

## Broad, sustained efforts can shut door on gangs

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I, along with the entire community, was stunned and saddened by the recent events of the shooting death of Michael Smith and the gang involvement of those associated with the shooting. While our community heals and searches for ways to prevent further tragedy, work is ongoing at the state level to tackle this destructive and dangerous gang problem.

At the beginning of this year, I wrote a column describing the General Assembly's efforts to combat gangs ("South Carolina Legislature addresses gang activity," *Chronicle-Independent*, January 29, 2007). I can report now that, in fact, the General Assembly took a strong stance against the escalation of gang activity in our state by passing "The Criminal Gang Prevention Act." This Act gives law enforcement more tools to prevent and combat crimes associated with criminal gang activity, including adding more offences and stronger penalties.

However, one of the most powerful aspects of the new law is the expansion of the jurisdiction of the state grand jury to investigate criminal gang activity. The state grand jury offers unparalleled investigative assistance to law enforcement because it not only allows the prosecutors to question suspects and witnesses under oath to justify indictments, but it uncovers more information beyond just the underlying crime. Information from grand jury testimony allows prosecutors to pursue additional crimes and suspects, exhausting the leads until the entire criminal network is revealed and ultimately punished.

This work takes time, but in gang situations exposing all of the crimes and identifying the full extent of the gang activity is critical to accomplishing the goal: destroying the gang itself. Since the legislation became law July 1<sup>st</sup> of this year, the SC Attorney General's Office and its Gang Prosecutor already has used the state grand jury to assist in several gang-related investigations.

In addition, tracking gang members and gang activity can be a powerful tool in preventing activity and quickly accessing information when crimes occur. The Act created a statewide criminal gang database to facilitate the exchange of information among federal, state, county, and municipal law enforcement agencies. This database is maintained by South Carolina's State Law Enforcement Division (SLED).

The General Assembly realizes that addressing our state's gang problem will be a long-term and multi-faceted commitment. Therefore, the Act also created the Gang Prevention Study Committee that will file a report with the General Assembly by January 30, 2008. Among the strategies the Commission is studying are gang courts, gang-out programs, school support programs, counseling and faith-based support programs, and the creation of a gang commission.

This Act, as is the case for most legislation, is only one part of the solution. The escalation and urgency of the gang problem requires an enhanced and collaborative effort of individuals, families, neighborhoods, schools, churches, service organizations, and all levels of government to change the complex socio-economic conditions that give rise to gangs and gang violence.

Law enforcement and the courts alone cannot solve gang violence. Research indicates a community problem solving approach that can address the underlying conditions includes improving the attitudes of our youth about their future; their connections to family, church, school, and the larger community; and the opportunities available for them to play useful roles in society. Other critical components to reducing gang participation include making available permanent and adequate housing that allow young people to stabilize their lives and enhancing the ability of families to meet their basic needs in a manner that enables them to have the time and energy to support their children. Strong and healthy communities are better able to provide the support that children need to avoid negative influences like gangs.

I will continue to work on this issue at the state level and support local efforts that involve stakeholders in sustained, cooperative, and coordinated efforts to find solutions to our local gang problem. The public conversation that has begun in recent days is a necessary starting point to this process. We mourn the loss of Michael Smith and the loss of the potential of the other young men who now face significant jail time. Out of this tragedy our community must pull together, show gangs the door, and, by doing so, provide our youth with hope for the future.