

Feds see city's anti-gang efforts in visit to Salinas

Salinas: Officials brainstorm ideas, offer help during tour

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Federal Officials from the National Forum on Youth Violence... (REG REGALADO/Herald Correspondent)

It wasn't about the money — mainly because there isn't much.

The tour taking place all over Salinas on Wednesday was about lending a hand.

Sitting around a table with volunteer Crisis Response Team members who visited families at five Salinas murder scenes in the past month and a half, Eugene Schneeberg jumped in with an offer of free training for outreach workers.

The offer from the director of faith-based and neighborhood partnerships at the U.S. Department of Justice was received with warm smiles around the room.

Then Sue Badeau, who works in a joint program between the nonprofit Casey Family Programs and the Justice Department, told the team about a free tool kit for "quick psychological first aid" the outreach workers could download.

The kit provides tips for first responders at violent crime scenes so they can say the right things or help children who have witnessed traumatic events — before professional help arrives.

"It's kind of like psychological CPR," Badeau said.

Badeau and Schneeberg were among officials from a half-dozen federal agencies who began a whirlwind two-day showcase of Salinas gang prevention and intervention efforts Wednesday, continuing to cement a White House pledge to help the city grapple with youth violence.

The visit to Salinas kicks off a two-week national tour of six cities participating in the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention.

By late afternoon, the officials were still enthusiastically brainstorming ways to get federal training, technical assistance and a few

grant dollars into the region.

Bob Reyes, who heads the crisis team and the Silver Star Resource Center, said the group could use that kind of help.

He was with them at the site of a recent murder, he said, when he saw an 11-year-old boy watching.

"I kind of stood in the way so he wouldn't see them bring the body out," he said. "I didn't want him to have nightmares later. ... We're learning there are ripple effects of violence."

Formally and informally, these and other ideas flowed throughout the day as officials visited sites around Salinas.

Greg Joy, the forum's Department of Justice liaison to Salinas and San Jose, said it was his first visit since Salinas submitted its strategic plan for addressing youth violence to the national group.

"There's no substitute for seeing the community centers, hearing what's going on," Joy said. Some sites were grim reminders of work still to be done, such as a corner house where flowers marked a homicide.

"There's a lot of sadness because of the violence," said Brian Daher of the U.S. Department of Labor.

But he is hoping the agency's Job Corps program can help.

"It will become safe," said Salinas City Councilwoman Gloria de la Rosa as the group pulled into a near-empty Cesar Chavez park. "Look at this beautiful day. I should be seeing women right now walking with their children."

But the group next saw the revitalized La Paz Park on Roosevelt Street, where a half-dozen children laughed and played.

The change "was simple," Deputy Police Chief Kelly McMillin told the visitors, "a cop talking to neighbors."

Residents told the officer that gang members were hiding in an old structure in the park, so he helped them get it torn down.

Badeau said she was moved at the day's morning meeting of the Community Alliance for Safety and Peace, where she saw "people from the highest level of government to family members."

"That wasn't just putting on a show for us," she said. "That level of community, that level of clear-headed 'let's roll up our sleeves and solve a problem,' is not seen in a lot of places."

After that meeting, the group met with Rep. Sam Farr at the Boys and Girls Club, and from there took a tour of the Hebbbron neighborhood and the Hebbbron Family Center.

Ending their day with the Crisis Team at the Silver Star Resource Center, the group seemed impressed by the cooperation between agencies in Salinas.

Consultants Sonja Koehler and Kim Stemler unveiled the Campaign For Our Future, a multi-agency plan to create employment for youths while teaching them to be leaders. It would connect young people with a near-avalanche of services to make sure they succeed. Schneeberg said that so far, he has been inspired by his first trip to Salinas. With a background in prisoner re-entry, he is eager to learn more about that today when the group tours the Rancho Cielo Youth Campus in Salinas.

Re-entry was one of the city's weaker areas noted by the national forum, and Schneeberg wants to help turn that around.

"It's really a unique time," he said. "There is hope."

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