

Anticrime program is topic in Brockton Outreach workers are one goal

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By Brian R. Ballou, Globe Staff | May 31, 2008

BROCKTON - Tears streamed down Maria da Silva's cheeks as her daughter, Nicole, stood at a lectern in front of a large crowd at Our Lady of Lourdes Church and recounted how her twin brother was stabbed while attempting to quell a fight at a local park several years ago.

"My son, he wasn't an angel; he was involved with different groups and drugs," said the elder da Silva, sitting in the church, her eyes fixed on her daughter. "I tried my best. I worked with his school and tried to get help in the community. I tried every single night."

Nicholas da Silva survived the stabbing, but in 2005 was killed in Cape Verde. "It was because of something that started here," Maria da Silva said. "He's gone, but I think this city has gotten worse."

Fed up with chronic violence and rising gang activity, residents such as da Silva are banding together in an effort to stem crime and repair the city's image. About 500 members of the Brockton Interfaith Community met at the church Wednesday with the city's mayor and police chief to discuss anticrime initiatives that appear to be working in Providence, which has a larger population but a similar geographic area.

The main components of those initiatives, discussed at length, were community policing and street workers. Brockton has a population of about 95,000, according to US Census Bureau estimates.

Maria da Silva said her son might have benefited from outreach by a street worker. "What I'm hearing today makes me happy, but we need to have commitment," she said.

Sue Richenberg, also a member of the Interfaith Council, said at Wednesday's meeting that she had researched the street workers program in Providence and believes it is a valuable tool in fighting crime.

"They build relationships with at-risk youth," she said. "Street workers complement the police. It is a tool that is missing in Brockton."

There have been 25 homicides in Brockton in the past three years, according to police. In several neighborhoods in Brockton that experienced fatal shootings in the past year, many residents complained of a lack of a police presence.

In February, there were four shootings in a week, two of which were fatal. An 88-year-old man was wounded on Fairmount Avenue in one of the shootings.

A few residents living in those neighborhoods vowed to move out of the city, and public meetings were held by some resident groups on the crime problem.

The city enlisted the aid of the State Police in the days following those attacks, and troopers have been patrolling the city since then, Police Chief William K. Conlon said Wednesday night.

"We're not just sitting by, idly waiting for you folks to come up with ideas," he told the crowd at the church. "We had a rough start to the year. The mayor reached out to the State Police because we don't have the numbers to be in the places we need to be."

Conlon said troopers have been active in the city, making vehicle stops and maintaining a presence that discourages criminal activity.

"It's a partnership; the governor and the colonel have pledged to us to continue indefinitely as needed," Conlon said. He added that the department will probably assign several new officers to foot patrol. The department is scheduled to add 10 officers by year's end.

At Wednesday's meeting, Mayor James E. Harrington made a few commitments, including an effort to open substations in troubled neighborhoods and begin decentralization of the Police Department.

He also promised to step up efforts to hire street workers, through the use of state grants to combat gang violence.

"When the Shannon Grants first came out, I fought to see that we would have street workers," Harrington said. "We haven't taken it far enough, and I will assure that the next grant application will specify more street workers."

Substations, foot patrols, and data that give police a better picture of crime patterns across the city are the cornerstones of community policing in Providence, say law enforcement officials there. Between 2002 and 2006, overall crime, including homicides, assaults, rapes and thefts, have decreased by 34 percent in Providence. ■

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