

# **YOUTH SAFETY IN SANTA MARIA**

## **Developing a New Strategy**

### **SUMMARY**

The 2016-17 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Jury) commends the 5<sup>th</sup> District Supervisor, the City of Santa Maria and its Mayor for accepting the challenge of addressing the need to suppress, prevent and intervene in the current gang culture with the formation of the Santa Maria Mayor's Task Force on Youth Safety.

However, the Jury has concerns in several areas. The service area of the Task Force currently is limited to, and under the direct control of the City of Santa Maria. It should be expanded to include the entire Santa Maria Valley. Also, the Santa Maria City Council is not working in partnership with the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors to provide sources of permanent funding for the programs included in the strategic plan.

The Jury finds that the at-risk youth and their families that the Task Force aims to help have little role in developing the envisioned changes and services that would affect them. Santa Maria is often characterized as a city divided by occupations, social classes and ethnicities. The current organizational structure of the Mayor's Task Force perpetuates that divide.

### **BACKGROUND**

Gang activity has long been a part of the fabric of the City, but it is now being acknowledged and addressed. It has taken a tragic toll on the lives of the youth and their families. Santa Maria has depended on its Police Department to defend the citizens and suppress gang activity.

In 2010, the 5th District Supervisor organized a Santa Maria Valley Collaborative Leadership Project to address gang problems. At that time, Fighting Back Santa Maria obtained a five-year \$1.4 million federal "Safe Schools" grant and two smaller grants to assist with efforts to solve gang problems, domestic violence, teen pregnancy and drug abuse, but these efforts bore no effective long-term results.

The composition of gangs in Santa Maria has varied over the years. In 2007, a member of the Police Department's Gang Suppression Team reported that there were approximately 2,000 known gang members in four gangs. However, it was the increased violent activity and homicides due to gang activity that rattled the City. The annual homicide rate increased from an average of three per year to thirteen in 2015, the situation became truly dangerous. Five of those killed were teenagers. In 2016, the Santa Maria Police Department with the assistance of county, state and federal law enforcement executed a raid known as "Operation Matador" which resulted in 16 arrests and 40 detentions. A Santa Maria police officer recently estimated that local gang members are again responsible for up to 80 percent of all crimes committed within the City. In 2017, a County probation officer told the Jury that

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there are approximately 1,300 known gang members in two local gangs

In response to the homicides in 2015, a grass-roots group of diverse community citizens, including educators, parents, and members of the faith-based community, formed the One Community Action Coalition (Coalition). It hoped to create a groundswell of action by the “underserved” in the area, which would then advocate for the City Council to collaborate with them in organizing and funding restorative activities for youth. According to the Coalition action plan, “we believe that to solve this COMMUNITY problem, we must begin with recognizing and respecting our diversity.” To this end, the Coalition believes that the input from youth and their families is valuable and a cultural component should be part of the foundation of any program. Poor parenting skills have been blamed for youth in gangs, but the Coalition sees the families as victims and as equal stakeholders in turning around gang violence.

In 2016, the leadership of the Coalition met with community leaders in Santa Maria and the County, and proposed joining the California Cities Violence Prevention Network (Network), with the Coalition representing Santa Maria. The Network, which began in 2007, has assisted 14 California cities in devising plans for prevention, intervention and enforcement. However, in spite of some community criticism, the Mayor and the City Council chose to bypass the Coalition, and to contract with the Network independently,

At the same time, the 5<sup>th</sup> District Supervisor persuaded the BOS to allocate \$75,000 for the development of a North County Gang Task Force. The idea for a regional group was based on the success of the South Coast Task Force for Youth Safety. It was originally thought that these funds, combined with an anticipated allocation from the City of Santa Maria, could be used to hire an experienced coordinator for the proposed North County project. Rather than cooperate with the County, the City independently hired its own coordinator to work in the Parks and Recreation Department. The City preferred having control over the project and the coordinator.

The BOS acknowledged this move by the City and was willing to help in another way. On February 14, 2017, it authorized \$22,095 of the \$75,000 to pay for the contract with the Network. This Network was retained to facilitate the development of a strategic plan for Santa Maria and designated the Mayor as the point person. The Jury learned that the remaining funds will be held in reserve for future developments in this program. The Supervisor hopes that additional funding will be allocated next year.

Previous collaborative efforts in the City have not had long-term success. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this new strategic plan will revitalize community efforts to combat the problems associated with at-risk youth and the gang culture, and have a lasting effect this time.

