the California Office of the Attorney General attended.

This meeting provided the opportunity for city leads to:

- Discuss their comprehensive plans and roadblocks to establishing these plans.
- Share promising strategies and programs.
- Explore and experience the San Jose Mayor's Gang Prevention Task Force in action.
- Learn about relevant policy discussions at the state and federal levels.

- Deepen their connection to each other and strengthen the statewide network.

The meeting kicked off with a discussion of the steps necessary to create a comprehensive action plan, with a focus on:

- Forging a common vision
- Engaging all stakeholders
- Developing strategies
- Sharing accountability
- Coordinating initiatives

By the end of the calendar year, all the cities are expected to have completed a comprehensive action plan.

Meeting participants had the opportunity to attend a gathering of the policy team of the San Jose Mayor's Gang Prevention Task Force. The policy team, chaired by the Mayor, evaluates emerging trends and sets policy direction, monitors the progress of the technical team, and facilitates interagency collaboration and troubleshooting. The team consists of leaders from schools, community-based organizations, probation, police department, juvenile court, city attorney's office, sheriff's department, and parks and recreation. Following the meeting, San Jose's Mayor Chuck Reed and Police Chief Rob Davis met with city leads to discuss specific questions regarding the San Jose model—reasons for success and longevity as well as the difficulties of implementing such a model.

Additionally, city leads shared promising programs and strategies in school-based gang prevention

programs, relationships with other criminal justice agencies, getting gang members into the legitimate workforce, reorganizing city services to meet neighborhood needs, and working with families of gang members. Staff from the offices of Governor Schwarzenegger, Senator Dianne Feinstein, and Senator Barbara Boxer joined the Network at dinner for an in-depth discussion of proposed gang prevention legislation.

Former Gang Members as Outreach Workers

At our inaugural meeting, and in conference calls and one-on-one conversations, team participants expressed an interest in learning more about working with and employing former gang members. The reasons for doing so are cogent: it supports those who have turned their lives around, and uses their life experience to develop a rapport with at-risk and gang-involved youth, in order to diffuse situations before violence occurs. There are, however, concerns such as how to assure that these workers have truly left the “life” and how to navigate their relationships with school staff and police officers who may distrust individuals with a storied past.

Though this issue deserves in-depth analysis, below we discuss some of the experiences of and recommendations from Teny Gross, a leading voice in this field and executive director of the Institute for the Study and Practice of Non-Violence, in addition to reflections from some organizations in our partner cities.

Teny Gross, Institute for the Study and Practice of Non-Violence

Teny Gross, executive director of the Institute based in Providence, RI, spoke by phone with the city leads on June 18, 2007. His program has been touted by many as one of the best in the nation. Gross believes that communities cannot significantly reduce violence in this country without the help of street workers. Street workers not only work with youth to move them out of the lifestyle by offering positive alternatives, but they also navigate the gang climate to reduce conflict and to reduce the risk to youth who wish to leave this lifestyle. Gross shared some recommendations regarding street worker programs:

- *The street workers must be adequately supported and nurtured.* Not only are these workers performing very difficult, dangerous, and important work, but as former gang members they must remain committed to staying away from the gang lifestyle, even as their work puts them in constant contact with it. Furthermore, street worker groups will likely be made up of former members of rival gangs which can threaten the group’s cohesiveness—an essential element of success. In order to ensure their success and prevent high turnover, street workers need up-front training, fair wages, constant mentoring, and support. Training alone will not work.
- *Community-based organizations.* Gross believes that a street worker program should be housed in a community-based organization, not within the city. According to Gross, this prevents city worker schedules that do not allow the flexibility needed to do this kind of work, much of which occurs at all hours of the night; it also keeps the program from becoming a “dumping ground” for city employees. Furthermore, it allows the program to be more aggressive and flexible in responding to the ever-changing nature of violence in the city. For similar reasons, Gross suggests that the program should not be housed in a large, bureaucratic non-profit organization.
- *Relationship with the police department.* This is an extremely important and delicate relationship to cultivate as the two groups often are working with the same individuals and share a mission of reducing violence in the city. But suspicion can be high as some officers now face working with individuals they once arrested and jailed. In order to improve the trust and relationships between the two groups, street workers in Providence now train in the police academy with police officers. Nevertheless, Gross believes it is crucial that street workers are not seen as “snitches” who provide information to the police. Communication with the police department is channeled through Gross to avoid giving the impression that the street workers are sharing information with the police. Though street workers will tell the police where they believe they should

focus their energy, i.e., where “hot spots” may occur, they will not share specific details of individuals or cases. In Providence, this has caused some tension as police may want help with specific cases about which the street workers have information. Gross was emphatic that though this information sharing might help solve one case, in the long run it would discredit the street workers and make them ineffectual, in essence destroying their relationship with gang members and wannabees.

