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East Contra Costa leaders discuss ways to stem youth violence

By Paul Bugarino
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Leaders of a gang task force are urging Contra Costa's new district attorney to bring his efforts to stem youth violence to the eastern part of the county.

County Supervisor Federal Glover asked Mark Peterson during an East County Gang Task Force meeting last week to implement plans for an anti-truancy program and civil gang injunctions in East and West County simultaneously.

"We know the problems in the Richmond area are much greater, but at the same time, we know we have a lot of the same problems here. It's prudent to look at both areas to prevent it from moving to East County and utilize those resources today," Glover said.

Both initiatives aim to prevent and suppress criminal activity, Peterson told the task force.

A renewed focus on truancy in high school, particularly for incoming freshmen, can make a big difference, Antioch High Principal Louie Rocha said during the meeting.

"I know it's a lightweight offense, but having that tool can prevent a lot of future violence," Rocha

said.

School districts have a series of attendance-review procedures to help keep truants in the classroom, but prosecuting parents of habitual offenders gives schools a stronger enforcement tool, said ReJois Frazier-Myers, Pittsburg Unified's director of student services.

Enforcement at the high school level has waned in recent years because of limited resources and the perception that it's too late for students to change by that age,

Rocha said.

Peterson, who was elected in November, plans to meet with local school districts in the next month to discuss how his office can support anti-truancy efforts.

"I'll go after these parents in a heartbeat," Peterson told the task force.

The district attorney's program is similar to one that has been lauded in San Francisco, where parents are held criminally liable for truant children.

Parents whose children continually miss school, even after multiple school district warnings, can be charged with a misdemeanor, he said.

The District Attorney's Office will also use civil gang injunctions to restrict specific gang members from a variety of activities such as associating with one another, wearing certain clothes, fighting, making certain hand gestures or being out after a certain time.

The gang task force, consisting of about two dozen local representatives from law enforcement, education, faith- and youth-based nonprofit

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organizations, met with the county's four new leaders in the criminal justice system -- Peterson, Sheriff David Livingston, Chief Probation Officer Philip Kader and Public Defender Robin Lipetzky -- to familiarize them with the group.

Peterson expressed hope that tougher truancy enforcement would reduce high school dropout rates, pointing to the 33 percent dropout rate in Pittsburg and 26 percent rate in Antioch.

"Statistics tell us that if kids stay in school, they are less likely to get into the criminal justice system," Peterson said. "Financially, it's a smart move."

The District Attorney's Office will research the idea of gang injunctions in East Contra Costa, including whether gangs move to other communities once restraining orders are put in place, Peterson said.

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