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## **METHODOLOGY**

The Jury interviewed a variety of citizens with interest and expertise in working with at-risk youth. They included the Mayor of Santa Maria, the City Manager of Santa Maria, the Santa Maria Police Chief, administrators from the Santa Maria Joint Union High School District, officers from the County Probation Department, the Coordinator of the South Coast Youth Task Force, a researcher from the University of California, Santa Barbara and the 5<sup>th</sup> District County Supervisor. In addition, the Jury studied documents from the California Cities Violence Prevention Network, the Santa Maria Police Department, Santa Maria City Council meetings, Board of Supervisors' agendas, the One Community Coalition and previous Santa Barbara County Grand Jury reports. Members of the Jury attended the first meeting of the Santa Maria Mayor's Task Force held on April 24, 2017.

## **OBSERVATIONS**

The Mayor has organized a task force of local decision-makers, called The Mayor's Task Force on Youth Safety (Task Force), to work with the Network to develop a Santa Maria-specific strategic plan. This Task Force held its first meeting on April 24, 2017. The Director of the Network from Santa Rosa and the Innovation Team Director from the City of Long Beach came to Santa Maria to begin facilitation and training. These cities already have active youth safety task forces. At the meeting there were calls from participants to bring in more local stakeholders, especially from neighboring areas. The completion of this comprehensive strategic plan is scheduled for September 2017.

Membership in the California Cities Violence Prevention Network has many advantages for the City. It provides a ready-made structure for the City Council and agencies to follow. The structure proactively brings many elements of the community together, which in turn should provide community building for a city that has known cultural and socio-economic divisions. Moreover, it offers contact with other cities and state agencies and the opportunity to benefit from their experience and resources. No less important, the Network will guide efforts and actions using appropriate language that will lend itself to accountability and to meet standards for grants and other support. Critical to the sustainability of Santa Maria's at-risk youth programs is the early identification of reliable funding sources.

The Task Force will identify goals and develop a strategic plan for the City. It consists of representatives of federal, state and local government, law enforcement, the faith-based community, non-profit organizations, the business community, County departments and schools. This group is the top tier of a two-tier plan.

This influential group will be instrumental in raising funds to maintain on a permanent basis any programs created by the Task Force. Other cities involved in the Network have raised funds through increased taxes. When and if taxation becomes part of the strategic plan, the City will need the support of these community leaders. Alternatively, the South Coast Youth Task Force assesses a per capita fee from the cities of Santa Barbara, Carpinteria and Goleta and the County. The Jury hopes that the Task Force will not rely on grants as an ongoing funding source. Too often, when the grant runs out, so does the program. At this point, it is not known who will oversee the expenditure of any future funding from city taxes, state grants or other sources.

The second tier of the plan, the Technical Resource Committee, is to consist of those who will work

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directly with youth. Members of this committee, known as “technical,” will serve as “boots on the ground” implementing the vision and the goals of the Mayor’s Task Force. The leaders of the Mayor’s Task Force will appoint the members of this technical committee in an effort to avoid duplication of services. At this point, community members and those involved with One Community Action Coalition may be invited to participate as “technical” in executing the strategic plan generated by the leadership committee.

The Outreach Coordinator hired by the City will act as liaison between the two tiers of the plan. He is a long-time Santa Maria resident with experience in working with at-risk youth. The leaders of Santa Maria wanted someone to work directly with them rather than partner with the County. Although this coordinator is an employee of the Recreation and Parks Department, he will have a direct working relationship with the Santa Maria Police Department and the City Manager. The Jury was told that the Police Department requested that the coordinator position be under another jurisdiction to avoid the perception that the emphasis is on law enforcement, which could alienate and intimidate youth. The focus will be on positive community action.

The City of Santa Maria has been slow to respond to its gang and at-risk youth problem. The County allocated funding for a North County Gang Task Force in June 2016 but Santa Maria’s contract with the Network only materialized eight months later, in February 2017, and the first meeting of the Task Force was held on April 24. Completion of the plan is not expected until September 2017 at the earliest. It is the Mayor’s hope that youth-serving agencies will be on board with the plan a few months after that. She desires to establish a good foundation and do it right. However, initial delays allowed an important submission deadline for valuable California Gang Reduction, Intervention, Prevention Program (CalGRIP) grants to lapse. Moreover, being under the aegis of the Mayor and City Council, any action or adaptations to the plan will likely have to be approved by them, possibly incurring further delays.

With the recent history of violent gang activity in Santa Maria, vigilance will be required and suppression will always need to be fast and decisive. However, the Police Chief has acknowledged that the Department “cannot arrest its way out of the gang problem.” Its response for more intervention involves more patrol beat coordinators in neighborhoods. More prominent use of a Citizens’ Academy for Spanish-speaking members of the community, recently formed by the Police Department, could also prove to be effective. These participants have agreed to volunteer to attend City Council meetings and public meetings of the Task Force. The Police Department is encouraging the Spanish-speaking population to contribute their voice and participate in the efforts for youth safety.

