

Can something like this work in our area? Imagine former gang members walking the streets in Bay Point, 10th Street in Pittsburg or Antioch's Lynwood Park ...

New group of street outreach workers trains to face Oakland's toughest neighborhoods

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OAKLAND -- They are neither knights nor angels, as they'll be the first to admit. Yet dressed in gleaming white jackets, they appear at vital moments in people's lives, often showing up at murder scenes, vigils for the dead or incendiary nighttime gatherings in Oakland's roughest neighborhoods, armed only with a message of hope for a better life.

These are Oakland's street outreach workers. They don the bright white "Measure Y for a Safer Oakland" Windbreakers and spend several nights a week walking hot spots -- areas notorious for drugs, shootings, prostitution and gangs. They search for young men and women caught up in dead-end lives of crime and violence, and make what sometimes seems like a futile offering of information about job programs, education and health services.

But, most importantly, they put themselves out there as someone to talk to, someone who's been there before.

"This is all about trying to make a connection and help that kid out there that's trying to decide between right and wrong," said Victor Silva, 27, the first outreach worker hired when the program started in 2008. Silva grew up surrounded by gangs in the Fruitvale district, selling drugs from age 14 to 19. He served jail time and then got his act together, now married with a young son and working as an outreach team leader and trainer.

"I know what it's like," Silva said. "So I can say to kids, 'Hey, I was just like you before. But I've come up from that a long way, and you can do that, too.' "

The outreach program, paid for by Measure Y's parcel-tax funds approved by voters in 2004 and reinstated under Measure BB last year, recently doubled the street outreach workforce, hiring nearly 30 more men, many with criminal backgrounds themselves who are trying to start fresh, trying to do something good.

Last week, they received classroom training at an office in Frank H. Ogawa Plaza, then hit the streets over the weekend, meeting people, making introductions, shaking hands. They'll eventually split off in teams, assigned to one of four Oakland neighborhoods to make regular rounds.

That sounds pretty straightforward, but as program directors and team leaders well know, they can't just go up to angry, frustrated young people -- sometimes high, sometimes armed and planning retaliation for a friend's slaying -- and start preaching peace and good will. If handled poorly, such situations can put the workers' lives in danger. So, through trial and error, team leaders have developed techniques for building relationships on the street, many which come from traditional sales methods -- understanding body language, making clear presentations, knowing when to back off.

In the training class, Kevin Grant is the head "non-angel," the violence prevention coordinator for the city of Oakland. He's worked in this field for nearly 20 years -- after he got out of federal prison. A gregarious, stocky, bald man who calls everyone a "loved one," Grant teaches the new workers what to expect. "You will get cursed out. You will get frustrated," he told the class. "People aren't perfect. You are not perfect. But you have to learn to get beyond that and follow through." On Jan. 27, it was role-playing day. Team leaders set up various scenarios, taken from experiences on the street. Then the students -- mostly black and Latino -- attempted to handle the situations. In one scene, the "actors" pretended to shoot dice, acting drunk, making noise. The students approached, but were quickly surrounded and pushed back by a wall of puffed chests and attitude. "Stop, stop, stop!" Grant called out, interrupting to offer suggestions. "OK, first off, don't step in front of someone. That's a threat on the streets. It's disrespect," he said.

"The approach is important. You want to be in an open position, hands visible. No hoodies. No hands in pockets. That sends the wrong signal. And then you gotta make the introduction from back here, several steps away. Say, 'Hey, what's up, loved ones? I'm Kevin from Measure Y. We got these jobs right now ...' and so on. Get your business card out, and hand it to 'em. That's saying, 'I'm coming in peace.'

"Everybody ain't feelin' us," he said. "So if you meet with an aggressive response, back off. Say, 'Hey, loved ones, we're sorry, didn't mean to interfere.' And back away. It can be humbling -- not your natural reaction -- but you gotta do it."

Grant admits their job is not easy. "We're basically putting a lot of the loved ones back in the element that twisted them up in the first place, out on the streets late at night," he said. "We have to be mindful that they're cared after themselves, take some days off. It's stressful."

The outreach workers are employed by California Youth Outreach and Healthy Oakland, not by the city itself. They also do not work for the police department -- a fact workers want to make clear.

"We do have a relationship with the police, but we want people to know it's one-sided," Grant said. "They will send us out. They will call us and say, there's a vigil or homicide situation going on where you guys might be of help. But that's as far as it goes. We do not give any information to them."

"We're not feeding back," Silva said. "We don't do that. Our job is to help, and that's it. Our safety is on the line."

While program results are hard to define, city and police officials believe the outreach is successful, making contact with more than 5,000 youths each year, and providing one-on-one services to nearly 400. "As to calls back, you'll get maybe one or two out of 20 contacts you make," Grant said. "So it's a matter of making the most contacts and following through."

Contact certainly worked for Victor Ledon, 22. Now a case manager in the program, he was originally a client two years ago -- shortly after he had been shot.

"I'm from a targeted gang area," he said. "One of the outreach workers came to see me at the hospital, asked me what my plans were for going forward. My initial reaction was toward retaliation. That's where I came from. Peer pressure. Coming from there, that's what you do."

"Then by him telling me about alternatives, it got me thinking," Ledon said. "I still went to jail a couple of times. But (the outreach workers) didn't lose their faith. New doors opened -- changed me to be a different person, toward increasing my education level. Eventually I started doing outreach myself, and now can do the same thing for the youth. And that feels really good."

For details on the street outreach program, go to www.MeasureY.org or call 510-238-6794.