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Stopping gangs before they start

\$4-million project to put advocates into trouble spots

By DAN ARSENAULT Crime Reporter

He has dealt with kids as young as 11 stealing cars, so Police Chief Frank Beazley is happy six areas of the city are getting help to straighten out troubled kids. A youth advocate program in Halifax was launched at its new base of operation in the Bloomfield Centre on Thursday morning.

The federal Tories are providing \$1.9 million toward the program, which targets kids from ages nine to 14, through the national crime prevention strategy. Halifax Regional Municipality will provide an equal amount.

The program's main goal is to keep kids out of gangs or other trouble. Funding is in place for four years. The project will be assessed afterward for possible renewal.

"We've got to get on the front end of it," Chief Beazley said of turning kids away from crime before they get into serious trouble. "It cannot be solved by just putting more police on the street."

He said the city's gang problems involved unstructured groups of kids that often cause mayhem.

"I call them disorganized crime," he said of the gangs.

The police have identified six trouble areas in metro — North Dartmouth, East Dartmouth, Woodside/Gaston Road, Bayers Road and Fairview, Uniacke Square and its surrounding area, and Spryfield. Each will get a youth advocate worker and an office to work out of.

Maurice James, 26, and the other youth workers attended Thursday's conference.

Mr. James, who grew up in Mulgrave Park in north-end Halifax, will run the Uniacke Square program.

He has been working with kids since taking a playground job as a 15-year-old, and he knows it can be hard to make the right choice if your friends are going in the other direction.

"My experience is that kids are kids. They're young. They want to try things. They want to have fun. I know how easy it is to fall into peer pressure or make poor decisions."

Mr. James sat through the meeting in a pair of shorts, red golf shirt and matching — but backward — baseball hat. He said his approach to work will match his clothing style,

which will help him connect with kids.

"I'm younger, I look like them (and) I'm into the same kind of things that they're into."

Mr. James and the other youth advocates will all handle five children that volunteer for the program. The youth advocates will be expected to give five hours a week to each child. He intends to have kids think of their own interests before choosing ways to stay out of trouble.

"I don't want to be that person (who is) always telling them what to do or where to go."

Tyla Johnson, 31, lives in Uniacke Square but will work from the Spryfield office.

"I'm very excited to do this because I think that it's really going to make a difference."

She said she believes a lot of children get into trouble because of things they may lack in their lives. Their wrong choices are often the result of them seeking acceptance, possibly from children who might be considered bad apples.

"They want to be a part of the group," she said.

The program's manager, Sharon Martin, works for the municipality's community relations and cultural affairs department.

To qualify for the program, she said children must live in a community where the program is offered, fall within the age group, and have problems that may include substance abuse, frequent trouble with the law, friends or family in gangs, lack of role models or other issues.

Each child will be assessed in the hopes that negative influences can be avoided and positive ones boosted.

Some kids may get financial help to play sports or study music or art. Others might get a school tutor paid for. She said the youth advocate will be a mentor to guide children through the services they can benefit from.

Anyone can refer a youth for the program, but participation is voluntary.

So far, the program is sorting through 23 referrals and staff members are meeting each child's family to see what the issues are. All staff members took an eight-week course to prepare for this new job.

Mayor Peter Kelly, as well as five council members, attended the launch. Mr. Kelly said his recently released roundtable report on violence showed some areas need help with crime.

"This program will help us get into those neighbourhoods," he said.

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