

The Koban Initiative

Sources join forces to help at-risk kids

By John Beifuss

Eight-year-old Amonda Washington says it can be hard to get a good night's sleep in LeMoyne Gardens.

"Sometimes there's shooting, sometimes there's fighting," he said Saturday. "When I hear the shooting, I think somebody just got shot, or maybe they just want to celebrate something."

An ambitious new program is intended to help put an end to Amonda's sleepless nights. If it's successful, young residents of the South Memphis public housing development will enjoy more productive days as well.

Saturday, the Boys Clubs of Memphis launched "The Koban Initiative," a cooperative venture with the Washington-based Eisenhower Foundation, the Memphis Police Department, the Memphis Housing Authority, and 100 Black Men, a mentoring organization for black young people.

Koban is a Japanese word that refers to the concept of community interdependence and policing. The Koban Initiative seeks to increase the interaction between community-based police officers and black professionals and at-risk youth from 7 to 11 years old.

A police COACT (Community Action) unit already is based in LeMoyne Gardens. Residents say the police presence has cut down on lawbreaking and drug dealing in the neighborhood although crime remains a serious problem.

Under the Koban plan, however, the police presence will be even more interactive; two officers will spend four hours a day working with young people at Goodwill Boys Club, 903 Walker.

The officer will tutor boys and girls at the club, and work with them on self-esteem, self-presentation, and other aspects of a successful work and home life.

Boys are likely to befriend the officers at the Boys Club because "it's a relaxed atmosphere," said Brad Baumgardner, president of the five Boys Clubs of Memphis. "Everybody already comes here, and is comfortable being here."

The Goodwill Boys Club has about 500 members, almost all of whom live in the 800-unit LeMoyne Gardens complex.

Currently, the two officers assigned to the Boys Club are Felix Calvi, 37, an 11-year veteran, and Glynetha Davis, 30, who's been on the force 3 years.

"I feel like locking all the people up is no answer," Calvi said. "The solution is to deal with kids when they're young, at 7 years of age, to keep us from having to deal with them in the criminal justice system. That's just common sense."

The organization 100 Black Men also will provide volunteer tutors and coaches.

The Koban Initiative program was developed by the Eisenhower Foundation, a non-profit organization that seeks to improve the quality of life for all Americans.

Koban programs already have successful in Baltimore, Boston, Philadelphia and San Juan, said Lynn Curtis, foundation president, who was in Memphis on Saturday.

"In some ways I think the problem is not so much the boys in the hood as the boys on the hill," Curtis said, referring to Capitol Hill.

He said the nation's prison population has tripled in the past 15 years, yet violent crime among young people continues to increase. He said prison spending grows while Congress cuts funds to inner-city education and programs.

The Eisenhower Foundation provided a \$45,000 grant to the Boys Club for the program, which is slated to last 18 months. After that, officials hope to be able to raise money to continue the program, if it proves to be a success.

According to the 1996 Memphis and Shelby County Crime Report, commissioned by Guardsmark Inc., early intervention with at-risk youth is vital to curtailing crime. The report recommended that well-coordinated community prevention efforts be established to instill socially positive

values in young people at an early age. The Koban Initiative is intended to do just that, Baumgardner said.