



The Birmingham News

Youths find haven with mentors, tutors

Southtown program forges alliance with police, college students to offer safe after-school instruction

Monday, March 20, 2006

TORAINE NORRIS

News staff writer

Birmingham police officer Carlos Williams remembers his interaction with police officers as a child in the Southtown Public Housing Community.

"The only time we saw an officer was when they were dealing with a crime," Williams said.

Williams now is an officer, and he's helping to change the way children in Southtown view officers today. He and partner Johnny Jones spend three hours a day at the Southtown Community Center tutoring and mentoring children.

The officers are part of a Youth Safe Haven Program at the Southtown homes. The program is a partnership between the Birmingham Police Department, the Birmingham Housing Authority and the Birmingham Urban League. The Eisenhower Foundation is providing funding for the Safe Haven Program.

The goal of the safe haven is to provide the children with a safe environment after school. Program coordinator Vincent Hinton said the program's volunteers are comprised of students from UAB and Samford and the police officers.

The program has been in place for six months and operates Monday through Friday. Volunteers mentor the children and tutor them with their school work.

Hinton said the faculties at Kirby and Avondale schools have also been in contact with the program's coordinators to give them direction in subjects where the students may need help.

He said the program is looking for more volunteers and mentors for the upcoming summer months and next fall.

"We would like to have 15 solid mentors we'd be able to match with the children, put two siblings with one mentor" Hinton said.

There are about 30 children in the program, ranging in age from 5 to 15. Hinton said he is trying to get as many as 50 children involved in the program.

Hinton said Southtown was a natural choice because it is easily accessible for volunteers from Samford University and UAB, and the police department's South Precinct.

Williams said the police department was glad to partner with the Housing Authority and the Urban League because the Safe Haven has components similar to the community policing effort being pushed by Chief Annetta Nunn.

"When the community is comfortable with the police, it makes it easier for them to tell you about problems in their area," Williams said.

E-mail: tnorris@bhamnews.com