Gang Reduction and Intervention Task Force (GRIT)

Village Meeting Notes

February 16, 2022

Call to order: 12:00 p.m. Seventeen attending.

Topic: The Role of The Family in the Reduction of Gang Activity

Speaker: Thelma Cervantes, Family Liaison - Lewis & Clark Middle School

Job is to improve communication between students and others.

* Parents have a crucial role in guiding children
* Listen to children, not just tell them
* Many youths turn to gangs because those are the people who listen
* Communicate a positive message—this is not always the usual practice
* Find productive ways to occupy to children’s free time.
* Spend time with your children one on one. Even a few minutes make them feel special.
* Know your children’s friends
* Set limits. Children need to know what is acceptable and what is not.
* Explain the consequences of various activities. Let them know how a relationship with a gang could affect their future.
* Being a parent is a 24/7 occupation, no matter how old they are.

Family liaison role

* Do not allow any gang signs, even subtle ones
* There is a dress code to prohibit gang paraphernalia.
* Family/school/community all need to work together to promote student success.
* Critical youth issues include drug use and mental health problems.
* Meet with family to plan for that particular student.
* Show the student that we care about them- “You are here because you are important to us, and we care about you.” No need to be afraid of a trip to the office.

Brandi Albert, Community Counselor, DCYF

* At-risk youth are the highest risk offenders and are already involved in gangs. The hope is to keep them out of the adult system.
* After parole, they will only have their family to fall back on. Families need to help their sons and daughters find other alternatives, family activities, employment, school activities offer kids a choice,
* One family’s story: Gang involvement was intergenerational, from the grandparents down. We all seek to be valued, and the mother emphasized the importance of putting family first to her children. She knew they could not just leave, but she taught her son about risk and safety, and considering alternatives. The priority was family safety.
* As providers, we have to tell ourselves not to give up 100 times a day. It is much harder for a mother in this situation. The mother continually reminded her son that even though he had to stay gang related, he could still go to school, meet his parole conditions, and build a chance for another kind of future.

Adrian Suarez, Parole Counselor, DCYF

* People join gangs at a young age because of a lack of family support and affection. They are seeking belonging. Parents might be working constantly, or on the other hand, may have drug and mental health issues that keep them from focusing on their children.
* I don’t try to make them change. It is not always possible to just leave. The strategy is more nuanced. We find out what is going on with this individual, and help them change their point of view, by creating reliable family relationships.
* Families sometimes think that food and shelter is their only responsibility. We try to get them to do activities together, like checking in at dinner.
* We are an advocate for better family communication and teaching them relationship tools so they can be successful.
* We have six months to make a difference, so giving parents and children tools is our top priority.
* We teach de-escalation skills, information about domestic violence, and the importance of maintaining relationships.
* We work with other departments, including police departments

Discussion:

* When parents are a part of the gang, engagement, participation, and respect are important. What works for me (Brandi) is to be accepting, and not blaming parents for their own culture. Appreciating the strengths gang provide, such as commitment to others and self-protection.
* Just because parents are gang-involved does not mean they want their kids going to prison or getting killed. Most of these families have no ability to relocate, and an attempt to leave will put a bullseye on their own family.
* School dress code rules are to protect the safety of all students. At home, you can dress anyway you want. Emphasis on group safety. No one is singling out your student.
* Teens who have gang family members have a hard time breaking those ties, even when they want to. It takes persistence, courage, and help from others.
* It is very important to be non-judgmental with youth and families.
* Families often do not recognize signs of gang involvement.
* There was interest in having Brandi and Adrian, as subject experts, talk to school administrators to educate them on this issue.

The meeting ended at 12:50 p.m.

The next GRIT Village meeting: March 16, 2022, via Zoom. Presenter details are being finalized.

Notes submitted by Ann Dibble, DRC