

City of Cambridge

The Public Safety Committee held a public meeting on September 24, 1997, beginning at 5:30 p.m. in the Sullivan Chamber for the purpose of discussing youth safety and safety issues in the city parks and any other youth issue that comes before the committee.

Present at the meeting were Councillor Michael A. Sullivan, Chair of the Committee, Councillor Henrietta Davis, Councillor Kenneth E. Reeves, and City Clerk D. Margaret Drury. Also present were Police Commissioner Ronnie Watson; Police Superintendent Harold F. Murphy, Jr; Ray Santilli, Police Department; Paul Ryder, Recreation Director, of Human Services (DHS); Eileen Keegan, Director of the Community and Youth Division, DHS; Robert Goodwin, Youth Program Manager, DHS; Andrew Spooner, Youth Program Developer, DHS; Dr. Patrick Murphy, Deputy Superintendent of Schools; John Silva, Security Director; Cambridge Rindge and Latin; Harold Cox, Chief Public Health Officer; Ed Harris, Director, Positive Edge; Mark Sandt, Positive Edge; Aneisha Worrell, Positive Edge; Nicole Carter, Positive Edge; Aral Lecorps, Positive Edge and Crystal Johnson, Positive Edge.

Councillor Sullivan convened the hearing. He stated that a recent report by the Public Health Commission lists potential harm to children from violence as a major health concern. When he read that report, he considered having a meeting of the issue of the Public Safety Committee on the topic of violence and youth safety. Then came the tragedy in Hoyt Field, in which Benny Rosa lost his life. Councillor Sullivan stated that this is a preliminary meeting, to begin discussion of the issue and an agenda for future meetings on the topic of youth violence and safety in the parks and in the city.

Eileen Keegan, Youth Division Director, Department of Human Services, stated that, from a youth center perspective, they found themselves reacting to the Hoyt Field incident. The planning that is going on now is focused on trying to make the centers more proactive, to look at the key areas that need improvement, including prevention.

Andrew Spooner, Youth Program Developer, Department of Human Services, described two meetings about the Hoyt Field incident that were held in the neighborhood and were attended by 15-20 young people aged 15 to 25. He stated that in arranging these meetings he learned how much need there is for coordination of services offered throughout the community and information about these services.

Other community groups and organizations, churches were planning some meetings and memorial occasions, like the candlelight vigil which took place, and he was trying to be sure not to create a schedule conflict with the meeting he was planning, but it was very difficult to find out whom to contact to get information about these events.

Councillor Sullivan asked Mr. Spooner for suggestions for improvements in this area. Mr. Spooner replied that the coordination needs to be someone's job.

Councillor Sullivan asked Harold Cox, Chief Public Health Officer, whether the health report had focused on this issue. Mr. Cox said that it had not, and that this is an area that needs more work. He stated that he agrees with Mr. Spooner that more coordination is needed. Mr. Cox added that the Ten Point Coalition will be doing some short-term work but he is concerned about the long-term implications.

Councillor Reeves stated that he does not have a sense that the City has truly grasped the complexity of this issue. There is a group of young people ages 19 to 25 who have either graduated from high school or dropped out. They are not in school, they don't have jobs, they haven't done any constructive work since high school. They spend all day "chilling" - hanging out in parks and corners drinking beer and smoking reefer. He stated that he is currently following three young men who have been troubled since the sixth grade. In New York City, they do not know who their children are; in Cambridge we do. This is not a police issue, it is a human services and education issue. There is important work that Cambridge could be doing with these young people because Cambridge has the resources.

Ms. Keegan noted that the cut-off age for participation in the youth centers is age 19. She said that the youth centers maintain close connections with Positive Edge, whose staff do work with older youth.

Councillor Sullivan stated that there is an important question of where in the course of getting to age 19 there could have been effective interventions.

Police Commissioner Ronnie Watson stated that it is a police issue because it is perceived as such by the community and because the police often have the first contact with these young people.

Crystal Johnson, Positive Edge, stated that this is an "everyone" problem because it affects the quality of life of the community. She stated that she used to manage the Boston Center Street Program. It takes time, but community police officers, working in coordination with probation officers, can make progress.

