

Diverse opinions about gang violence – and what to do

What to do about gang violence was the subject of an educational forum presented earlier this month by Better People, an organization working through various programs to obtain



FROM THE DESK OF
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Ruth Kovacs is a Portland activist, former teacher and the host of Prison Pipeline on KBOO, 90.7 fm. She writes regularly about the issues surrounding the millions of individuals and families affected by the U.S. prison system.

employment for individuals in the community.

A big kudos should go to the organization for recruiting a diverse group of participants at the presentation. After presentations by the mayor, a judge,

Chief Counsel from the Department of Justice, and folks from the Portland Police Bureau, we heard from audience participants representing community programs, parents, the editor of The Skanner and former gang members.

There were two schools of thought that were evident by speakers and participants. The first was being tough on criminal actions and the second is preventing gang violence with increased youth programs.

Apparently the choice between the two is usually reflected by governmental budgets. Do we increase funds for a stronger police force, or do we allocate more funds to programs? One had to listen carefully because most speakers alluded to the plus side of both approaches, and often sounded very open to comments by other speakers. My impression was the glaring conclusion that it is good to add to programs, but if they aren't able to reach the individual youth, then get tough.

Mayor Sam Adams began his comments by advocating for education. The city's Cradle to Career model has helped the city identify the 2,500 eighth graders most at

risk to drop out of school. "We absolutely know that a kid that fails third grade reading standards is exponentially more likely to drop out of middle school, junior high school and high school." Adams added.

Kate Desmond, a manager with the Multnomah County Gang Resource Intervention Team, and Rob Ingram, the Director of the Portland Office of Youth Violence Prevention, told about the preventative work being done.

Desmond oversees the gang probation unit and said the city needs to work with ex-offenders and let them be mentors. She wears two hats, law enforcement and social worker. She's concerned that many young people she speaks with between the ages of 12 and 16 have not been in school for a year. Desmond drove home that the value of work and education must be introduced at a very young age.

Rob Ingram has been with Portland Police since 1976, working in SE Portland. Ingram spoke about the need for youth to feel a place of belonging and acceptance.

Also representing the Police Bureau was Lt. Dave Hendrie and Officer Marci Jackson. Both made convincing presentations and left me feeling that they want to do whatever is best for our youth throughout the city.

"Programs come and go," said Hendrie. "We need to get behind them." He stressed the need for accountability, outreach, early intervention and parent education. He also spoke about the need for citizens and foundations to help with funding and real participation that would give our youth a real chance in life. "That starts with a great trust between the police and the community." His conclusion was clear. "Society must demand accountability."

Honorable Kenneth R. Walker, Circuit Court Judge from Multnomah County, introduced himself as a person from a tough area of Compton, California. His outline for eliminating gang violence was parent education, mentoring, and youth programs. "At present, there are fathers missing in the home." Statistics show that one out of every three black men are prison bound.

Following the panel's comments, an open mic gave folks a chance for comments and questions. We learned about the work of Big Brothers and Big Sisters through the Community Relations and Diversity Program.

Lisa Loving, with The Skanner, explained that the community still does not trust the police because of the many incidents of police violence that have been piling up.

Other comments and questions showed that the audience had listened and wanted to develop action that would provide a solution to the gang violence in Portland.

One of the last folks to stand up was Monica Alexander. She told her story of being convicted of 27 felony charges, being addicted to drugs, and finally successfully recovering after serving years in prison and losing her son. Her son was killed by gang violence. She is now 50 years old, a full time student, and a mentor to kids in trouble. She said that she regrets she was not "there" for her own children and is eager to tell her story. Alexander was strong in her statement that "jail is not the answer."

Although the speakers each had a different focus and perspective, everyone who spoke has their own unique experienced. It's clear the community is concerned and listening about gang violence in our community. Now, it's time to do something about it.

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