

# Trying to educate parents on gangs

Arundel sheriff's program for Juvenile Court may be only one of its kind in state

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The men and women sat in the jury room in the Anne Arundel County Courthouse, but they weren't jurors. They were the parents of juvenile court defendants, ordered into a new wake-up program on gangs because of what their children may have done.

"They twist their fingers around, like this — I can't get my hands into the shapes they make," said Deputy Sheriff Greg Kies, contorting his hands as his small audience laughed.

"But those are hand signals, and that is a way gang members communicate with each other," he said, as the parents' faces turned somber. "If you see your kid doing that, ask some questions."

Such instruction, Kies said, is the point of Gang Awareness and Prevention, a program run by the county's Sheriff's Office. State officials, who are compiling a directory of court-linked delinquency programs, say this is the only local program of its kind they're aware of in Maryland.

"This is so that the parents are aware of what the kids are bringing home — language, behavior, graffiti, God forbid, tattoos — behavior the parents didn't pay attention to," said Kies, who spent a decade in a Maryland State Police gang unit. "They are pretty ignorant, and I don't mean that in a bad way. But they just don't know what to look for."

The hope, he said, is that parents who've stood in a courtroom with their children and then get a "Gang 101"-style session on potential signs of gang influences will move to address the problem early.

The program, finishing its first year, grew out of a similar seminar that Kies ran last year for judges and others who deal with problem youths. After a public defender said some parents could benefit from such instruction, the juvenile court masters and judges approached Sheriff Ron Bateman about holding it four times this year, each for a small group of parents they think need it, said Cynthia Ferris, a master.

"Those of us who hear juvenile cases see youths who we think are in gangs or are on the edge of gangs or who have friends in gangs, or are at risk of joining gangs," she said.

Parents are ordered to attend, just as they can be ordered by the court into counseling, Ferris said. No more than two dozen adults are on the list for any given two-hour session. There are always no-shows, and no one has been punished, although the potential exists for contempt charges.

At a recent session attended by about 14 people, one person napped. Most — some showing more interest than others — seemed to pay attention as Kies flashed images on a screen that included gun-wielding children, tattooed youths and variations on the crown symbol of a gang known as the Latin Kings.

The basics: Gangs range from small bands of neighborhood teens involved in crime and violence to highly organized national gangs. People in criminal organizations get hurt, killed or land in prison, and expose their families to danger. Parents should watch for unsavory friends, unexplained graffiti-like scrawls, injuries and more.

"You need to be aware of what's going on," Kies told the parents before a talk about knowing their children's friends, ensuring that their children have a caring family and exercising their authority as parents.

"It was enlightening, although the majority of the information they had shown, I had seen it already on television," one Severn mother said afterward. "My son is not affiliated with gangs. They were saying some of his friends may be."

Still, she said, some things Kies showed, "I would not have known to look out for — like some of the markings, the lingo, the small things that you may turn a blind eye to."

Parents' names are not being used to protect their children's identities. The Baltimore Sun does not identify juvenile court defendants.

An Annapolis father said he thought that the talk of Brown Pride and other Latino gangs trying to make inroads in his city was overblown. Nevertheless, the man said, "I learned about the gangsters' signs, the tattoos."

The program is an addition to the mix of gang information and violence prevention efforts offered by schools, police and others.

Its effectiveness is unknown. There's no feedback form for parents. Kies said authorities probably will check on recidivism of the youths as the program, presented to fewer than 100 participants, continues. It will begin its second year with interpreters available.

"Programs like that have the potential to minimize the situation. After all, parental supervision is important in dealing with antisocial activity," said Jeffrey Ian Ross, a University of Baltimore criminologist.

But, he cautioned, nobody knows whether it's a feel-good effort with minimal effect or really helps.

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