Councillor Davis stated that under the Health of the City Program, about four years ago, a somewhat different group met on this issue. She asked Councillor Sullivan what this committee will focus on.

Councillor Sullivan said that is really the question for this meeting. The members of the City Council are not the experts on this subject. This meeting was set to have an open agenda discussion with some of the people working in the field on the issues and to work towards creating a more specific agenda for policy discussions on the issue of youth violence.

Councillor Davis suggested looking at what is possible.

Councillor Reeves stated that because there is not enough coordination of services, he finds himself too involved in arranging service provision for troubled youth. He emphasized the crisis of the 19-25 year-old population.

Ed Harris, Executive Director of Positive Edge, said that the problems of 19 to 25 year-olds start much earlier. They need to be engaged early on. There is nothing set for 19-25 year -olds who get in trouble.

Dr. Patrick Murphy, Deputy Superintendent of Schools, stated that there are numerous programs in Cambridge for kids who are still in school.

Councillor Sullivan stated that there can be the problem of several different professionals, the teacher, the afterschool provider, the youth center worker, all working with one child who is having problems in the situation in which they encounter the child, but none of them talking to each other.

Ms. Keegan stated that the meetings of the Health of the City Violence Prevention Task Force were very helpful in that regard. Service providers from the schools, the hospital, human services, etc., all had an opportunity for regular discussion and information exchange.

Councillor Davis stated that the Violence Prevention Task Force looked at domestic violence and youth violence. From the work of the task force, a coordinator was hired, Richard Wright. Because of the circumstances at the time, the focus came to be more on domestic violence, which, of course, is very important to youth violence.

Commissioner Watson stated that for the kids whom the police identify through their contact, i.e., drinking, vandalism, shoplifting, who are in school, there are programs. For the kids ages 17 and over, there is nothing but jail.

Dr. Murphy agreed that there should be a referral system for this age group to get them social service help.

Councillor Davis suggested that perhaps the place for this is in the court system. She also stated that in middle class homes when kids act out, it is treated by the institutions as a mental health problem. When the kid doesn't have the resources of strong family advocacy and money for mental health treatment, the behavior gets a criminal justice response.

Commissioner Watson stated that in the cases mentioned earlier by Councillor Reeves, the police knew about the family problems. However, there are regulations which prohibit their sharing much of their information with other agencies. This is a major barrier to communication and coordination of intervention responses.

Aral Lecorps, Positive Edge, stated that he works at CRLS and that he often has contact with the families. It is very important to educate the parents. It is necessary to keep building connections. There is a lot of fear on the part of the parents, particularly immigrant parents. There is also fear of police, by both parents and kids.

Ms. Johnson stated that Positive Edge has good support with the kids, which is very important. However, this takes time, and Positive Edge workers are only part-time.

Councillor Sullivan observed that since there are many more police officers than Positive Edge workers, the police will probably be the first contact with troubled kids a lot of the time.

Mr. Harris stated that Positive Edge has one full-time employee and nine part-time employees. He needs more full-time employees. He would love to have someone working full-time at the high school and at the courts.

Councillor Reeves gave the example of a case in which a child is in serious trouble first came to his attention as a second grader living in a homeless shelter. He was identified as a child at risk at the age of seven. There is a well-known phenomenon of third and fourth grade boys falling behind in school work, acting out more and more and never again catching up academically. Councillor Reeves stated that this was how the DuBois Academy was founded. It was for these "at risk" kids,

and it was intended to provide African American boys with positive role models of successful African American adult males as teachers. For example, Lieutenant Morrison of the Police Department was one of the teachers. Thus there was also the advantage that as these boys get older, the police will have known them at a younger age. It is essential that the police get to know these kids at a younger age. That is one of the reasons for the police basketball leagues in other cities.

Councillor Reeves added that Positive Edge was created to catch the high school students who were on the edge of failure and chaos. He stated that anyone who is expelled from high school should be on a list at Positive Edge and visited by that staff.

Councillor Davis asked Councillor Reeves whether the DuBois Academy has made a difference. Councillor Reeves replied that it has made a difference for individual kids who have had enormous encouragement to keep on track.

