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Guest Column

... and our community needs more safe havens for young people

The Stickney safe haven has built trust between law enforcement and the neighborhood; as a result, youth crime is down

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In Toledo's Stickney neighborhood, nearly half of young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 lack high school diplomas. One of every five neighborhood residents, and one of every four children, is poor.

Stickney's residents grapple with overwhelming challenges. For the neighborhood's young people, disadvantage, misery, and despair make success elusive.

Yet flowers are blooming amid the concrete. You can see them on display at the School Safe Haven/Police Mini-Station program run by the James C. Caldwell Community Center at 3201 Stickney Ave.

The program, funded by the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, includes a youth "drop-in" program and Kids Café, which provides healthy meals. The program's partners include the Toledo-Northwestern Ohio Food Bank, Toledo Public Schools, the YMCA of Greater Toledo, local law enforcement agencies, and America's Second Harvest.

The safe haven provides homework help and caring adults to talk to. Field trips expand the world of young people who often have never left their neighborhood, offering a glimpse of possibilities and hope.

Physical exercise, which is being cut from far too many schools, is available. Such activity is essential to youngsters' mental and physical health.

As a police officer for 33 years, I can be a positive role model for youths who come to the safe haven. Too often, the typical relationship between poor communities of color and law enforcement is one of distrust and alienation. I can enlist these children as partners in keeping our community safe, and replace suspicion with trust.

Young people learn that police officers do more than just arrest people. Their transformation influences entire families.

A bright 12-year-old I work with at the center came to me angry and frustrated. He lives with his grandmother and often got in trouble at school.

Before we met, there was no one he could confide in. He didn't have a positive male figure in his life, and felt no one had his back.

My message to him: I care about you. The nurturing I offer is genuine. Your pain is my pain, and I understand the anguish you feel — because I've been there.

It has been rewarding to see him change. He is developing coping skills, and learning to talk about his issues instead of erupting in anger.

He is beginning to feel empowered to resolve conflicts. He realizes that he can make positive decisions, and that he is not just a victim of bad situations.

Police work is truly effective only when law enforcement has a partnership with the community — not as an occupying force, but as people who can help residents deal with living in their neighborhood.

The safe haven offers salvation to young people who are floundering in a tough environment, often without support. National studies show that young people who attend safe havens are less likely to get pregnant as teenagers or to enter the juvenile-justice system.

According to FBI reports, youth crime in Stickney relative to the rest of the city of Toledo fell from 2008 to 2012. I know that one of the reasons for this is that the youth safe haven has built trust between law enforcement and the neighborhood.

We need thousands of safe havens across the country. We can save children, create safer communities, and save money by keeping young people out of the criminal justice system, which can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars per person each year. Data show that once a young person enters the justice system, recidivism is high and the outlay of taxpayer dollars increases.

Children, especially African-American and Latino boys, are too often seen as potential criminals rather than the doctors, accountants, mechanics, and members of Congress they could become with a helping hand. If we invest in safe havens, we will all win.

Harold Mosley is a retired Toledo police officer.

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