

## MINUTES

### Juvenile Crime, Graffiti and Gang Violence Task Force Town Hall/Public Meeting

Thursday, December 11, 2008

6 p.m. at Bonham Elementary School  
2400 E. Jefferson  
Harlingen, TX

Gabe Gonzalez welcomed those present to the fifth School Town Hall meeting of the Task Force. He acknowledged City Commissioner Robert Leftwich, Chief Danny Castillo and Gerald Gathright as present. He informed the public on the purpose of the meeting and asked them to fill out a questionnaire that was being distributed. He asked for their comments with regards to juvenile crime. The Task Force would be putting together a report for the City Commission that would be completed either this month or next month.

Chief Danny Castillo thanked everyone for their presence. He informed them they had met in different areas of the city in order to obtain different viewpoints. He encouraged the audience to offer their comments and mentioned the Task Force valued their input greatly.

1. **Rev. Richard Duhamel** approached the podium and stated the problem was with the judicial system that didn't give the maximum sentences. He was of the opinion that juveniles should be responsible for their actions. He commended the Police Department for their efforts.
2. **Kathleen Sheldon** stated she lived and worked in the area. She was at the first meeting at Jefferson School and was there tonight because there was graffiti on the Burger King next to Starbucks that she wanted to report. She had called it in and the system for reporting this is very cumbersome. Calling in non-emergency calls to the Police Department is very awkward. Also, there is more graffiti that she spotted a few months ago that is still there. She wanted to know what the current policy or system for graffiti removal was? Also, she wanted to understand better what the gang situation in Harlingen was. She wanted a better picture of who are the gang members, how old are they and why do they join, etc? Tuesday night she called the Police Department to report an illegal hook-up of cable (at 10 p.m. or so) and the juveniles left before the police arrived. She doesn't know how that was resolved. That family is not a very good family. She called Time Warner today and was told that if the people are first offenders, all they have to do is pay a fine and then nothing else happens to them. The reporting and impacting was what she wanted to understand better.

Chief Castillo encouraged Mrs. Sheldon to continue reporting the graffiti areas. Their intention was to make the reporting process more streamline. They've had various churches and other organizations go out there and paint over graffiti. One issue that they've discovered with the graffiti eradication strategy was the issue of private property owners not signing waivers to allow the City to step in and take care of the graffiti. Now, they've changed the ordinance where it's a

requirement for the private owner to either paint it over themselves within a certain period of time or they are granted permission to automatically go in there and take care of the graffiti. They do work with the property owners. He encouraged her to call his office to report any graffiti areas. Harlingen Proud and various youth programs have assisted them with this issue. Graffiti eradication would take a strategic and consistent community wide effort. It would involve not just the painting over of the graffiti but also an educational component. The negative side was that they are basically trashing their own neighborhoods. He advised they would be addressing the graffiti on Burger King. Her other question as to 'what are gangs, etc', could be addressed by various studies that have been written. He felt that the main concern was the family unit. He didn't think that aggressive law enforcement on it's own could solve the problem. Chief Castillo felt that these are young kids and they had a responsibility to help them. As a community, if they came together, then that would incorporate a lot of different strategies. They've identified a lot of people that are interested in being a part of the solution. They needed to bring together the strengths of the community. Her type of questions were what prompted this process of community input and he thanked her for her input.

3. An audience member commented that graffiti was tied to gang territory areas. Gangs go out there and spray their territories. An article stated that a 'known south side gang member...' The authorities know some of the gang members. He felt that the gang problem was only getting worse. He felt the Police Department should try to identify the names, leaders, members and slogans of the gangs. He recommended they go after them with the criminal law behind them. They should go after them all at one time. People in the community should start identifying who these people are. He asked them to create a website with the different gang slogans so citizens can access the website at any time. Citizens could send them pictures of the slogans. He made reference to the different gangs fighting over territories. He had a hard time finding out about the meeting. He had to go thru the entire paper to look for the Task Force notice. If the community is getting involved then the news stations and other media should help promote the meeting information.
4. **Sylvia Cholick** commented parents should be held responsible. Children should have chores and they need to do their homework and so on. The parents should be taken to the judge to be fined.
5. **George Merrill** stated that a crucial thing was getting a website with gang members photos in view. The police department had photos of the gang members and this would be similar to "America's Most Wanted".

Chief Castillo made mention of a program the cities of El Paso and California started with regards to gangs. These cities identified gang structures as organizations. Locally the HPD has started to do the same. On the civil side, these communities have gone forward with court injunctions against these organizations. Once they gather all the intelligence, they can identify membership to those organizations. What does that mean? Well, this would prohibit that organization from existing. Because when that identified organization gathers with two or more in any public display (be it just gathering or displaying certain colors) then that gives the police department the power of arrest. The intent is to get the organization and to dismantle it. The

nature of these types of offenses is not like sex offenders—where they're under reporting or supervision. This is a different classification of offenses. It's something that we could look at as a society. Because of the nature of this type of activity we are targeting dismantling that activity.

