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Giving youths safer choices

Expanded program helps kids resolve disputes peacefully

By John Fritze

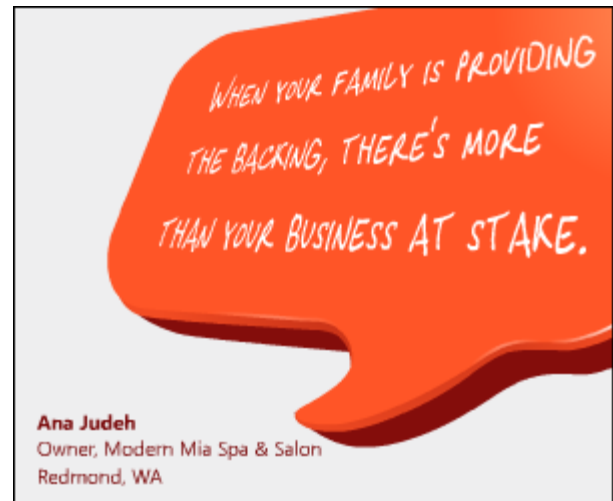
Sun reporter

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With a \$1.7 million boost in funding, Mayor Sheila Dixon's administration is expanding an anti-violence campaign with roots in Chicago to two high-crime neighborhoods in Baltimore.

The Health Department program, Operation Safe Streets, hires ex-offenders to reach out to youth and mediate disputes before they turn violent. The program will expand to Cherry Hill and to several sites in East Baltimore later this year.

"This is an investment that will produce returns more valuable than any amount of money," Dixon said. "This program works."



Safe Streets, modeled on a Chicago program called CeaseFire, began in Baltimore last June in McElderry Park, blocks from the Johns Hopkins medical campus. With the new money, the program will be active at five sites.

Health Department statistics show there has been a reduction in homicides and nonfatal shootings in McElderry Park. The average number of nonfatal shootings and homicides dropped to 0.7 a month from 1.2 a month after the program started.

Dr. Joshua M. Sharfstein, the city's health commissioner, said his department is still reviewing those statistics. The city is anticipating the results of a Johns Hopkins study of Safe Streets in December.

"This is a public health approach that looks at violence as a behavior that needs to be changed," Sharfstein said. "People are hearing from ... people they look up to in their community that they don't have to pull out a gun to settle a dispute."

Initially, Safe Streets was funded through a federal grant. As the money dried up earlier this summer, the city sought other sources to pay for the program.

The Dixon administration dedicated \$1 million this year and raised an additional \$655,000 from private sources, including the Greater Baltimore Committee Foundation and the Abell Foundation. Sharfstein

said the city needs to raise \$2million - an additional \$345,000 - to keep the program alive through next June.

The Living Classrooms Foundation manages the East Baltimore locations. The program hires ex-offenders to canvass the community, mediate conflicts and mentor young men at risk of being the victims or perpetrators of shootings.

"We want to be a messenger [to] stop violence, stop homicides, stop the shootings," said Leon Faruq, director of Safe Streets for Living Classrooms. "Our people get them to pause and think. Our people get them to reflect because of the respect they have."

The program expanded east from McElderry park to neighboring Ellwood Park this year. Now the city hopes to extend the program's reach in East Baltimore again, this time moving north and covering an area from Monument Street to Ashland Avenue.

Baltimore will also start a Safe Streets program in Cherry Hill, which will be run by the Family Health Centers of Baltimore. An existing site, in Union Square in Southwest Baltimore, will be scaled back and retooled, Sharfstein said.

Expansion of the program comes as the city has experienced a major decrease in violent crime so far this year. Police statistics show a 32 percent decline in homicides and a 24 percent drop in nonfatal shootings compared with last year.

Police Commissioner Frederick H. Bealefeld III said he has been repeatedly asked to explain the reduction in crime. While he said there is no "silver bullet" explanation, he said programs such as Safe Streets are a big part of the cause.

"This is one of the biggest reasons fueling the reduction of violence in this city," Bealefeld said. "This really is part of the silver that goes into that bullet."

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