- *Managing expectations.* Given the high rate of recidivism among the prison population as well as former gang-involved youth, and given the community’s distrust of supporting and funding former gang members, Gross said it is essential that expectations are managed. As he sees it, working with former gang members is a necessary gamble given their effectiveness in reaching and influencing gang-involved and at-risk youth. Schools, police, and the media need to be taught that, though it is possible that a street worker will get involved in some negative activity, this does not mean that the entire program should be considered a failure.
- *“Carrot” approach.* At-risk and gang-involved youth need to replace their current activities and behavior with positive activities. It is essential that street workers are able to offer these youth positive means to spend their time, acquire skills, and even earn some income. Furthermore, as gangs can make youth feel that they are part of a family and cared for, street workers must “compete for the hearts of these kids. Somebody has to show them that they can be cared for by more than their fellow gang members.”

For more information on the Institute for the Study and Practice of Non-Violence, please visit <http://www.nonviolenceinstitute.org/>

Peacekeepers

Stockton’s Peacekeepers Program aims to utilize outreach workers in partnership with government, community, and faith-based organizations to:

- Reduce gang related violence in Stockton and San Joaquin County.
- Reach out to gang related youth ages 13 to 18.
- Provide the resources necessary for youth to abstain from a gang lifestyle and become productive members of society.

The Peacekeepers are all former gang members who work as youth outreach workers for the City of Stockton. They are trained in conflict resolution, mediation, community organizing, mentoring, and case management. They work in neighborhood settings and particularly in the schools, street corners, and apartment complexes where at-risk and gang-involved youth are found. Peacekeepers canvass neighborhoods and hotspots, conduct weekly home visits in gang infested areas, respond to crisis situations to prevent the escalation of violence and future retaliation, and build mentoring relationships with youth who have the highest risk of gang involvement, particularly serious gun violence, and provide these youth with positive alternatives for a healthier, non-violent lifestyle. Peacekeepers serve as a liaison between gang members, at-risk youth and their families, and law enforcement and community-based organizations.

Currently the four youth outreach workers are all male former gang members from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Each is assigned to two major high schools in order to cover all the major high schools in the area. The City plans to hire enough outreach workers to assign each worker only one high school, allowing them to also work in middle schools and alternative high schools. Peacekeepers are seen as particularly effective in communicating with current gang-involved youth, given their similarity in background. Police Lieutenant Dennis Smallie, who manages the Peacekeeper program, says they are “respected and can really get into the gang. Youth look up to them and think, ‘If he got out of the life, I too can get out.’”

Stockton’s Peacekeeper Program has been modified since it was first put in place in 1998. Below are some of the lessons learned by the Stockton program since its inception:

Funding and city support:

Stockton's Peacekeeper Program was modeled after Boston's Ceasefire Program and has been in place since 1998. The program was funded by grants and a shared agreement between the City of Stockton and County of San Joaquin. Initially, it appeared to have great success. Gang-related homicides fell from a high of 22 in 1997 to 2 in 1998; between 1999 and 2003, the City had five homicides or less per year. Perhaps because of its success, the program was not seen as a priority anymore, funding was lost, the coordinator departed, and the youth outreach workers were reduced to one position.

In 2006, as crime rose, Mayor Chavez' Blue Ribbon Crime Prevention Task Force recommended the re-ignition of the Peacekeeper program. By March, 2007, the City of Stockton had experienced 7 gang-related homicides. With City general funds, and grants from the California Wellness Foundation and Juvenile Accountability Block Grant, among others, the Mayor and City Council hired four youth outreach workers and added the program management to the duties of Police Lieutenant Dennis Smallie, who was working directly for Stockton's Mayor and City Manager. Previously the program had been under the direction of the City's Parks and Recreation Department and prior to that by the coordinator working out of the San Joaquin County. Since the reinstatement of the program four months ago, no gang-related homicides have occurred.

Smallie believes that housing the program in the Mayor's office has heightened its priority within the City, and therefore its ability to accomplish things quickly. Furthermore, he believes its home in the Mayor's office is crucial both to its longevity and the stability of its funding.

