

NATIONAL

Good money after bad

Seattle puts \$8 million behind grassroots initiatives to stop youth violence on the streets

BY CYDNEY GILLIS
STREET NEWS SERVICE

SEATTLE, WASH. —

It's high noon at Rainier Beach High School, and inside a classroom, 20 teenage boys, all African American, are sitting at a circle of desks talking about what they can do to survive the summer in South Seattle.

If only the session were just about beating the heat. It's early May and, two days before, five boys were coming out of a doughnut shop on Rainier Avenue South when a shooter fired on them, wounding two.

One of them should be in the circle today talking about going to Wild Waves. Instead, 16-year-old Daveon Braxton is recovering

from a bullet in the back — a victim of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, says Gabriel Ladd, the meeting's leader and founder of Youth 180, a mentoring group working to steer teens clear of street life and the violence that gangs can lead to.

In the hot days ahead, "I don't want to be picking up bodies off the ground," the 29-year-old Ladd tells the boys. "I don't want to be moderating no funerals. I did two funerals this past year."

The room falls silent. From a corner outside the circle,

Tavares Jackson, a friend of Ladd's and former gangbanger who volunteers with the group, asks the question of the hour.

"What makes you hang out on the corner? What makes you just walk up and down the same spot all day, every day? I need a real answer," Jackson says. Fifteen-year-old Will Myles replies.

"Some people might be selling drugs.

"When I was a child, I spent my time at the Parks Department. The parks had programs where they took us camping, they signed us up for arts and crafts, they taught us swimming. All that was free. So while we've spent money putting people in prison, we've cut back all types of programs for recreation and now we're asking what are we supposed to do?"

— YVONNE NEWSOM
MOTHER OF A TEENAGE DAUGHTER



PHOTO BY JOSHUA HUSTON

Initiative director Mariko Lockhart says the youth violence initiative is "really about 'Does someone care about me?'" The initiative seeks to cut violent incidents in half by providing community-based services to 800 youth.

Some people might be out there because somebody else is out there [or] because they're with their homies," Myles says. "Some people do it because they're having a hard time with their mom, their dad."

"Others," he says, "they just do it because they don't got nothing else to do."

Ladd once worked as a truancy officer at Cleveland High School. He founded Youth 180 one year ago to give teens hanging out on corners like Henderson and Rainier something more to do, something more their lives can be than selling drugs or accepting violence as a way of life. Besides leading the group sessions, he walks the streets to recruit new members and, with the help of his young crew, has turned the family home where he grew up into a "safe house" where he hopes one day to teach job skills like carpentry and plumbing.

Youth 180 is one of three existing programs that got \$25,000 this year under the mayor's new Youth Violence Prevention Initiative. It's the type of culture-

and relationship-based effort that teens, parents and community leaders have called for in recent city forums leading up to the ceremonial launch of the initiative's services on July 7 at the Rainier Vista Boys & Girls Club.

The initiative seeks to cut violent incidents among youth in half by providing community-based services to 800 middle-schoolers and youth up to age 17 with \$8 million in funding over the next two years. Some teens will get anger replacement therapy, some a personal mentor and others full-service case management, all arranged through three "network hubs" or lead agencies in the city's most affected areas — the Central District, Rainier Valley and Southwest Seattle — where police "emphasis officers" have also been assigned to get to know students at five middle schools.

Separately, the police department has also funded a new daytime gang-unit squad of four officers and a sergeant and is currently negotiating with King County, says

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