

Inside [Neighborhoods](#):

[City](#)

[East](#)

[West](#)

[North](#)

[South](#)

[Washington](#)

[Westmoreland](#)

[PG Store](#)

[Directory](#)

[Dining](#)

City organizes assault on violence

New program offers violent youth a way out

Sunday, July 11, 2010

By Sadie Gurman, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Behind a courtroom's doors this week, dozens of Pittsburgh's toughest troublemakers will face people they've hurt, people who could send them to prison, people who have been there before and people who can help.

Parents of slain children will speak of loss, ex-convicts will share regrets, police will pledge the steepest punishment for future gunfire and service providers will offer a way out.

It's up to them: Stop killing now, or expose everyone in their gangs to swift arrest the next time one of them pulls a trigger. They'll come under heightened scrutiny -- not just for the shooting, but for every illegal act in which they take part.

"We ask that they take the message back to the other members of the group," Deputy Police Chief Paul Donaldson said. "We will be telling them, we realize you may not have an education, you may not have a job, and you may be affiliated with a group of people who have a violent nature, but this does not give you a right to take another person's life.

"This isn't going to be tolerated."

They'll leave the courtroom about two hours later with a phone number and, officials hope, the willpower to stop shooting. The session -- one of several to which gang representatives will be "called in" to attend in upcoming months -- marks the dramatic start of a sweeping antiviolence strategy that aims to reduce gang-related murders in the city.

After months of setbacks, the Pittsburgh Initiative to Reduce Crime begins Tuesday, nearly two years after officials pitched it and at a time when citywide violence is down. Homicides fell 45.8 percent -- from 72 in 2008 to 39 last year -- and the number continues to drop this year. As of Friday, there had been 25 killings in the city, down from 27 at the same point last year.

It's hard to quantify how many of those are gang- or "group-related," police said. Still, they insist a need remains for the ambitious plan.

"We can still do better," Chief Donaldson said. "It will go back up again unless you do something."

Modeled after programs in Boston, Cincinnati and other cities, the Pittsburgh initiative takes a "stick-and-carrot approach." The stick is the threat of punishment; the carrot is the chance for redemption through social services, job connections and educational opportunities.

Some critics in Pittsburgh have questioned its strategy, saying they doubt a program driven primarily by law enforcement will gain credibility with hundreds of gang members. Proponents, however, say it differs from previous antiviolence efforts because it also includes community members and social service agencies and puts their collaboration on display for selected gang members.

"All these people who you don't ever see together are suddenly together," said program coordinator Jay Gilmer. That sends the message that "we're all here together, the rules have changed slightly and we're very serious about what we do."

Mr. Gilmer and other program officials recently traveled to Cincinnati to watch a call-in session there. He said gang members seemed interested in the message, nodding and shaking their heads as though they knew it was time for a change.

Here, representatives from about 40 street gangs will be at the first call-in, summoned by their probation and parole officers. Police asked that the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette not reveal the time and location of the session and would not reveal the identities of those they have summoned.

Chief Donaldson said only that they were selected through "police intelligence," and that "it has to be somebody we know is involved in this type of activity." Few are strangers to the criminal justice system.

Street gangs in and around Pittsburgh aren't so much organized criminal enterprises as cliques, their members in many cases connected by something as seemingly insignificant as their street block and driven to kill not necessarily by drug sales, but by minor slights.

"They don't band together so much to promote criminal activity as they do for protection," the chief said. "They have to be part of this lifestyle where they know, 'I can't walk four or five blocks from my home because if I do, I'm liable to be shot and killed because I'm outside of my community and in their community.'"

"You have to break that," the chief said. "You have to tell them enough is enough."

Pittsburgh's gang landscape looks much like it does in other cities where the program has been tried, said its architect, David Kennedy, a professor and the director of the Center for Crime Prevention and Control at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York.

The assumption that highly organized, economically sophisticated gangs with international ties exist in other cities is "basically just a fiction," he said. The Pittsburgh initiative's predecessors have worked elsewhere because they offer opportunities to law enforcement for repeated and direct communication with gangs similar to Pittsburgh's, he said.

"Once you're in this world you realize basically nobody ever tells these guys that what they're doing is wrong," Dr. Kennedy said.

The Pittsburgh initiative is reminiscent of past efforts in the city to combat gang and gun violence, which had varying degrees of success. But most were "single-faceted," Chief Donaldson said, without the help of community members and service providers. Offenders were sentenced to lengthy prison terms and entered what would become the revolving door of the criminal justice system from which they would not escape.

"This program offers alternatives to a violent criminal lifestyle, with the promise that if you fail to avail yourself to them, then any future acts of violence by you or any member of your group will result in a focused response by law enforcement," Chief Donaldson said.

Some critics, however, have questioned the initiative's approach.

David Adams, president of the neighborhood and crime-prevention organization The Conscience Group, said summoning gang members to the call-ins sounds more like a threat than an opportunity for reform. Mr. Adams, whose group has studied violence in the city and elsewhere, said he's worried attendance at the sessions could bring unintended consequences.

"Everybody in that room, whether they have accepted services or not, is going to be known on the streets as snitches," he said. "How far are we going to go to make sure the people who have called in are not going to be threatened while they're on the streets?"

Mr. Adams said he also fears the social services will be insufficient because "the carrot side always ends up very short."

The city will spend \$200,000 to contract with two nonprofit organizations, Pittsburgh Community Services Inc. of the Hill District and One Vision One Life. The former will offer gang members "access to pretty much anything that's out there" to forge a more productive life, Mr. Gilmer said, from drug treatment and family support to education, driver's licenses and job training.

One Vision One Life, an antiviolence group, will continue providing outreach to gang members, with its workers serving as "life coaches," Executive Director Richard Garland said.

"Once they come to the call-in, my people will be outside on the street saying, 'Here we are, get with me after you think about what we could offer,'" he said. "My guys will be following up with them by phone or on the street saying, 'Think about what we had to say.'"

One call to the "PIRC hotline" will connect a member to these services.

Mr. Gilmer would not name other community members and leaders who have been invited to attend the call-in sessions. That has left some antiviolence advocates questioning whether key players in the community were overlooked.

In the end, gang members who participate in the program lean one of three ways, Dr. Kennedy said. They turn their lives around, they ignore the message and continue to kill, or "they do not completely give up the streets and become choir boys

but they stop hurting people." Most pick the third option, he said.

The initiative's success lies not in the number of criminals who reform but in the drop in violence. Other cities that have tried it reported dramatic decreases in homicide rates at first, but some found it proved hard to sustain.

In Pittsburgh, city council members have asked to receive quarterly progress reports, but program officials warned not to expect instant success.

"The most important thing right now is that it's happening," Dr. Kennedy said. "In many cities, we never get this far."

Sadie Gurman: sgurman@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1878.

Looking for more from the Post-Gazette? Join [PG+](#), our members-only web site. You'll get exclusive sports content, opinion, financial information, discounts from retailers and restaurants, and more. Our [introduction to PG+](#) gives you all the details.



First published on July 11, 2010 at 12:00 am