

Gang group formed

County's Anti-Crime Team broadens focus, replaces Narcotics Enforcement Team

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SANTA CRUZ — County law enforcement leaders voted Monday to change the focus of the Narcotics Enforcement Team from drugs to organized crime, specifically gangs.

Now called the Santa Cruz County Anti-Crime Team, or ACT, the five-officer investigation unit will broaden its focus immediately.

Gang violence — namely stabings and shootings — has gripped the county in recent months. Three slayings in the county this year have been linked to gangs.

Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina, who chairs the ACT council, said county law enforcement leaders have been discussing the change for a few months in response to community concerns about gang violence.

"Even though — believe it or not — crime in 2008 for Santa Cruz P.D. and Watsonville P.D. is down overall, we were really feeling the intensity of these gang violent crimes. They're so bold," Medina said. "The community, they perceive that as not feeling safe so we want to feel responsive."

The five-officer task force, which is also overseen by the state Attorney General's Office Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement, will work in conjunction with the new Santa Cruz police gang unit. The department established the three-officer team dedicated to combating gang crime in the city earlier this month.

"They'll be working side by side," Santa Cruz Police Chief Howard Skerry said. "We'll have the same goals."

The county's Narcotics Enforcement Team was established in July 1984 as a two-year drug program under the auspices of the state Department of Justice. The team, which included representation from all county law enforcement agencies, targeted cocaine and heroin. Over the years, the team has busted international drug rings with Santa Cruz County ties, as well as more-local efforts, like taking down a gang that was selling drugs, stealing cars and fencing stolen weapons in 2007.

ACT will continue to go after drugs, as they are often connect-

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ed to organized crime and gangs, in addition to its work on violent crimes, Medina said.

"The whole purpose of this thing is to act, not to react," District Attorney Bob Lee said. "Although its very important to have these resources when there's a gang stabbing or an homicide ... the goal of this thing is to become investigative, to get there first and to try to stop it before it starts."

ACT will not require any additional funding or staffing. Also, the officers assigned to the team will work with the county's auto-theft task force, which includes one officer each from Watsonville police, the Sheriff's Office and the District Attorney's Office. The two programs share office space.

ANTI-CRIME TEAM

- Cmdr. Rich Westphal
- Two sheriff's deputies
- One Watsonville police officer
- One District Attorney's Office inspector
- Three-officer Santa Cruz police gang unit
- The California Highway Patrol is considering adding an officer to the team.