Mr. Cox stated that it is important not to pit one area such as domestic violence against another such as youth violence. All are important and related.

Mark Sandt, Positive Edge, stated that he also works with at-risk kids in Worcester County, and compared with other places, Cambridge has a lot of resources available to help kids. He stated that collaboration among organizations is essential.

Ms. Johnson stated that it is important to utilize the 19-22 year-old kids in the youth centers because the younger kids will listen to them.

Commissioner Watson said that if you could take the group at Hoyt Field who identified themselves as smokers and drinkers and sit down with them one-on-one, they could be helped. Ms. Johnson said that ideally the police officer will have a rapport with the streetworker. Commissioner Watson said that often the arrests are made by other officers than the one assigned to the neighborhood where the kid lives or the school. He would like to see a person or an agency who could do the assessment and make contact with the family. That system exists for kids who are still in school, through the Monday morning meeting.

Superintendent Harold Murphy, Police Department, said perhaps there could be something modeled on Project Alliance, the Monday morning meetings. Ms. Keegan said that there is a mechanism in the schools that is also a possible model, the student support teams.

Councillor Reeves agreed that inventing a program that identifies these kids and keeps an eye on them could be very useful.

Mr. Harris asked how many at-risk kids there are.

Councillor Davis said that number exists for the younger kids as the number of kids identified by elementary school principals as at-risk on their way to high school.

John Silva, Director of Security at Cambridge Rindge and Latin said that most of the at-risk kids are special education kids.

Councillor Davis said that the transfer kids are another big at-risk group at the high school. They really need a special orientation and mentoring group.

Councillor Reeves stated that all of the kids who have been expelled from CRLS are at risk. Mr. Silva said that for the most part, those kids go through a process, end up in an alternative placement school for six months and then most are readmitted to CRLS.

Mr. Silva stated that he has ten excellent security staff. The high school last year was the best it has been in 15 years. There is good rapport with the kids. There is a police officer assigned to the high school. CRLS Security is getting a national award for its mediation programs.

Mr. Silva stated that the Monday morning meeting focuses on young people who have been arrested, to share information and try to see what can be done for these kids. Robert Goodwin, Youth Program Manager, Department of Human Services, described the Monday morning meetings. The program is called the District Attorney's community-based justice program (Project Alliance), and it focuses on building the relationships necessary to help these kids. It involves the District Attorney, the high school, Positive Edge, the police and Human Services.

Mr. Lecorps stated that he believes that he, as a Positive Edge streetworker, ought to have the kind of relationship with the police that would mean that he could tell a police officer in a particular situation that the kid is a good kid and ought not to be arrested and have the child released to him, as would happen in Haiti, where he is from. Commissioner Watson disagreed and explained that the police have a duty to exercise their independent authority in such a situation.

Paul Ryder, Director of Recreation, Human Services Department, stated that he sees the value of meetings like this where all the different agencies and providers can sit down and have a discussion, but only from a positive perspective with mutual respect for each other's work.

Councillor Sullivan stated that Cambridge has lots of resources but not everyone who could use the information knows about them. He said that it might be useful to have an inventory of what services are available and what service gaps exist. Councillor Sullivan added that he would like to work with a smaller group to set an agenda for a series of meetings to consider the issue of youth violence and to look at some of the points that have been brought up at this meeting.

Mr. Spooner suggested inviting representatives from the community human service agencies to subsequent meetings.

Paul Ryder suggested inviting members of the clergy who have been involved with issues of youth violence.

Councillor Sullivan thanked those present for their attendance. The meeting was adjourned at 7:30 p.m.

For the Committee



Councillor Michael A. Sullivan, Chair

Committee Report #2

Cpl 2
5-660
A communication was received from
D. Margaret Drury, City Clerk, transmitting
a report from Councillor Michael A. Sullivan,
Chair of the Public Safety Committee,
for a meeting held on September 24, 1997,
to discuss youth safety and safety issues in the
city parks and any other youth issue.

In City Council October 6, 1997

Charter Right
exercised by
Councillor Sullivan

October 20, 1997
Report accepted.
Placed on File.