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Elgin police program aims to help troubled youth without a badge

By: James Fuller

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Elgin's new Youth Empowerment program will put the theory that it takes a village to raise a child to work by enlisting local mentors and community organizations to work. Their task will be steering local youth, who would otherwise find themselves in contact with the police, into better choices and social services that will help address underlying problems.

Police Chief Ana Lalley announced the details of the program to city council members this week.

The city is seeking more people and organizations to get involved. Until then, the early roster of helping organizations features a bevy of religious organizations. That may be appropriate as Lalley and the creators of the program are asking the community to have a little faith in a new approach that tries to limit police contact with local youth.

"Policing in America right now, we are at a crossroads," said council member Corey Dixon, who is one of the creators of the new empowerment program. "We've had decades of institutional racism. Black and brown people are being thrown in jail, and people who don't look like them are being slapped on the hand for the same offenses. We can continue to talk about this stuff, or we can do something."

Dixon was inspired to do something after seeing the stats from the police department's Operation Homefront program. That program involved police making visits to the homes of youth who found themselves in trouble. But the numbers showed Black and Hispanic youth getting arrested in numbers greater than would be expected or that Dixon and several fellow city council members felt is appropriate.

The Youth Empowerment program will still involve home visits, but the idea is to send teams that don't consist of people wearing badges whenever possible. Concerns about a youth with a gun or having committed major violent offenses will still involve the police. But there will be an emphasis on restorative justice, accountability and doing right by any victims rather than just putting the youth in the criminal justice system or locking them up.

Part of the effort involves a \$90,000 contract with CKone, LLC. The consulting group, which has a background in gang violence prevention in Chicago, is charged with laying a foundation that prevents juvenile violence and gang membership from happening in the first place.

"We are having conversations, allowing them to speak their mind along with giving them some positive reinforcement that changes their way of thinking," said the organization's Charles Perry. "We have young people who are not being given a chance to share what's going on with them. Just a family visit is not enough. They need to have a place where they can come talk and air things out with someone who will listen and really understand."

Lalley has publicly acknowledged that's not her department's area of expertise. She and Dixon share a desire to see the program taken over and run totally by a community-based organization at some point. The bridge to that is enlisting existing community groups and seeing what they can bring to the table.

So far, **Elgin Area School District U-46**, the Coalition for a Safe and Healthy Elgin, Kingdom Advancement Center, Vineyard Church, First United Methodist Church, Greater Grace Community Church, First Christian Church and Congregation Kneseth Israel are all on board.

Organizers are working on recruiting Hispanic and female-based organizations to join the team. In the meantime, Dixon recognized any program that still involves the police may fuel some skepticism. He asked for some patience while the program gets its footing and builds. As more community groups get involved, the police department and school district will play a lesser role.

"Because we do something doesn't mean we are going to have it all figured out," Dixon told the city council. "But this program is starting off with the best of intentions."

In an interview, Lalley said the success of the program, at least in the early going, will be based on a reduction in the contact police have with juveniles in the community, particularly repeated contacts with the same youth. But there is also much to be gained in a better overall community view of the police department and its efforts to be a positive factor for all Elgin residents.

"It's not always about numbers," Lalley said. "Families being supported, people having access to resources -- those things can be hard to measure. There's quantity and then there's quality. We didn't have to change anything, but we want a positive relationship with our residents. I have no problem with criticism. It makes you evaluate your work. And now we have to be persistent and believe that what we're doing here is going to work out for the betterment of our community."

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Where school districts stand on masks now

By: Jake Griffin

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Despite the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommending schools start the year with everyone wearing masks indoors, many suburban school districts have yet to change course on decisions that make protective face coverings optional.

School boards in Palatine-Schaumburg High School District 211, Kaneland Unit District 302, St. Charles Unit District 303, Geneva Unit District 304, Arlington Heights Elementary District 25 and Wheaton Warrenville Unit District 200, among others, voted to make masks optional. That was in spite of earlier CDC advice that unvaccinated students and staff members be required to wear masks indoors.

None have reversed those decisions in the face of the CDC's stricter guidelines announced Tuesday. In some cases, the districts have told parents they are aware of the CDC's recommendations.

"We will review all guidelines and our local data, and will provide updated information to our community prior to the start of the school year," District 25 Superintendent Lori Bein wrote to parents last week.

The district's school board doesn't meet again until Aug. 12.

District 303 administrators asked parents to fill out a survey about masks after the CDC's announcement. The board next meets Aug. 9.

Other districts have remained mum. District 304 board members voted to make masks "no longer mandated" at their July 22 meeting. The board is scheduled to meet again Aug. 9.

The District 302 administration hasn't provided any updates to the school board's Monday decision making masks optional. That board also meets again Aug. 9.

Board members in District 200 voted to make masks optional more than two weeks ago, but Superintendent Jeff Schuler said in a letter to parents late last week the district was reevaluating that stance.

"I understand that our school community has questions about what this updated guidance means for the upcoming school year," he wrote. "I ask for your understanding as we review and process these updates."

District 200's board meets again Aug. 18, five days before school starts.

District 211 officials have also not provided any update since the board voted to make masks optional in the high school district where most, if not all, students and staff and faculty

members are eligible for vaccines. The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine is approved for ages 12 and up. The District 211 board's next scheduled meeting is Aug. 19.

The Barrington Unit District 220 board indicated students in prekindergarten through fifth grade "will begin the school year wearing masks indoors." That board is slated to meet again Aug. 10.

Some school boards voted to make masks optional even after the CDC updated its recommendations last week to advise universal masking in schools. The Lake Zurich Unit District 95 and Northwest Suburban High School District 214 boards both voted in favor of optional masks Thursday.

However, the largest suburban school district, Elgin Area U-46, is mandating masks to start the school year.

"Effective immediately, I am reinstituting the requirement that masks be worn in all schools and departments by employees, students and visitors -- regardless of vaccination status -- within all U-46 buildings," U-46 Superintendent Tony Sanders told parents in the district Tuesday after the CDC's guidance was announced.

The U-46 board meets again Aug. 9.