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Youth Safe Haven mentoring program in Providence targets at-risk children

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By Gregory Smith

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PROVIDENCE — Residents of the Manton, Silver Lake, Hartford and Olneyville neighborhoods, one of the more crime-ridden areas in Rhode Island, are being invited to a “town hall meeting” Tuesday night to discuss their concerns about public safety.

The forum, at 7 p.m. at the Thomas J. Anton Community Center on Laurel Hill Avenue in the Hartford Park housing project, is part of an anticrime initiative called Youth Safe Haven. Officers from police District 5 will conduct the forum.

On Thursday, the Providence Housing Authority held a grand opening of Youth Safe Haven, a program that is being financed by federal grants, in large part, funneled through the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation in Washington, D.C.

In the program, 50 children ages 6 to 12 are mentored, including an hour of help with homework Monday through Friday, with the goal of steering them away from antisocial behavior as they grow older. There are at least 20 mentors, including two patrolmen assigned to the Police Department housing unit.

Neighborhood-based policing and consultation with the public to be policed is a major requirement of Youth Safe Haven. The foundation tracks the children’s attendance and reading and math grades in school and the crime rate in the focus neighborhoods to see if the program has an impact. If it does not, the foundation terminates the financing.

Inherent in the program is the goal of keeping the young people and their families safe so they can flourish in life.

The danger that young people face was demonstrated 2½ months ago when a participant in a police-run youth-boxing program, Joshua Torres, 12, and a friend, who were playing basketball at the Manton Heights housing project, were shot and wounded by an unidentified gunman. The police said the youths were innocent victims.

The Housing Authority owns and operates Hartford Park and Manton Heights. Executive Director Stephen

O'Rourke said the foundation first approached the authority several years ago with an invitation to participate in Youth Safe Haven, but the program could not be launched until sufficient financing was arranged.

Alan Curtis, president and chief executive officer of the foundation, said Providence was selected because it is a practitioner of community policing; the Housing Authority has a good reputation, and city leaders understand mentoring and have shown their receptivity to the strategies and tactics that the foundation advances.

Eddie Banks, director of field operations for the foundation's program and a former District of Columbia policeman, spoke at a ceremony to mark the grand opening. He said Youth Safe Haven has resulted in improved school attendance and grades and reduced crime in other places where it has been implemented.

"We got them a Safe Haven, and the results speak for themselves," he declared.

Those invited to the town hall meeting, according to Bernice Morris, local director of Youth Safe Haven, primarily are everyone living within the bounds of District 5. The district encompasses most of Manton, Silver Lake, Hartford, and part of Olneyville. But the general community is welcome, too, she said.

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