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Task force on gangs wins grant

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A Watsonville group that has been working on gang prevention and intervention for the past six months has just received \$30,000 to support and expand its efforts.

The group, a subcommittee of the Santa Cruz County Criminal Justice Council's Gang Task Force, is made up of representatives from Watsonville Police Department, the Pajaro Valley Unified School District, Fenix Youth Center, the Watsonville Recreation Department and Youth Services. It has been meeting regularly to coordinate efforts to deal with gang-involved or "high risk" youth.

The grant, awarded by the Greater Santa Cruz Community Foundation, will allow the group to be more effective with organization and follow-through, Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina, chairman of the group, said.

The subcommittee would become a "community review team," made up of representatives from each agency, who would meet bi-weekly for two hours and at each meeting review two cases of youths who are considered "at-risk," or gang-involved, and develop an individual intervention plan for each one. The cases will be brought back at three-month intervals for a period of at least one year. If the plan does not appear to be successful, the team may change strategy.

Medina said there has been a 23 percent increase in gang-related violent crimes over the past year. Nearly 300 youths are members of 10 active gangs, the Police Department says. The school district has identified at least 164 students who identify themselves as gang members or would-be gang members.

Other factors that increase the risk for local youth include a school dropout rate of 36 percent and the fact that 70 percent of students in the district come from poor families.

The project is being set up as a way for the different agencies to work together in sharing information and coordinating resources.

The plans include using of the services each agency can provide, along with those of other local agencies, including Child Protective Services, Parents Center, Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step groups, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, the YMCA, local drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs, County Mental Health and private therapists.

Each of the five agencies will develop alternative and prevention activities for youth involved in gangs, based on the needs identified by the team. The grant proposal suggests field trips to prison and detention centers for would-be gang members, to show them what it's really like to be incarcerated; self-esteem-building camping trips; outdoor education; special classes to give youth personal or career skills; and groups for inter-gang communication to reduce rivalries and hostility.

The Pajaro Valley school district will be responsible for organizing a major training event for the staff of the five agencies and two trainings for the team each year. The training will include information on local gang activity, practical training for identifying and working with gang-identified youth, and information about services and programs for youth.

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The money will be used to pay for clerical support for the program, the training programs, alternative events and activities and salaries for the team members for the hours they spend in meetings.