6. An unnamed audience member stated that as a citizen they needed to know what colors these gangs were using? He concurred that a website with gang information was a good idea.

Chief Castillo agreed that was important information to know. Their gang unit has made several presentations in the schools and teachers have been asking exactly what they were asking. If this all eventually leads to a website that everyone can view, then he concurred. He's original concern is with juvenile offenders—there might be some restrictions from broadcasting their pictures. Educators should be able to identify the signs and colors to look for.

**George Merrill** stated they were referring to early prevention. They wanted to deter 10/11 year olds. By the time kids are 17 years old or older they've reached a 'senior level'. He agrees knowledge has to get to the public. This was a Gang, Juvenile Crime and Graffiti Task Force and this was just one point out of three. He was hoping that they would have a better turn out. They needed to communicate it on the radio. He wished Gabe were there to write down these ideas (*Gabe left the meeting at approximately 7 p.m. for another appointment*). Use buses to pick people up. Maybe moms and dads don't have more than one car. He's been to every meeting except for the first meeting. The first meeting was about 130 people at Jefferson. Pepe Cervantes was at the Ben Milam meeting—that was about 30 people. The point is that this is a wide range. Get communication on the radio. Thank you to the principal of the school for being present. Parents need to be here. They are the ones that are dealing with this. These parents live and breathe this. He's a pastor for a church that is in the heart of downtown. His church is 93-94% Hispanic and he has a good feeling for what they deal with their kids. They need to be able to come to this. Maybe make this extra credit for the kids—as far as an elective. The kids could get extra credit if their parents show up to a community event. Give them a chance to get higher on their GPA. If the kids are struggling in a certain area, if their parents show up, then it benefits everyone. I don't believe this is just the Chief's or Mayor's venue. He's been a part of this as a volunteer. Since this all started, he is now a victim. Last Thursday, they were broken into (things were stolen) and they were attacked by Eastside Killers (ESK). Now he sees it on a firsthand standpoint. If they are not involving the parents, their influence on the kids will not be as powerful. Holding the parents accountable is the key. Make them show up here. They'll come when the kids get an award but they won't show up for something like this. The meetings should be at one location all the time and not move it around. Maybe City Hall or the Municipal Auditorium a large meeting place. Maybe a local business. I wouldn't mind contributing pizza and coffee, anything to help them bring their kids. Kids programs, the Crimestoppers—one of our greatest assets. Commissioner Leftwich has been to more of the meetings than the people that are officially on the board. Unfortunately, the other people (they're gonna hear this—but I'm sorry) with the exception of the Mayor who has meetings all the time—the people that should be on this board, here tonight, if they're going to be on the board, they should be here. This is

crucial information, even if just one person shows up. He was disappointed in the lack of board attendance. Starting off was good, but it's not how you start it's how you finish. He commended Commissioner Leftwich for showing up even though he isn't even on the board.

Commissioner Robert Leftwich thanked George Merrill for his comments and asked if anybody else wanted to say 'anything'?

7. **Pepe Cervantes** approached the podium as a pastor, nurse and a father. He lives down the street and has been affected by gang violence also. Juveniles have flattened all four of his tires, taken the gas out of his gas tank. He can't prove it, but he knows it has to be the kids or gangs. We need to follow through. Right now they are trying to form a faith-based coalition where they can get all the churches to come together to work with the City to solve these issues. He liked what George Merrill said about getting representatives from every school to meet at the auditorium. Food can get people together. Get a representative from the schools, plus any teacher that wants to be involved. They need to get together and have everyone wear the colors of their school to show that they are united. This will affect somebody eventually. They need to get the word out to announce the meeting. The Task Force has done a great job. He asked for their patience with the kids. As a spiritual leader we must accept them, but also from the city's viewpoint there must be disciplinary action. If you are a person of prayer, keep them in prayer. All the schools should show up to the meeting. Perhaps get some food and tell each principal to encourage participation.
8. An unnamed audience member asked if there were any ex-gang members that wanted to help?

Danny Castillo confirmed that was something that could happen in that venue. He found that out through the church coalition that is in the making. It taught him that there are a lot of people that are interested in doing something. Their task is trying to figure out how to facilitate this communication. They've seen great things from the local pastors on the things that they are doing. They have now about 15 ex-gang members who are attending churches and are looking for good things to do. That is a direct result of the faith-based group. They are trying to develop a video of ex-gang members that will be educational. They will be talking about why they got into gangs and what prompted them to get out. Sometimes, it means raising accountability, holding those kids accountable—but once you do that what's going to happen afterwards? They are trying to figure that out how to help those kids out. What can turn their lives in the right direction? He appreciated Pastor Cervantes and Merrill for their comments.

Commissioner Leftwich agreed that the key was 'momentum'. The fact was that even though the crowd was smaller but there was more quality conversations. The audience was able to say what they wanted to say in more 'openness'. They got some fantastic comments tonight and a lot of good ideas. They would be taking some of those ideas and not waiting for the recommendation but would have Danny Castillo start implementing those ideas right away. He thanked everyone for coming to the meeting. He invited them to go see Chief Castillo personally if they had any further ideas.