

Community initiative reducing gun crime, police chief says

Despite homicides, six-month decline in incidents is biggest in five years.

By Kyle Nagel, Staff Writer

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Six months into an anti-gun violence effort whose model has significantly decreased such crimes in other cities, organizers say they're seeing signs of change despite 15 area homicides this year — including four in the past month that involved guns.

The Community Initiative to Reduce Gun Violence began in November 2008 with the goal of demanding that gun violence stop in Dayton, Montgomery County and Trotwood, particularly by those who are members of groups or gangs.

When community members ask what's being done about guns, organizers point to this effort.

Dayton Police Chief Richard Biehl noted that homicides are the smallest portion of overall gun crimes and said the decline in serious crimes involving guns has decreased in the past six months by its largest margin in five years.

"The challenge is to get a grass roots-type movement in our neighborhoods," Biehl said. "That's the next big step."

Biehl was instrumental in bringing the anti-gun violence program to Dayton after viewing first-hand its success reducing homicides in Cincinnati.

It is modeled after the Boston Gun Project, which helped cut homicides in that city from 152 in 1990 to 31 in 1999 by combining community support with pressure on gang or group members to police each other.

The keys to the program are a constant presence in the community, involvement from several law-enforcement, social-service and community-service groups and "call-in" sessions.

Those sessions are meant to serve as a final warning to group members, who are brought into a courtroom to hear presentations that organizers hope show the dire nature of their crimes.

Call-in attendees also are told that if anyone in their group or gang commits a gun crime, the entire group or gang will be prosecuted to the fullest extent for any crimes, however minor, they've committed. CIRV has held five such call-ins since November.

"We're beginning to see a crack," said Larry Lane, program director of the Montgomery County Jail.

One of CIRV's main obstacles is obtaining help for those who want it, said Tommy Owens, program coordinator at the Dayton Urban League who is also a case manager for CIRV.

Organizers, such as Owens, hope to gain education or work for those who want to leave the violent lifestyle, but the struggling economy has made that more difficult.

"Some of these guys don't even have an ID," Owens said. "We don't promise them jobs, but we promise them hope."

Marlon Shackelford, whose four-member Street Advocates group is often present at homicide scenes and works with community members, said homicide numbers don't show the entire picture.

Biehl and other organizers are scheduled to meet with the media on Monday, May 18, to release more detailed statistics on the effort's progress.

"If we weren't doing this," Shackelford said, "it would be much worse."

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