Santa Maria was characterized by several interviewees as a city divided by occupations, social classes and ethnicities. The Jury finds that The Mayor’s Task Force perpetuates that divide – those in the top tier will set the goals for those at the bottom. The at-risk youth and their families that the Task Force aims to help have little role in developing the envisioned changes and services that concern them. Inclusion of all citizens in this diverse community is essential for success.

The ability to gather all elements of the community into a functioning alliance will be the crucial test of Santa Maria’s collaboration with the Network. The real test of the strategic plan will be realized in successful programs focusing on suppression, prevention, intervention and successful reentry into the community.

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## **CONCLUSION**

The 2016-17 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury looks forward to the City of Santa Maria implementing a strategic plan that will help lift the community's youth out of a gang-dominated culture. The Mayor and City Council of Santa Maria have sought assistance by partnering with the California Cities Violence Prevention Network. By being methodical and adopting a structured program, the City hopes to lay a permanent foundation and maintain control of the program. However, this proposed level of control could possibly perpetuate the cultural and socio-economic divides that exist in the City. Now is the moment to bridge those divides.

The Jury concludes that a successful Santa Maria Youth Task Force should reach out to surrounding area communities and their agencies. This model program would then actualize Santa Barbara County's original intention of having a task force serving all the youth of the North County.

The Santa Barbara County Grand Jury commends the 5<sup>th</sup> District Supervisor, the City of Santa Maria and its Mayor for accepting the challenge of addressing the need to prevent, intervene and suppress the existing gang culture. The Jury implores the City leaders to honor the rich diversity of their community by including the voices of all stakeholders, particularly parents and at-risk youth, during the planning process.

## **FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Finding 1**

The City of Santa Maria has stated that its new Santa Maria Mayor's Task Force on Youth Safety will be confined to youth-serving agencies within the city limits of Santa Maria.

### **Recommendation 1**

That the Mayor and the City Council of Santa Maria expand the service area of the Santa Maria Mayor's Task Force on Youth Safety to include youth-serving agencies in the entire Santa Maria Valley.

### **Finding 2**

The Mayor and the City Council of Santa Maria's exclusive control of the strategic plan's design and implementation may cause costly delays.

### **Recommendation 2**

That the Mayor and the City Council of Santa Maria delegate certain discretionary authority for routine operational decisions in order to avoid costly delays to the implementation of the strategic plan.

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### **Finding 3**

The Mayor and the City Council of Santa Maria initially refused to collaborate with the 5<sup>th</sup> District Santa Barbara County Supervisor in utilizing the \$75,000 allocation from the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors for the hiring of an executive level coordinator for the Santa Maria Mayor's Task Force on Youth Safety.

### **Recommendation 3**

That the Mayor and the City Council of Santa Maria strengthen their collaboration with the 5<sup>th</sup> District Santa Barbara County Supervisor and the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors to expand their ongoing support for a regional program under executive-level leadership.

### **Finding 4**

The Mayor and the City Council of Santa Maria have not yet identified reliable, permanent sources of funding needed to maintain the Santa Maria Mayor's Task Force on Youth Safety programs and staff.

### **Recommendation 4**

That the Mayor and the City Council of Santa Maria within the next six months identify reliable, permanent sources of funding for the Santa Maria Mayor's Task Force on Youth Safety programs and staff.

### **Finding 5**

The Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors has shown support for the development of an at-risk youth program in North County by allocating \$75,000 in budget year 2016-17, of which approximately \$50,000 remains.

### **Recommendation 5**

That the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors commit to reserving the remaining approximately \$50,000 allocation and continue with annual financial support for the at-risk youth program in North County.

### **Finding 6**

The Mayor and the City Council of Santa Maria have not included representatives at the policy-making level of parents and at-risk youth who would be directly affected by the services of the Santa Maria Mayor's Task Force on Youth Safety.

### **Recommendation 6**

That the Mayor and City Council of Santa Maria include parents and at-risk youth representing the diversity of the community in the first tier of the Santa Maria Mayor's Task Force from the beginning of the planning and decision-making process.

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## **REQUEST FOR RESPONSE**

Pursuant to *California Penal Code Section 933 and 933.05*, the Santa Barbara County Grand Jury requests each entity or individual named below to respond to the enumerated findings and recommendations within the specified statutory time limit:

Responses to Findings shall be either:

- Agree
- Disagree wholly
- Disagree partially with an explanation

Responses to Recommendations shall be one of the following:

- Has been implemented, with brief summary of implementation actions taken
- Will be implemented, with an implementation schedule
- Requires further analysis, with analysis completion date of no more than six months after the issuance of the report
- Will not be implemented, with an explanation of why

### **SANTA MARIA CITY COUNCIL– 90 days**

Findings 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6

Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6

### **SANTA BARBARA COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS – 90 days**

Findings 3 and 5

Recommendations 3 and 5