

News

Gang summit held

A San Gabriel Valley summit brought the issue of gangs to the forefront.

By Mary O'Keefe

On Friday, the San Gabriel Valley Council of Governments held a summit to discuss the impact of gangs on communities. The meeting gathered together representatives from across the San Gabriel Valley to explore possible programs that would help change the cycle of gang membership and violence.

La Cañada council member Dave Spence is president of the Council of Governments. He joined other leaders in commending those who work to solve the issue and to those on the front line that battle gang influence.

"La Cañada does not have a gang problem, but we are so close to adjacent gang activity that prevention is important," Spence said. Spence added that being proactive was an important step in preventing gang influence in the La Cañada area. He also said that the summit was useful for community representatives who are not battling a gang problem to hear from those cities that are fighting for their community's safety.

California Attorney General Jerry Brown was a guest speaker at the summit. He noted that there will always be racial tension and division, and that gangs feed off this type of mentality and hatred.

"We have domestic terrorists right here," he said. "Gangs are like a disease, like a cancer in a community. We have to do more [to solve the problem]."

Brown referenced the war that is being fought in Iraq and Afghanistan and the amount of money it is costing the country. Yet there is no money to fight the domestic terrorist, gangs, he said.

Brown looked toward the music industry as fueling the gang fury with lyrics that glorify the violent lifestyle. That sentiment prompted a question from a man in the audience who asked what Hollywood's responsibility was in promoting gangs.

"I think Denzel Washington and [Robert] De Niro and anyone who has made money glamorizing gang members should contribute [to programs to help kids out of gangs]," said Constance Rice, co-director and co-founder of the Advancement Project in Los Angeles.

Rice, who is also a civil rights attorney, spoke about the lack of funding to help kids stay out of gangs. She told the audience of funds that had been donated to run a project in Los Angeles.

"For 15 weeks we had basketball games at night," she said, stating these types of activities divert

attention away from negative behavior.

In addition to games, the program offered tutoring and mentoring services to kids throughout the night. Rice said that the program worked and for those 15 weeks the violence in the community dropped dramatically, but then the funding ran out and the violence came back.

"These kids want to talk to you, they want to continue to be engaged," she said. "It is not hard to teach people. The problem is who is doing the teaching."

Spence said that he was surprised at the lack of funding for such programs.

"I thought there was more federal funding, but there isn't," he said.

The information on funding, testimonials and questions from those who are most affected by gangs was an eye opener for Spence and others.

"The more information out there the better," he said.

Sheriff Lee Baca also attended the summit and was frank about gang problems increasing.

"I think county supervisors are getting the message," Spence said. "The board of supervisors are realizing how serious this is and they are willing to spend money."

The summit, Spence said, was a way for all 32 cities that gathered with local law enforcement to work together to solve a problem that, left unchecked, could spread throughout the San Gabriel Valley.