

NORRISTOWN AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

Gang Prevention Initiatives

The Norristown Area School District's Safe Schools/Healthy Students Federal grant was awarded in July of 2008. Demographically, the district enrolls approximately 7,000 students, K-12, comprised of 47% African-American, 26% Caucasian, 23% Latino, and 4% Other, and serves three distinct communities, one urban and two suburban: Norristown Borough; East Norriton; and West Norriton, each of which is represented by its own police department.

During our initial assessment of gang-related activity occurring in the Norristown Area neighborhoods, what became clearly evident was that perceptions of the issue were widely divergent among the municipalities. While Norristown Police Department was particularly adamant that no organized 'gang' activity had impacted the Borough, the two suburban departmental supervisors asserted that there did, in fact, exist evidence of gang influences as indicated by juvenile arrest records as well as their juvenile officers' contacts with adolescent offenders. In addition, gang connections were endemic within the Montgomery County Correctional Facility, including Blood, Crip, Sureños 13, Latin King, and other affiliations as reported by adult probation officers overseeing former inmates' assimilation back into the community following their release from incarceration.

What subsequently transpired during the first year of our SS/HS project's implementation was a consensus forged with our law enforcement partners that the priority needed to focus on devising prevention strategies designed to counter gang-related influences and activity. As a result of the assignment of School Resource Officers to our middle and high school settings, a heightened level of surveillance proved effective in identifying and addressing the display of colors, gang tagging and graffiti, as well as glorification of the 'gangbanger' mentality. In the middle school settings, our three officers were particularly adept at establishing themselves as positive role models and encouraging student participation in constructive alternative activities, both in the schools and in the communities. Likewise, in the high school setting, our assigned officer was proactive in reaching out to reputed gang members in an effort to establish a level of trust necessary to effect positive lifestyle changes- obviously a tall order. In addition, our officers have attempted to engage district staff and parents in recognizing indicators of gang involvement and actively dissuading young people from embracing the 'thug' mentality.

Over the past two years, several violent incidents, especially the fatal shooting of a reputed member of a local street gang ('Chain Street', a.k.a. 'Bang Bang'), as well as the vicious beating of a middle school student, also a member of 'Chain Street', by 'L Block' perpetrators, have served to underscore the realities of the Norristown street scene. As a result, what has been brought into sharp relief is the realization that identification with and glorification of gang culture

is a bona fide phenomenon and, furthermore, that a practice of intimidation of younger impressionable 'recruits' (as opposed to 'wannabes') appears to be operating on the street, if not actively within our school settings.

These indicators, in particular the periodic episodes of gang-related violence, served as the impetus for the creation of the Norristown Area Violence Prevention Committee, initiated in January of 2009. The mission of this quarterly meeting (intentionally not designated as a task force), incorporating school district administrators, police department officials, juvenile and adult probation officers, county detectives, and social service representatives, is to share information as well as to determine viable preventive strategies intended to proactively and effectively address gang-related activity. We also invited the Prevention Coordinator from the U.S. Attorney's regional office as a consultant to inform us as to gang intervention efforts introduced along the Lancaster/Allentown/Easton/New York City corridor as well as to advise us with respect to the Norristown Area School District's current violence prevention/intervention initiatives.

As our committee continues to formulate additional strategies designed to thwart youthful attraction to gang subcultures, it is imperative that we endeavor to fully incorporate local community-based organizations such as *Communities That Care*, *Weed & Seed*, and *ACLAMO* as invested partners. 'Gang' affiliation, while symptomatic in the school settings, has its foundations in the neighborhoods of Norristown- a phenomenon whose roots have been firmly entrenched over generations due to economic deprivation and social alienation and disaffection. Our efforts to partner in proactively mitigating these risk factors will, of necessity, be challenging and long-term in scope.