

Teaming up to Prevent Youth Violence in San Diego

The news may alert a city to youth violence, but what can a community do to make changes that will last?

Challenge

For years, gang violence was on the rise in San Diego. It seemed that every Monday morning the papers reported another gang-related death. City and community organizations had each launched efforts to prevent violence and to help youth achieve their full potential and make a successful transition to adulthood (positive youth development). However, the city and community had never worked together as a team. The 2003 New Year's Eve murder of two innocent young women was the tipping point for San Diego. Gang violence had spiraled out of control. City officials and community organizers knew San Diego had to come up with a coordinated approach to positive youth development and violence prevention. And it was essential to do it in a way they could sustain.

Solution

Change in San Diego started at City Hall. Building policy that could foster prevention was a first step. Council member Anthony Young enlisted Mayor Jerry Sanders to join him in working with the San Diego City Council. At the urging of Young and Sanders, the Council set up the San Diego Commission on Gang Prevention and Intervention. The mayor appointed Pastor Harry Cooper, a widely respected faith leader, to lead the Commission. The City Council passed an ordinance that sanctioned the Commission to "Make recommendations concerning gang prevention, intervention, diversion, and suppression methods; identify local, state, and federal funding sources; and address other gang-related policy matters." One full-time city employee and 4 student interns have supported the work of the Commission.

The next step was finding common ground with the community. First, the Commission reached out to the people of San Diego to hear their suggestions for dealing with gang violence and learn how city agencies could work better with the community. This "listening tour" made the people part of the solution. The city joined the California Cities Gang Prevention Network, a group of 13 California cities, to learn how they had incorporated prevention into city planning. San Diego also became part of Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth (UNITY). Through UNITY, the city accessed the resources of the Prevention Institute, a national organization focused on promoting primary prevention practice.

Results

Building on the know-how of other cities and the support of community partners, the Commission developed a strategic plan in 2006 and began to carry it out. One of the Commission's top goals was to build collaboration between the public, schools, and law enforcement to decrease gang violence. The city has made great progress in building working relationships with community groups. As law enforcement and neighborhood residents sat down at the table together, they began to connect, learn from each other, and build shared understandings. Community members and organizations learned to work together in a new, positive way. Local agencies and school districts have partnered to conduct the Safe Passages program in middle and high schools. Safe Passages is a coordinated, multi-agency effort to keep students safe as they walk to school and to impact gang involvement. Partnership around truancy and curfews is another area of success. Over 50 neighborhood volunteers have helped police with curfew sweeps.

At the high point of the violence in 2007, there were 29 gang-related homicides. By 2009, that number had declined to 9. Clearly, this is progress in addressing issues of gang-related violence, and the Commission continues to gather momentum. Working through the issues and solutions together has increased understanding. It has also brought more partners to the table. The Commission has developed a strategic plan for 2011 that builds on the success of the initial effort.

Highlights

Public and community leaders joined in a coordinated plan to prevent youth violence. The San Diego Commission on Gang Prevention and Intervention includes: each of the 8 city districts; community-based organizations; Public Health; Social Services; reformed gang members; San Diego Association of Government; San Diego Workforce Partnerships, Inc.; Chief of Police, San Diego; Superintendent, San Diego Unified School District; San Diego County Sheriff; San Diego County District Attorney; San Diego County Chief of Probation; Superintendent, County Office of Education; and Department of Corrections, State of California.

Quote

“. . . most [gang members] have caused harm to someone, whether it was their property, their sense of safety, their emotional sense of safety, their psychological wellness . . . if I can prevent harm from ever taking place, that would be the most significant impact.” Pastor Harry Cooper, Commission Chair
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