Officer David Perez, center, shares a laugh with Officer Kevin Costa and the brothers they are mentoring, Jackswell Martinez, 10, and Hansell Martinez, 9, at the Thomas J. Anton Community Center at the Hartford Park public-housing project on Tuesday afternoon.

PROVIDENCE — Two giggly boys bend over their board games. On a raw winter day in one of the more gritty neighborhoods in Rhode Island, they are snug in a community center, looked after by some caring adults.

Hansell Martinez, 9, who lives with his mother and brother in the Manton Heights public-housing project, was playing Perfection. In this beat-the-clock game, oddly shaped pegs must be fit as quickly as possible into matching holes before a buzzer sounds and all the pegs pop out of place.
A uniformed policeman, Patrolman David Perez, is at the table.

“Come on, Hansell,” he urges, as the time runs. A jarring buzzer sounds and a startled Hansell recoils, with all his well-placed pegs rolling askew inside the game board.

“It’s pretty good for making nervous messes out of kids,” said a smiling Perez.

Jackswell, 10, Hansell’s brother, is at the next table, playing another game with Patrolman Kevin Costa.

In their enjoyment, the boys were oblivious to the fact that they are the subjects of study — and help — by the federal government, a Washington, D.C., foundation, the Providence Housing Authority, the police and school departments and several nonprofit organizations.

They are participants in an anticrime/social services program called Youth Safe Haven, for children 6 to 12 years old, that gives them after-school refuge in the brightly decorated Thomas J. Anton Community Center at the Hartford Park public-housing project.

Fifty children from the Olneyville, Hartford, Silver Lake and Manton neighborhoods get an hour of tutoring and help with homework, especially math and reading, Monday through Friday, plus serious or fun time individually, or in clusters, with adult mentors. Thirty-two live in Manton Heights and Hartford Park.

Youth Safe Haven will have its grand opening Thursday morning, although it has been in operation since April.

Its aim is to take a group of children at risk of failing in life because of their circumstances, and give them a nurturing place to go after school, experiences with positive role models and a hand with their schoolwork. Together with community policing, the effort is meant to better secure the focus neighborhoods for everyone.

“Let’s see if they can do better in school and get into a little less trouble” in general, said Alan Curtis, president and chief executive officer of the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation, of Washington, D.C., which is in the process of spreading $10 million in federal aid across the country on Youth Safe Haven and similar ventures.

About $184,000 has been committed by the foundation so far toward what the Housing Authority hopes will be a three-year grant. That has been coupled with an expenditure by Rhode Islanders Sponsoring Education, a nonprofit group that operates mentoring programs.

Both sums originate with the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention at the U.S. Department of Justice as well as a separate appropriation by Congress. They pay the salaries of local program administrators and two part-time youth advocates who tutor.

Youth Safe Haven promises to build on the work of decades in the focus neighborhoods.

When Lt. Dean R. Isabella was a rookie on the police force in 1987, he recalled, Hartford Park and Manton Heights were much more violence- and crime-ridden than they are now.

Isabella has spent his whole life around the projects, and now he is commander of police District 5, which encompasses the same area. Crime statistics for the district are heavily influenced by incidents associated with the projects.

The majority of the households are single-parent families, he said, leaving them prone to further dysfunction.
is the profile, too, of the families of the 50 children in Youth Safe Haven.

Hansell and Jackswell live with their mother, Giovanna Ventura, 32, who emigrated from the Dominican Republic in 2000. Ventura, who keeps their front door locked, works as a hair stylist and takes English-as-a-second-language classes at the community center.

While both projects remain troubled, there are signs of improvement. From 2008 to 2010, juvenile crime there plummeted 70 percent, according to Housing Authority data. In 2010, violent crime in District 5 was down.

Federal and nonprofit dollars have flowed into the neighborhoods in recent years and helped to pay for a seasonal youth boxing program and programs with names such as Youth Police Initiative, Night Vision and Weed and Seed. Mentoring of young people by police officers has been a significant part of most of them.

In Youth Safe Haven, two officers assigned to the police housing unit, Perez and Costa, are mentors. Perez mentors Hansell, and Costa mentors Joshua Chin, who lives in Hartford Park. Jackswell has a mentor who is not an officer.

A full three-year run for Youth Safe Haven will depend on the school performance of Hansell and Jackswell and the other children, and the incidence of crime in the focus neighborhoods, according to Curtis. Jackswell said he and Hansell are both good students.

When the police serve as mentors, it benefits not just those who are mentored, but the police officers themselves by building rapport that pays off in community trust, according to Perez.

When he comes by the boys’ apartment, he lets them toot the horn of his cruiser. And when Hansell spots any cruiser, his mother said he chirps, “It’s my mentor!”

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