Relationship with other entities:

Given the importance of the Peacekeepers' collaboration with the Police Department, schools, and community-based organizations, the Peacekeepers' program has made an effort to strengthen these collaborations and to present a more united voice to the community. On a weekly basis the Peacekeeper Core Team consisting of School District Police Officers, Stockton Police School Resource Officers, Probation

Officers on Campus, and the Youth Outreach Workers meet to discuss issues, especially gang members and school sites or locations in the City where suppression and intervention efforts should be deployed.

On a monthly basis, 25-50 high-risk gang members are invited or mandated to attend a forum where criminal justice agencies, including probation, parole, police, and the District Attorney's Office, tell the youth that they will face strict consequences if they continue their current behavior. After this presentation, the Peacekeepers, community-based organizations, and the mothers of gang members who have died discuss how these gang-involved youth can get out of the lifestyle. The forum combines the message of clear consequences and clear offers of help.

Additionally, on a monthly basis, policy makers and others interested in collaboration are invited to a Peacekeeper Advisory meeting to get updated and address any roadblocks to collaboration.

The relationship with the Police Department is particularly sensitive and important to the success of the Peacekeepers' program. Dennis Smallie coordinates the program for Stockton's Mayor and City Manager. The city leaders did not want to house the program directly in the Police Department, as this would likely make gang members less likely to trust the Peacekeeper with information for which they could possibly be arrested. However, as police personnel are also likely to be suspicious of the Peacekeepers, given their former gang involvement and the relationships they form with current gang members, city leaders felt it was important that the program remain supervised by someone with police experience. Furthermore, in Stockton all Peacekeepers are introduced to every police officer and detective at every roll call with an explanation given to each officer on how the Peacekeeper program works. A law enforcement representative is involved in the hiring of the Peacekeepers to further the buy in. It takes a continual effort to build this relationship. Smallie believes these extra steps are improving the relationship between the police and the peacekeepers and referrals from the police are increasing.

Communities in Schools

Communities in Schools, San Fernando Valley, Greater Los Angeles (CIS-GLA) is the Los Angeles affiliate of Communities in Schools, Inc., a leading national community-based organization focused on helping youth succeed in school and prepare for life.

CIS-GLA, formed in 1994, has been named a “model” program for gang intervention by the State of California, LA County, and the City of LA. CIS-GLA aims to bring the community together to address local youth violence through a wide range of violence prevention, gang intervention, community empowerment, job development, and mentoring activities. For every at-risk youth, the organization aims to provide:

- A personal, one on one relationship with a caring adult.
- A safe place to learn and grow.
- A healthy start—a healthy future.
- A marketable skill to use upon graduation.
- A chance to give back to the community.

Current services include an after-school program that serves over 200 at-risk youth annually, gang intervention for gang members, their families, and others affected by gang violence; a wide array of job-related services; mediation and restitution services for youth offenders and their victims; crisis intervention, with a focus on preventing retaliation; and collaboration with the police and probation and other city agencies.

Robert Hernandez, a program director with Communities in Schools, said that former gang members are “able to engage with [gang-involved youth] faster than a licensed professional. They automatically relate to youth about their life experiences.” He admits that employing former gang members can be a challenge, particularly “the stigma society has about gangs, the idea that ‘once a gang member, always a gang member.’” Nevertheless, Communities in Schools has been able to work with a variety of city and community agencies and has built a positive reputation through years of hard work and positive results. Hernandez says that after years of working with the same agencies and individuals, one can develop relationships and trust among unlikely

allies. Hernandez emphasized that often Communities in Schools engages in the work that other agencies do not want to do. For example, they strive to serve the most disruptive youth—those that may seem most difficult and most entrenched in the gang lifestyle. Given the unique abilities of these former gang members to infiltrate these communities and influence hard-to-reach youth, and the constant need for outreach workers to interact with the police and the schools, it becomes clear that “we all need each other.”

Paul Vinetz, director of the Los Angeles County Probation Department and member of the Los Angeles Network team, agrees that street outreach workers contribute to the public safety landscape in Los Angeles. He says, “If we don’t have those agencies as part of the equation there is a void. They are an essential ingredient when it comes to public safety and they need to be here.” Despite all the work his agency and police departments can do, he recognizes that “former gang members are in a unique position to understand the minds of gang members themselves. The best street workers are those that can serve as a positive model, not only for the people in the community but also for others in their agency, and really sincerely do their work and give of themselves for positive change in their community.”

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