

Acting Now To Prevent The Spread Of Gangs

By Federal Glover

ONE ONLY has to read the headlines of our local newspapers to realize that gangs are no longer limited to major urban centers. Their influence has spread to the suburbs and rural areas, including East County.

In many cases, we read that victims of much of the violence associated with gangs are not gang members, but they are innocent bystanders who happen to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

The easy access to deadly weapons – legally and illegally -- such as automatic weapons that can spit out bullets at an alarming rate, increases the magnitude of the disputes that used to be settled by less drastic means. Many of us have been successful in avoiding the consequences of violence, particularly gang violence. We are lucky in East County that gang violence has not risen to the magnitude of other areas, but every day, the circle of death seems to come closer to the communities we love. From news stories we know gang-related calamities can strike at anytime: at a daughter's first-birthday party, parking the car, walking down the street and even on a Sunday morning right after church services.

A few weeks ago, a high school classmate of my daughter was gunned down at college. A young man with a bright future lost his life and the world will never know how he might have positively affected the people and community around him.

It has been an eye-opening learning curve since I called together a group of people to form the East County Gang Task Force over two years ago. The Task Force consists of up to 50 representatives of education, law enforcement, probation, faith and community groups. We learned about the activities, resources and strategies used by each group to combat the lure of the gang lifestyle and the factors that lead to the formation of gangs. We arrived at the following points of agreement:

- The need for coordination and networking among the various organizations, agencies and institutions to prevent the further growth of youth gang activities in East County.
- While the gang problem in East County hasn't grown to the deadly proportions as in other parts of the urban Bay Area, gang activity is increasing.
- There are many factors contributing to the spreading influence of gangs, among which is the need to belong to a group/family, youths' alienation from the mainstream culture and a lack of job opportunities and organized activities outside of school. Fueling this growth is the media portrayal of the "glamour" surrounding gangs.

- Many of the problem youth in East County are “wannabees” who want to emulate the gang lifestyle. These youngsters provide a fertile recruiting ground for initiation into more hardcore criminal activities.
- Prevention strategies should target children as young as elementary school students up to 8th grade.
- Among members of the Task Force, there is a real concern that the emerging gang presence in East County plus the easy access to guns has the potential to evolve into serious societal problems including criminal activity and deadly turf wars.

To raise community awareness and as a proactive step to fight the spread of gangs, the Gang Task Force is holding a Gang Summit to seek ways of stemming the spread of gang culture and values among East County’s young people. The event involves youth service providers, schools, parents, clergy, law enforcement, the judicial system, recreation specialists, city and county staff and young people themselves. Parents shouldn’t think that just because they think their kid is not into gangs that this Summit doesn’t concern them. The key is to prevent kids from being lured into gang activity. It behooves all of us to learn what we can do to keep our kids safe. Prevention and intervention, along with strong law enforcement, is the way to keep our community safe.

Before gangs become solidly entrenched in East County, we need to act now. I hope you will join me Sept. 22 at the East County Boys & Girls Club in Pittsburg. The Task Force knows that the Summit won’t solve our growing problem. It is only the first step in the ongoing effort to stem the senseless violence, the first step to end the tears.

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What: East County Gang Summit

Where: East County Boys & Girls Club, 1001 Stoneman Ave., Pittsburg

When: 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Sept. 22, 2007

Who: Supervisor Federal Glover and the East County Gang Task Force in partnership with the Boys & Girls Club and Workforce Development Board.

Registration: Call 925-427-8138. Space is limited.