

Sheriff, residents open dialogue on violence

Meeting identifies ways to aid east Bakersfield

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Last March, Frances Martinez's husband visited an east Bakersfield convenience store.

Photos:



Photo by Brian Drake

Sheriff Donny Youngblood sits in a pew at St. Joseph's Church Thursday before a forum to discuss violence in east Bakersfield. The East Bakersfield Faith Community Alliance hosted the forum, in which community members and the sheriff spoke about ways to combat crime in east Bakersfield.

Their daughter was working across the street at the Kern County Sheriff's Department Flower Street substation.

She stepped outside after hearing about an incident at the store, Frances said.

Her father, Alfred Martinez Sr. lay on the ground, severely beaten. He died of his injuries eight days later.

Martinez and other east Bakersfield residents shared their neighborhood's horror stories with Sheriff Donny Youngblood and a packed house during a community meeting Thursday night at St. Joseph's Catholic Church on Baker Street.

Pastors and residents involved with the East Bakersfield Faith Community Alliance spoke of actions they wished the sheriff and neighbors to take to make the area safer.

One of the alliance's organizers, Brandi De La Garza, said people feel trapped inside their homes because of the violence awaiting them outside.

The group is focusing on the area between Mount Vernon Avenue and Virginia Street, south of Flower Street and north of Niles Street.

Resident Mickey Martin said she once felt privileged to live in an area with shopping, a hospital nearby and all the services a person could ask for.

But then things started to change, and muggings and police sirens became the norm. She saw a man who'd been attacked and was bleeding in the street.

"What kind of world are we living in?" she said, breaking down into tears. "... Don't we value life anymore?"

Community members also addressed the poor road conditions, substandard housing and trashed blocks plaguing the east side.

Others complained the substation wasn't responsive to their needs.

Youngblood said he's lived in east Bakersfield his entire life. He pointed out the deputies in the audience.

"I didn't order them here," he said. "They wanted to be here."

The meeting came on the heels of Tuesday's county Board of Supervisors meeting, at which the board approved the sheriff's plan to more than triple the staff on the Sheriff's Gang Unit. His plan also called for creating more space in Lerdo jail to house gang members.

The alliance asked Youngblood to agree to the formation of an east Bakersfield advisory committee, which would meet regularly with his department. They also asked for a bilingual receptionist at the substation and to establish a neighborhood point person who would work with the department and community.

Youngblood and members of the alliance agreed to meet in six months to discuss their progress.

Youngblood said he and the residents in attendance need to hold each other accountable.

"This is a great meeting," he said. "But it means absolutely nothing if it's the last meeting we have."

He told the neighbors they need to be responsible for their own, too, as the department cracks down on troublemakers.

"If you don't know where your children are at at 11:30 at night, we're gonna tell you where they're at," he said.