

The Birmingham News

Commentary

A new tool against crime

By ELAINE S. JACKSON

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As any skilled laborer can tell you, the key to getting a job done right is having the right tools in the toolbox.

So when Birmingham political and civil leaders joined on the steps of City Hall last month to announce the Cease Fire anti-crime campaign, designed to fix the crime and drug scourge harming the city, citizens rightfully cheered.

This initiative, which brings together government, churches, business, the media, schools and community leaders to actively discourage violence through anti-crime summits, public awareness campaigns through the media and a few old-fashioned Sunday morning diatribes from the pulpit, seems well-placed to begin reversing the soaring murder rate.

But we at the Birmingham Urban League don't want city officials to overlook another new tool now at the city's disposal that has a proven record of reducing crime in troubled communities around the nation.

Four months ago, in partnership with Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization, we opened Birmingham's first Youth Safe Haven-Police Mini-Station in the Southtown Public Housing Complex just east of the University of Alabama at Birmingham's campus.

In all honesty, it's a little too soon to declare even a partial victory against crime there. But if history is any indicator, we will be claiming some success in the very near future.

Everywhere the Eisenhower Foundation, a 25-year leader in creating and replicating such youth-development programs across the country, has had the program properly implemented, crime has dropped.

Here, the partnership includes local police, the city housing authority and school officials. The safe haven creates a safe space where parents, youth and police work together to create open line of communication that didn't exist before. That communication helps lead to an atmosphere which is less than hospitable to drug peddlers.

It would be folly to think a safe haven, or any facility of this type, could magically transform the lives of drug dealers. But what the foundation has discovered through

years of scientific evaluation is it makes it much harder for dealers to conduct business as usual.

When kids start talking to police officers, good things happen.

One thing is certain: Doing nothing will not work.

According to the 2004 FBI Uniform Crime Statistics, the overall Birmingham crime index is more than twice as high as the national average. The same goes for all violent crimes, including murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assaults. And the new on property crimes is just as bleak.

Birmingham officials are to be credited for not burying their collective heads in the sands of denial and creating Cease Fire.

But let's make sure all the tools in the toolbox are being used to fix the problem of surging crime and death on our streets. Our children deserve nothing less.

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