

Donated money, time keeps GRIP funded for now

By LAURA MCCUTCHEON The Daily Journal

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New money and hired help will sustain the anti-gang curriculum in Ukiah Unified's elementary schools for a few more years.

The Ukiah Police Department this year donated \$21,000 to the Gang Resistance is Paramount program; the Mendocino County Sheriff's Office donated \$10,000 and some staff time, according to Pat Sanborn, prevention services coordinator at Mendocino County Alcohol and Other Drug Programs, and former GRIP counselor.

Last year GRIP was funded primarily by AODP, which remains the conduit for administering the money, which is set up in a separate budget there, aodp she said.

That said, funding is continually needed for what many see as invaluable curriculum.

"Our plan is to start outreaching into different parts of the community, including service clubs and county and city governments, to look for additional funding sources to make this a long sustainable program," Dewey said.

Asked why the UPD donated to the cause, Capt. Chris Dewey said simply: "To keep kids from joining gangs."

Over the last two years, the UPD has sent 15 certified gang members to prison as a result of on-going gang investigations, Dewey said.

In 2002, the UPD performed 13 misdemeanor and 16 felony gang-related investigations.

By 2005, the number of gang-related investigations grew to 60 misdemeanor and 78 felony cases.

In 2005, 102 adults and 14 juveniles were arrested on charges of felony assault and battery. That same year, 48 adults and 15 juveniles were arrested by the UPD on felony weapons charges, according to Dewey, who noted not all these arrests were gang-related, but the majority were.

"The number of felony arrests and the number of felony arrests with weapons continues to increase, and most of those felony weapons arrests are gang-related," he said.

Asked if this indicated an increase in local gang members, Dewey said: "I don't know if the number of gang members is increasing, but I know the current gang members we have within our community are more violent than they have been in the past."

All the more reason for preventive measures.

In Paramount City -- where the GRIP program was established in the early 80s in an attempt to deter youth from getting involved in gangs - - the effectiveness of the program is revealed in annual surveys, according to Dewey.

"They see that about 50 percent of the kids at the beginning of the year have not formed an opinion about gangs, and at the end of the year, 90 percent or more are committed to staying out of gangs," Dewey said, noting they track the students over the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth grades and the numbers stay the same. The local GRIP program for the first time this year will do its own surveys -- a pre-survey and a post -- to see what the students learned.

In addition to new funding for the program continually in need of more, the structure of GRIP has also changed.

In the past, volunteers from different agencies would go into the classrooms and teach the GRIP program, Sanborn said, noting the various agencies donated the time of their employees for the cause.

"The difficulty with that is it's hard to maintain consistency with how the program gets delivered. It was also difficult to monitor it, in the sense that we didn't know if the students were getting what they needed," she said. "It's hard to maintain volunteers, they are not a dependable work force. Don't get me wrong, we were incredibly grateful for their help, but we needed something more sustainable," she said.

Enters Carlos Jacinto, who has spent a large part of his life working in gang prevention.

This year, the anti-gang crusader is tasked with teaching 15 UUSD fifth-grade classes the GRIP program. Apparently his employer -- the Department of Social Services -- has reassigned his job duties and given him 15 hours a week to work with the students.

"It's excellent," Jacinto said of teaching GRIP to the children, "because it has a blanket statement across the fifth grade which helps create positive peer relationships for preventing gangs. When you address just one-on-one, or just one class, there is still negative peer pressure in the community," he said. "And then the sixth-grade classes support the fifth-grade classes because they went through the program last year, which also creates a healthy school environment for gang prevention," Jacinto said.

Kristen Frith-Williams has also been hired to act as the local GRIP coordinator.

"She will be focusing on doing more fund-raising, grant writing, and getting more money added to the budget so we can continue the program for more than three years, and expand it to other grade levels and perhaps other locations," Sanborn said. "We don't want it to go away," she added.

Last but not least, a GRIP action team -- made up of representatives from the school district, law enforcement, AODP, the Department of Social Services and members of the community -- has been formed to act as an oversight committee.

This is one of the changes Dewey is most excited about, he said. "The GRIP program for the last two years has been running and active, but a GRIP action team is going to be a huge factor in increasing the program and its success in the future," he said. "Now we have school district administrators, officers who work out on the streets, local community members concerned about gang enforcement ... all getting together collectively once a month to talk about these issues, learn about current trends, and look at alternatives to make the program more effective in the future.

"Constantly we hear that gangs are a police problem, or gangs are a school problem. The point of bringing everyone together is that gangs are really a community problem and coming together we can collectively look for more effective solutions in the future," Dewey said.

To donate funds to the GRIP program call Pat Sanborn at 472-2609.