

United Interfaith Action credited with improving public safety in New Bedford

September 28, 2008 6:00 AM

NEW BEDFORD — It was December 2005 and the auditorium at Our Lady of Mount Carmel School was packed with at least 100 people. Among them were a handful of public officials, including the new mayor-elect, Scott W. Lang.

Crime was the topic of discussion. The forum was sponsored by United Interfaith Action, a confederation of people from local religious denominations who are engaged in community issues.

With several attendees listening and applauding, UIA leaders received promises from the incoming mayor that he would take the following steps to increase public safety:

- Support developing a street outreach worker program to engage at-risk youth.
- Develop a decentralized community policing model.
- Devote resources to fight neighborhood crime "hot spots."
- Form a city inter-departmental effort to hold accountable absentee landlords of problem properties.

Nearly three years later, those public safety initiatives, among others, are in place and credited with helping to lower the city's violent crime rate, which in 2005 was the central issue in the local elections.

The faith-based group is now focusing its grassroots organizing on education, vowing to work with the School Department to lower the city's high school dropout rate, increase college attendance, and improve parent-school relationships.

"UIA's main role is to heighten public sensitivity that something can be done," said Fr. Stan Kolasa, the former pastor of Our Lady of the Assumption, which has several UIA-active parishioners.

Officials and UIA leaders admit there was already a groundswell of support and work done by other organizations, such as the HOPE Collaborative, before UIA's public safety "action" meeting in December 2005.

However, several community volunteers and public officials credit the organization with mobilizing residents and getting them involved in the political process to secure commitments and resources to fight crime.

"I think UIA is a valuable organization for New Bedford," Police Chief Ronald E. Teachman said.

"This is a community organization that gives a group of people a voice and public safety officials a bilateral line of communication with the community we're trying to serve."

Paul Graham, a former UIA organizer, said the organization is wary of taking too much credit for improving public safety. Still, Mr. Graham said members believe they at least helped.

"For example, we didn't invent community policing," he said. "It's not our baby. But we like to think we created the space for community policing to take hold in this area."

UIA volunteers indeed have made several key contributions on the public safety front.

UIA teamed with Treatment on Demand and YMCA Southcoast to develop the street outreach worker program. UIA leader Carol Walsh joined police and street outreach personnel in attending community policing seminars in Providence.

UIA advocated for increasing summer jobs for teens and establishing conflict resolution educational programs for New Bedford public school students.

Also, UIA members were instrumental in lobbying local state representatives to create and maintain funding for the state Shannon Grant, which has directed \$2 million to New Bedford for gang intervention and suppression efforts.

"The lobbying by the members created such a buzz around the statehouse that the funding for the Shannon Grant was not only restored to the budget last year, but even increased," said UIA member Jack Livramento.

UIA leader Dorothy Lopes was on the police hiring committee that recommended appointing Chief Teachman in 2006.

Ms. Lopes, a parishioner at Our Lady of the Assumption Church, said city and police officials have generally been supportive of UIA's advocacy.

"For the most part, the Police Department has been receptive to our ideas," she said.

"Prior to our public action meetings, we've had dialogue with the mayor and police and people researching behind the scenes for months. Things just don't fall from the sky."

The cornerstone of UIA's advocacy is a philosophy that establishing relationships is the key to rebuilding the social fabric.

UIA members share their concerns and ideas with each other in a small, intimate forum, called a "1-on-1," at their respective congregations. From there, members usually attend a house meeting hosted by a fellow parishioner to further discuss the issues raised in the 1-on-1 groups.

"It's good not just for the community, but also for the individual parishes," Ms. Lopes said.

The concerns are then brought to leaders at UIA's larger monthly meetings. Individuals volunteer to study the issues, research possible solutions, and contact public officials.

"Whenever we go through the process of making suggestions, it's not like we just sit around in a meeting," said Mr. Livramento, a 10-year UIA member and a parishioner at Our Lady of the Assumption.

"The mayor and police chief know when we bring something to them, we've been talking to the people in our parishes and churches," said Sue Sylvia, a parishioner at Our Lady of Guadalupe at St. James Parish.

In November 2006, an estimated 600 people attended an action meeting at Ms. Sylvia's church. UIA leaders secured city officials' commitments to follow up on 200 crime hot spots, increase summer jobs for teens, and devote funding for public school conflict resolution programs.

"We had a huge turnout that night," Ms. Sylvia said. "It showed that people were very interested and

concerned about the violence in the community."

Almost two years later, the city is arguably safer as UIA now shifts its focus to education, which members say is intertwined with the crime issue.

"If we can show the youth they can have a good solid education, it's less likely they'll be out on the streets," Ms. Sylvia said.

To maintain the gains made in public safety from the last three years, Mr. Livramento said residents and public officials must continue to collaborate.

"We're in this together," he said. "The police force is well aware of it. They're not going to be able to correct all the problems by themselves."

Contact Brian Fraga at bfraga@s-t.com

undefined