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Neighborhoods target crime

Frogtown and North End programs aim to engage youths, secure communities

BY MATT PEIKEN
Pioneer Press

Two of St. Paul's community councils are tackling crime the way they know best — by being neighborly.

In the city's North End, District 6 council leaders are walking door to door to find vulnerable businesses and problem properties, secure a storefront along Rice Street for a group of crime-fighting ministers and recruit volunteers to support the thin staffs at area recreation centers.

In Frogtown, the home of the District 7 council, leaders are turning to the arts to help the ballooning youth population connect with neighborhood resources and, ideally, take an owner's pride in them.

The differing approaches have the mayor's support, through small grants, and represent the first efforts by both councils to deal with crime through their own programs. The councils have long served as liaisons with police and other nonprofit efforts to fight crime.

Both councils recently received \$4,000 from the mayor's office to develop or expand projects designed to reduce crime and boost community safety. Others sharing in the \$20,000 crime-fighting grant from the mayor are the East YMCA, Hmong American Partnership and Save Our Sons, an African-American role-modeling organization.

"We've always been involved with crime issues, but a lot of things are being brought to our attention now, especially with businesses, and we want to be active with it," says Kerry Antrim, a community organizer with the District 6 council. "Sometimes crime is as much about perception as reality, but we want to do something about it that changes perceptions and makes a real difference."

Even before receiving money from the mayor, both councils had stepped into crime-fighting mode. District 7 leaders commissioned a local performance poet to recruit, mentor and engage a handful of Frogtown youths about the Central Corridor and compose verse about what light-rail trains will bring and mean to the neighborhood. The youths performed their work in April, and strong feedback led organizers to put together summer classes on digital photography, hip-hop theater and painting. While studying these art forms, up to 15 students also are learning about various police initiatives in their neighborhoods.

"Part of the program is about asking the kids what it's like to live where they do, especially the hip-hop kids, and a lot of the feedback we get is just about trying to survive," says Boa Lee, a community organizer with the District 7 council. "Then we tell them about things happening in the neighborhood and ask them what they think we need more of here."

In the North End, organizers are conducting "environmental surveys" of area businesses — checking locks, lighting, landscaping and security cameras — for ways to make them more secure. They're also recruiting young adults to volunteer with area recreation centers to ensure they stay open during promised hours.

Such efforts might not have a direct, immediate impact on crime, Lee says, but they foster communication with people who otherwise have little contact with civic leaders.

"The kids are out there on the streets — walking to school or to work — and they're in a great position to really see what's happening out there and let us know," she says. "We're trying to get kids more involved in what we do here and figure out how to move them into community leadership positions."

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