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Program to prevent crime still stumbling

More people targeted for intervention by police committing crimes than getting help

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WILMINGTON | More of the 30 people the Wilmington Police Department called in during violence intervention efforts in March 2011 and December 2012 have been

charged with attempted murder than tried to take advantage of the helping hand offered as part of the program.

Call-ins are targeted intervention efforts executed by law enforcement agencies across the state offering persistent offenders

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an opportunity to turn their lives around while simultaneously promising harsh penalties if they don't change.

"The point is not to have to arrest these guys, the point is for them to

be successful, try to find gainful employment and a noncriminal lifestyle. Some take advantage of it, others will test the system," said WPD Chief Ralph Evangelous.

In Wilmington, though, at least 15 participants in the 2011 and 2012 call-ins have been convicted of or charged with crimes—including five for attempted murder. Meanwhile, three participants asked for assistance, and a fourth

asked for help understanding the court system, said Linda Rawley, WPD spokeswoman.

By comparison, Goldsboro which began using call-ins in March 2013, has had 11 of 75 participants commit another crime said Goldsboro Police Department Capt. Theresa Chiero. Four of the participants there have asked for

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some form of assistance, Chiero added.

Could they work better here?

While Goldsboro's participants have had significantly less time to commit another crime, the 15 percent of criminals who have is substantially lower than Wilmington's 50 percent.

Evangelous attributed the amount of recidivism among Wilmington's call-in participants to not understanding how serious law enforcement is about its efforts.

"Usually your first couple call-ins, most of those people don't believe anything's gonna happen, so they test the system," he said. "Then we go after them and we incarcerate them and we use them as examples when we call in the next year and in the future."

Frankie Roberts, the executive director and CEO of LINC, worked with WPD to put the 2011 and 2012 call-ins together. While he avoided criticizing the call-ins, Roberts made it clear there was room for improvement.

"I don't think we've found the sweet spot of how to do them here and make them effective," Roberts said, pointing to High Point as a city that has benefited from them. "What makes them effective is community buy-in and community support, when you've got a lot of community members to come to the call-in and speak to the heart of the individual who's doing the crime."

In particular, Roberts would like to see area businesses become involved in the call-ins, so as to better provide participants with employment opportunities. Jobs, he said, are integral to preventing recidivism.

"Call-ins are not designed for opportunities, they're just designed to deter violence," Roberts said. "But you can only deter violence with an opportunity."

Finding a job is particularly difficult for those with a criminal history. A video shown at a call-in last Tuesday in Goldsboro featured one man who went on more than 65 interviews before finding a job.

In Wilmington, Rawley said one woman asked for help with job applications after the 2011 or 2012 call-in. Her criminal history made it difficult to find a job, though, and she quickly fell out of touch.

"A lot of times they become very discouraged," Rawley said.

WPD will likely have another call-in program in the near future. As part of their preparations, though, detectives are building cases against the participants.

That, Evangelous said, gives police a chance to make clear the possibility of punishment.

"We are gonna do it again," he said. "It's just a matter of us pulling together the target group."

How call-ins work

The first call-in participant walked up the stairs in Goldsboro's old city hall building at 5:43 p.m., May 20. He was 17 minutes early and, with his checkered shirt tucked into a pair of jeans, more closely resembled a college student than a criminal.

To reach the stairs, he'd had to pass under gold statues representing Liberty and Justice. By the end of the night he would be told of the potential of the former and promised that if he committed another offense the latter would be swift.

Before climbing the stairs, police screened him with metal detectors to ensure he wasn't bringing a weapon into council's chambers.

One by one, 10 more followed him up the stairs. There were supposed to be 12 - 11 men and one woman - but one didn't show, a violation of his probation.

The 11 people who showed

CALL-IN OUTCOMES

March 14, 2011, call-in participants who have since committed or been charged with committing a crime:

Antonio Walker
Antwane Walker
James Moore
Kejuan Smith
Marcus Clark Jr.
Matthew Brewster
Rakim Lee*

Dec. 6, 2012, call-in participants who have since committed a crime:

Takeem Collins
Lebaron Jones
Antonio Point^
Adrian Point*
Mark Richey
Sebastian Robinson
Kolton Thompson*
William Point*

^ wanted for attempted murder

* charged with attempted murder

up began by meeting with their probation officers behind closed doors in a room next door. After a short meeting, participants were led into council chambers where three pews near the front had been reserved for them.

Chiero spoke first, letting the group members assembled at the front of the room know they were there because of their criminal records.

"Don't take this lightly," she said. "This is not a question-and-answer time."

Next up were two parents whose sons had been killed by gun violence.

"This could be the first day of the rest of your life. Don't let another parent go through the hell I have to go through every day," said Teresa Cox, a Goldsboro Police Department captain, whose son was killed in May 2004.

"There is no amount of payback I can ever give this person because all I want is my boy back. I can't hate him enough," said Craig Doubt, whose son was shot in the head from 60 feet away.

Then a line of law enforcement officials filed into the room, including representatives from local law enforcement agencies, the Drug Enforcement Agency, the Wayne County District Attorney's Office, the U.S. Attorney's Office, local probation, and the federal Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

Each representative had a chance to speak. Among the messages, Wayne County Sheriff Larry Pierce told the participants they would be placed on lockdown if they returned to the Wayne County jail. Branson Vickery, Wayne County's district attorney told them call-in participants are immediately under a microscope from law enforcement.

And Gus Willis, speaking for the U.S. Attorney's Office said, "The fact of the matter is it will stop. Your choice is how it stops. Will it be because you got locked up or because you change your ways?"

Most of the call-ins across the state involve the U.S. Attorney's Office as part of Project Safe Neighborhoods.

After Willis spoke, the group was shown a video featuring past call-in participants, some of whom had landed in federal prison and some of whom had turned their lives around.

After the law enforcement officials filed back out of the room, the message was of hope and opportunity.

Derrick Wootson of the N.C. Department of Commerce said he could help call-in participants find jobs, and several perked up while he was speaking.

Francine Smith, program manager of Rebuilding Broken Places, a Goldsboro nonprofit, was the last speaker.

Smith told the 11 people that they could turn their lives around, but they would likely need some help.

"It takes perseverance," Smith said. "It also takes having somebody in your corner to help you, and that's what we want to do."

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