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Barnidge: Antioch's Youth Intervention Network pays dividends

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IT IS easy to find communities concerned about juvenile delinquency. Point a finger in any direction.

What is harder is finding a community that has had success curtailing it. But you might start by looking toward Antioch.

The Youth Intervention Network, aimed at 13- to 18-year-olds, earned national recognition earlier this month when the U.S. Department of Justice presented it the Outstanding Community Involvement Award, but those in the program knew it was working long before any plaques were handed out.

Police Chief Jim Hyde and community organizer Iris Archuleta, the brain trust behind YIN, have been sharing winks and grins at its growing success ever since they launched the program three years ago.

They have seen school attendance and grades improve among troubled youth. They have seen juvenile arrests decrease. They have seen an increasing number of parents, recognizing the program's benefit, clamor to be included.

"It's above and beyond anything we could have imagined," Archuleta said.

YIN is the product of many factors — funding from the federal Project Safe Neighborhood, dozens of committed community volunteers and guidance from the Vesper Society, among others — but it largely owes its success to involving entire families in redirecting their troubled teenagers.

"The behavior of the child is often the symptom of struggle within a family," Hyde said, "and

usually that struggle is about communication."

Before the program could effect change, organizers needed to identify the youths most likely to be involved with crimes or violence. They decided to study every teenager in Antioch public schools ("That's 8,763 kids," Archuleta said).

After hammering out an agreement with the school district — fictitious names were used to avoid privacy issues — YIN researchers collected data on every teenager who was disciplined. What was the offense? How was it resolved? How often was that student absent? What is his or her socio-economic status?

"We collected every grade, every test score, every piece of data on those kids," said Archuleta, "and we contracted with someone to analyze it. The top two indicators of kids likely to commit crime or be involved with violence were truancy and student disengagement."

The next step was to find those wanting help. Families were invited to apply, with the understanding that every member would be involved in solving the problem.

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"We interview the families," Hyde said. "If they don't have the commitment we require, they're out."

At the outset, two volunteers ask each family member, in private, to explain what he or she sees as problem issues. ("We ask them what's out of control?" said Archuleta. "What's going on with this youth? How does it impact you?")

Later, they share those observations openly with the rest of the family ("Each time we do this, somebody loses it — there are tears, stomping, the whole bit," Archuleta said).

Next, family members agree on problems to be addressed — and they volunteer solutions. Finally, every member signs a contract to implement the actions they have agreed on. A volunteer advocate is assigned to offer counsel until the teen has finished high school.

How is success measured?

"By academic performance, graduation and peace in the family," Hyde said. "If a kid is going to fail in school, he or she is going to fail in the community."

Archuleta said participants' GPAs have improved from an average of 0.65 to 2.3. Some have surpassed 3.0.

It appears that Antioch's investment in YIN is paying dividends.

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