

A year in, anti-gang program is paying off

City Council to get report on progress of Contigo plan

By TODD GUILD
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WATSONVILLE —

Since the city launched a two-year program aimed at reducing gang crime among youths in the neighborhoods surrounding Marinovich Park, organizers have seen a reduction in tardiness and increases in school performance and interfamily communication, according to a report by the Watsonville Parks and Community Services Department.

"We're very proud of the program," said Parks and Community Services Department Director Ana Espinosa. "We feel that the model is unique to the community in that it focuses on the well-being of the entire family within a neighborhood."

The Watsonville City

Council tonight will hear an update on the program, one year after a \$369,309 grant from the California Emergency Management Agency helped launch it. The program is scheduled to last through next year.

The goal of Contigo, which in English translates to "with you," is to provide support for youngsters and their families through tutoring, counseling and other services — such as after-school care and parenting workshops — to reduce the chance of youth getting involved with gangs.

The program is run jointly by the City of Watsonville Parks and Community Services Department and Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance, with the goal of working with

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From page A1

40 families with kids in fourth through seventh grades.

"What we have found is that students are engaging in negative behavior much younger," Espinosa said of the decision to start the program in the fourth grade.

The Marinovich Park region was chosen because 36 percent of the city's gang-related crime occurs within a half-mile radius of the park, and the schools associated with the area — Landmark, Radcliff and Alianza Charter schools — reported truancy rates ranging from 38 percent to 25 percent.

According to a California Healthy Kids study, 31 percent of fifth-graders in PVUSD have used alcohol, marijuana or inhalants such as glue or paint and 11 percent had used in the past month.

If the program reaches its goals, 70 percent of the families will participate in 63 percent of the activities per year, 60 percent of the students will improve their grade point average over the two years and 75 percent will not be suspended from school, take part in delinquent behavior requiring police intervention, participate in gangs and will report not using drugs or alcohol.

While the bulk of the program's results won't be available until a post-participant survey is given six months after the 2013

end date, preliminary results show it is having success.

According to the city, 30 families have participated in the program so far — 47 parents and 75 young people. During that time, 62 parents, both participants and non-participants, have completed the programs "Guiding Good Choices" curriculum.

An examination of attendance records for the first eight months of the last school year and the first eight months of this school year show that 58 percent of the students have fewer unexplained absences, and 17 percent have fewer instances of being tardy.

Additionally, school officials reported a 74 percent drop in suspension days.

Information on test scores is still being examined, but teachers and school staff are reporting an increase in the amount of homework assignments being completed.

More importantly, Espinosa said, the program helps parents connect with teachers, case-workers and other school staff so they can be better involved in their child's education.

Anecdotal evidence is showing that many participating students have shown improvements in their reading grades and a decrease in disruptive behavior, Espinosa said.

Additionally, families are reporting that communication between youth and parents is improving, she said.

"Where you may have had communication problems, that

is changing, so the family environment is changing as a result," she said.

The program has also encouraged parents to become involved in the community, and as a result the well-attended events *Uniendo Families* and *Posada Navideña* each drew hundreds of attendees. As did eight events designed to boost family bonding.

"That's really important," Espinosa said. "It's our belief that it's important to support the structure of the family so they can weather the challenges that come their way."

Now, as the program enters its second and final year, organizers are hoping to renew the grant. If they can't, however, Espinosa said the city is prepared to continue the key components such as the after-school programs and family case management.

The hope, she said, is to work with the students until they graduate from high school.

"This is a model that is making a difference, and we would love to be able to continue with it," she said.

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The Watsonville City Council will meet at 6:30 p.m. tonight in the City Council Chambers in the fourth floor of the Civic Plaza building at 275 Main Street. For information, visit www.ci.watsonville.ca.us.