

Program Tears Down Walls Between Inner-city Teens, Cops – By John Tuohy

What if an inner-city kid got to know what a cop was like growing up?

And what if a police officer could see that the kid on the corner in the hooded sweatshirt has dreams such as a college education or an honest job?

Would it defuse tensions and reduce the chances of a potential tragedy when they met again in a stressful situation on the street?

The Indianapolis Metropolitan Police Department bets it would.

IMPD is launching a citywide program to increase understanding between teenagers and their neighborhoods' police officers.

The four-day Police and Youth Initiative was introduced this year on a pilot basis. The department enlists community organizations to bring them youths for the sessions with cops.

Both sides are encouraged to be frank -- and the early returns indicate they are.

"I was just blown away by the openness and stories on both sides," said Vince Failla, director of children and youth services at the John H. Boner Community Center on the Near Eastside.

The program is part of IMPD's community policing efforts, said Public Safety Director Frank Straub. If kids and cops know where each other is coming from, it could help avoid a needless misunderstanding.

"Our goal should be to keep children out of the criminal justice system, and we need to look at ways to get that done," Straub said.

Sgt. LeEtta White, IMPD's coordinator of youth services, agreed that the goal is to strip away misunderstandings.

"Some of these kids, they say they run when they see police because they don't trust us, not because they did something wrong. This gives us a chance to explain to them that when you are running, it signals that you did do something wrong."

An example police are using in the pilot program's sessions: An officer responds to a burglary call. The suspects are described as three males, 6 feet tall, wearing black hoods and black coats.

Though the description is vague and could fit a lot of people, it's all police have. If a group of innocent teens wearing that clothing runs away, the police naturally conclude that might be the people they are looking for.

It's a template for disaster, White said.

"Please don't run from police," she said.

During the first two days of the session, the teens are encouraged to write down their stories, one of various exercises to get them to express their thoughts.

One of the simplest to write: a decision they made -- good or bad -- plus the consequences and the effect on those close to them. Then they're asked to list their goals in life.

Participants also are told to express their impressions of police, which often elicits terms such as "racist," "corrupt" and "disrespectful."

"They are encouraged to be honest, that there are no negative consequences for it," White said.

On the third day of the program, the officers who police the teens' neighborhoods come in. The youths tell their stories, and the police share theirs. Both sides listen.

"I was very impressed by how deeply the officers got into it," Failla said. "You'd have this huge white officer with a buzz cut and he'd just open up, talking about his background, his childhood."

The officers would tell how they got into trouble when they were 14 or how they didn't like the police, either. They'd say how they came from a poor family or a broken home, and that despite an apparent lack of hope, they found a way out.

"I swear, these kids were on the edge of their seats, enthralled, when these officers told their stories," Failla said. "One kid said, 'Wow, he got busted for weed, just like me.' "

On the last day, the cops and youths interact for another hour, and then a banquet is held. Cops, teens and their families eat together, then certificates are given to the youths.

The two pilot sessions were in IMPD's East District. The next one is scheduled Jan. 10 in the Downtown District.

Straub said the program is in place in other cities, including Boston, Baltimore and White Plains, N.Y., where he used to be public safety director.

"I have witnessed firsthand the success this program has had on police-youth relationships," he said. "I have no doubt it can work here."

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