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After-school program fights crime

By Darryl Smith

I've been a police officer in Northern Virginia for over 30 years. Since 1997, I and other concerned community members voluntarily developed Vecinos Unidos/Neighbors United Inc., an after-school program in an economically distressed section of Herndon that is home to many of the county's new immigrants.

In the few years of its existence, we have seen remarkable results. Some nights, our program is filled with more than 50 kids of many races.

The children we serve are more confident, are better students in the classroom, and find it easier to stay out of trouble.

Studies have shown that the most difficult time for impulsive teens is the hours after school. Without a place to go and without guidance, many of the young people we serve would have found themselves engaged in lawbreaking.

Vecinos Unidos offers a safe haven for kids during those tough hours. And while we have no funds to do a formal evaluation, I know it works.

I'll never forget one young sixth-grader. He was basically a good kid, with an easy smile, but he was always getting in trouble at school. He was very aggressive, fighting with other kids and threatening to teachers.

He even earned the dubious distinction from his principal of being the school's "No. 1 problem-child."

But after participating in our after-school program, he changed for the better. The aggression and fighting all but disappeared. He is now a happier person, a much better student and, most important, on his way to becoming a good, law-abiding resident of our community.

The Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation has pioneered programs like this around the country. Under the Eisenhower initiative, a police ministration is married with a youth safe haven like ours.

Paid staff members and police officers mentor, provide homework help, counseling and intervention with school and family. The results have been

impressive.

In scientific evaluations of these programs, the academic performance of students improves, crime reporting goes up, and crime rates go down. There is also less teen pregnancy and delinquency.

In Columbia, SC., for example, the neighborhood with a police ministration and youth safe haven reduced crime by 19.7 percent, while crime went up 6.8 percent in the rest of the city.

We need more ventures like those here in Herndon, Leesburg, Manassas, Alexandria, Woodbridge, and so many other areas of Northern Virginia. Particularly as demographics change, we could face increasingly strained relations with police and mounting youth crime.

Vecinos Unidos does good work, but it is woefully underfunded. With volunteers who come and go, we have no stability and consistency of services.

We are stretched to the limit, and cannot work with the school and home as needed. We badly need educational supplies. Our ability to offer the kinds of field trips that inspire and encourage these often deprived youngsters is curtailed.

Furthermore, we cannot develop the kind of outreach that assures crime is being consistently reported and stopped. Right now, we exist on the goodness of a few volunteers' hearts, and donations from local businesses and the Rotary Club.

But funded appropriately, our approach could be a cost saver as well as a real crime fighter for Northern Virginia. It is expensive to try young people in court and jail them. It is much less costly to prevent the crime in the first place.

This is a perfect opportunity for the kind of private/public sector partnership that can work so well. Federal funds coupled with the support of the local police could assure that these kinds of programs exist where we most need them, creating safer communities for us all.

Capt. Darryl Smith
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