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Politicians, inmates unite against Richmond violence

Meeting at prison allows lawmakers to ask how to ease transition from cells to society

By John Geluardi

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RICHMOND - Politicians and high-ranking city officials went inside San Quentin state prison Wednesday as part of an ongoing program to end the chronic violence on Richmond streets.

In a small room known as the Muslim-Jewish Faith Center just inside the prison's heavily secured gate, county Supervisor John Gioia, Richmond City Manager Bill Lindsay and Deputy Police Chief Ed Medina sat down with a group of inmates in what might be described as a networking session.

The policymakers wanted to learn what they can do to ease the transition from prison to the outside, and the inmates wanted to find out how they can help from inside.

The meeting was organized by the San Quentin Trust For The Development of Incarcerated Men, a group of long-term inmates who help prepare other inmates for the outside world. The 35 Trust members have achieved a high level of self-improvement through workshops, academic classes and a rigorous regimen of personal accountability. The Trust is currently working with 20 Richmond inmates who have agreed to take part in the Trust's Richmond Project, which requires them to commit to do their part to end Richmond violence.

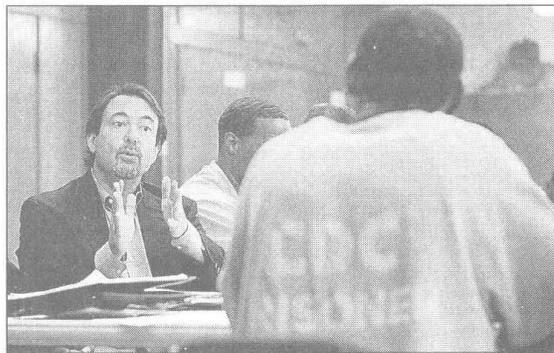
"We are a group of men who see a need to help other inmates develop into assets instead of liabilities," said Trust Chairman Rahman Green. "We aren't saying we have all the answers, but we know one thing -- we can reach out and try to help."

The Richmond Improvement Association, a coalition of faith-based organizations, has been meeting with the Trust twice a month since February. Invited by the Revs. Andre Shumake and Charles Newsome, community members and business owners have met regularly with the Richmond inmates to establish a network of relationships the inmates can rely on for support when they are released.

Gioia said it was important for him to learn more about their needs.

"I'm here to listen to what can be useful to you on the outside," Gioia told the group Wednesday. "I applaud all of you for your hard work you're doing in here, and we are obligated to make your entry back into the community easier."

Gioia has been working with the Richmond Improvement Association on a program called Clean Slate, in which parolees could have nonviolent convictions expunged from their records to remove barriers to employment and education.



JOANNA JHANDA/TIMES
SUPERVISOR JOHN GIOIA meets with inmates to talk about ways to stop violence in Richmond at the San Quentin Trust meeting for the development of incarcerated men Wednesday at the prison.

The Richmond inmates told the visitors Wednesday about the work they are doing in preparation for their release. Most are studying for a general equivalency degree as well as learning job skills. They also are taking workshops in anger management, parenting and drug and alcohol abuse.

They talked about why they are committed to changing themselves and becoming a positive influence on their younger siblings, cousins and friends.

"There are a lot of myths in our community. We think we're powerful because we carry guns and sell drugs. But power comes from the inside," said Richmond inmate James Houston, 32. "We don't do enough to support the kids out there who are doing well."

Trust members also want to do what they can from behind the prison's walls. In the coming year, they will organize an essay contest in Richmond high schools with the goal of getting teenagers to think about their social responsibilities by answering such questions as "what does my community mean to me?" The best essays will receive cash prizes.

They also are raising money to help low-income students buy school uniforms, which will be required at West Contra Costa County Unified School District elementary and middle schools starting in the fall. Medina, the deputy police chief, contributed \$500 to the uniform effort on behalf of the Richmond Police Department.

After listening to the inmates speak about the progress they've made, Lindsay talked about the city's responsibility.

"We need to change, too. When I hear you talk about closed community centers and canceled recreation programs, these are things we can do something about," he said. "We'll try to hold up our end of the bargain just like you are holding up yours."

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