

Hometown News: U.S. Rep promises cash to combat gang violence

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By Michelle Gentile - Hometown News

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PALM BEACH GARDENS - Nearly half a million dollars in new federal funding to combat gang violence may be in the future for Palm Beach County, announced Rep. Tim Mahoney, D-Palm Beach Gardens, at a press conference on Aug. 29.

Rep. Mahoney, who got funds passed by the House of Representatives, is waiting now waiting to for approval by the Senate.

Congressman Mahoney met with Palm Beach County School District Chief of Police Jim Kelly, School Superintendent Art Johnson and Principal of Palm Beach Gardens High School, Jon Prince for a round-table discussion and press conference to discuss the funds that may be available to the the authorizing of the funds for the school district.

Chief Kelly and other officials at the press conference all agreed that funding would provide the district, in conjunction with local police and task forces, with up-to-date information on any gang related activity in the community.

The Youth Gang Violence Prevention Initiative is being heralded as the first of its kind and is expected to bridge the gap between schools and law enforcement officers through intelligence sharing, gang violence training, community awareness and programs for at-risk youth.

"The success here in Palm Beach County could mean success around the country," said Rep. Mahoney.

The sheriff's office estimated that there are 7,000 gang members in the county and gang membership is on the rise.

"Gang intelligence" will improve communication and help thwart off violence in a number of ways. One specifically is through education.

"Knowledge is power," said Chief Kelly. "Intelligence sharing, training detectives, funding cops grants and educated students and parents will go a long way."

Funding will go to the introduction of an intelligence system that would provide seamless information shared to and from the Palm Beach County Violent Crimes Task Force, Palm Beach County schools and municipalities throughout the county.

The system will use the district's cable television station, Channel 10 out of Boca Raton, and nearly 10 other substations to share information that may be surfacing inside the school walls or on the city streets in association with gang activity.

"Federal, local and school officials who learn about a drive-by shooting the night before, can communicate with one another," said Mr. Prince. "This allows us the time to address the issue when students are angry and ready to engage."

News about gang violence travels by word of mouth around school campuses, said Mr. Prince and often school officials and teachers are becoming the front line of defense.

"It seems to me what is happening here is there is more responsibility for the school, said Rep. Mahoney. "They are now on the front lines, acting like soldiers, in issues like gang violence."

Rep. Mahoney publicly spoke out against the President Bush's administration for abandoning funding for anti-gang prevention programs. He added that the amount of money going toward the Iraq war diminishes money for programs in an already fractured community.

"When you don't keep infrastructure up, it creates problems," said Rep. Mahoney. "A fractured society and corruption of our youth must be taken into consideration."

Rep. Mahoney and Mr. Johnson publicly criticized the media, corporate America, athletes, musicians and entertainers for sensationalizing drugs and gang violence.

"Young people are the world's worst copycats," said Mr. Johnson. "The inappropriate behavior they see is copied."

The youth initiative will focus on re-connecting wayward kids into the community through counselor programs and mentoring.

Training and mobilizing more officers is also on the agenda.

"We are all in this together and this is a partnership," said Mr. Kelly. "People need to know what's going on and information empowers."

Gang violence is not just a problem in Palm Beach County, but is a growing problem across the country," said Rep. Mahoney.

"There are added challenges to our educators who face gang-related issues and we need to take a proactive stance."

Officials in Palm Beach County just recently learned of the funding for the Youth Gang Violence Prevention Initiative and the information is just getting to local police departments.

"The Palm Beach Gardens Police Department is aware of the initiative and does not have enough information to comment on it," said Ellen Lovejoy, public information officer for Palm Beach Gardens Police Department.