

Brockton police build bridge to city youths

A group of 10 police officers and 20 city youths will participate in a program designed to build respect between the two groups.

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BROCKTON —

Jeff Stone says the atmosphere may be a bit edgy when 10 cops and 20 city youths first get together in a closed room tonight.

But, the two groups are likely to be chatting and laughing by the third meeting, according to Stone, facilitator of a program aimed at building trust between kids and cops in a city where a no-snitch culture is a handicap to resolving rising violence.

"We're often providing the first chance for kids to sit down and talk with cops in mutually respectful voices," said Stone, a founder of Boston-based non-profit City-Wide Dialogues, who is bringing the program to Brockton.

Ten street cops and 20 at-risk youths have been selected for the meetings, which will take place in three 3-hour sessions behind closed doors.

Stone said the program has been effective in Boston, where it has been offered 14 times since 2004 in districts throughout the city.

Randolph, Lowell, New Bedford and Fall River are also interested in City-Wide Dialogues, but the Brockton sessions will be the first time it is used outside of Boston, he said.

In Brockton, the effort comes at a time when the city is trying to bridge gaps between police and the community, especially youths.

There have been more than a dozen shootings, two fatal, in the city in two months. Though discouraged by the continued violence, Mayor James E. Harrington said city leaders must address the issues, and this is one way to do that.

"If it works well, we may do more of these dialogues in the future," Harrington said.

The youths taking part in the program have been selected by My Turn Inc. and other agencies that partner in the Shannon Grant, a state-funded initiative designed to reduce youth violence. Police Chief William Conlon has selected the officers who will participate.

"We want a mix of kids cops will typically encounter or have confrontations with, and those cops," Stone said.

Stone and his colleagues — Roscoe Thomas, former head of Boston's City Year program for youths, and Boston Housing Authority civil rights director Michelle Ekanem — will facilitate the discussion, breaking down stereotypes and animosity that may exist on either side.

“We do that by getting police and the kids to talk about the most difficult of issues — the negative stereotypes they have of each other, peer-group pressure, snitching and what snitching is and isn’t,” Stone said. “In a city that has violence, animosity and lack of trust exists to a degree between cops and kids.”

The group is designed to reduce any intimidation youths may feel from the police, hence the ratio of two youths for one cop.

Sharice Ferris of My Turn admits some of the kids were reluctant to participate, but agreed to try after hearing from Stone and his team.

The rules are the same for the kids and cops and based on respect, Stone said: Dialogue, not debate Respectful tone Share air time Agree to disagree

The chill of a typical first session relaxes through an informal supper shared by all and gradually, by the third and final session, Stone said some police officers are looking to continue the meetings.

There’s positive response from youths, too.

“The kids often see that the cops actually care about them, that the cops don’t want to be their enemy but want to be allies,” he said.

Moises Rodrigues, Brockton’s director of community services, said the “frank and open” discussions should be helpful to both youths and police.

The \$2,000 cost comes from the Shannon Grant, he said.

A follow-up survey of the participants will gauge its success, Rodrigues added.

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