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**Guest editorial: Bobby Kipper**

## **Guest editorial: With prevention, intervention and enforcement, reduce crime and violence one neighborhood at a time**

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Recently on a warm weekend afternoon I decided to take a trip down memory lane and drive by my former elementary school in central Newport News. The large softball complex adjacent to the school appeared bare and unkempt. This field that provided me hours of free play and kickball as a child now appeared to be vacant and forgotten. Word has it that softball players in the community stopped using the lighted complex due to an overriding fear for personal safety. The area that was once filled with children's laughter is now an identified hot bed for gangs, prostitutes and gunfire.

As we begin a new year, one of the greatest challenges facing our local community is finding a way to reduce the presence of gangs and violent crime within our neighborhoods. An Oct. 15 Daily Press article provides a glimpse of the magnitude of this problem. We should credit the leadership of Police Chief James Fox, who chose to deal with the reality of the situation by informing us that Newport News has over 60 known street gangs and over 1,400 identified gang members.

Before we rush to judgment, one would wonder what these numbers look like in the surrounding communities. To think that gang members isolate their activity to one neighborhood or city is simply a way of not addressing the elephant in the room.

But the concerning issue for the community that I policed for 25 years is not the presence of gangs but the lack of a strategic plan to address the issue. Handling gang issues as a police matter will only lead to a continued band-aid approach of revolving-door incarceration. And handling gangs as a simple youth issue does nothing for those between the ages of 18 and 25 who lack education, job skills and a positive direction in life.

Several years ago, when I served as the director of Virginia's Gang Reduction Program, we developed a working plan of action that has been embraced by the White House and by governors and mayors throughout America. The pilot project took place in Richmond, where we targeted the city's most violent neighborhoods. We were joined by citizen action teams, 40 community partners, 11 faith-based organizations and several city agencies.

As a result of our efforts, overall crime in the targeted communities decreased more than 35 percent. Robberies were cut in half and serious assaults dropped by more than 70 percent.

If this strategy of prevention, intervention and enforcement worked in Richmond, why not here?

A spinoff of this plan has been introduced in Newport News by the group People to People with its Neighborhood Centers Project. The vision of providing a center located within targeted communities not only makes sense, it works.

In the Richmond Project, we adopted several of these Citizen Resource Centers as a place where citizens could have access to job training, GED classes and parenting classes, as well as homework clubs, tutoring, and youth recreation opportunities. This project is not about bricks and mortar. It is about providing citizen services in buildings that are accessible in neighborhood settings.

A second ray of hope that we are moving in the right direction is the move by Riverside Health systems to open a free clinic in the southeast section of Newport News. In Richmond, I witnessed the power of this effort when we provided health care vans in our targeted communities. Citizens began to share a renewed vision of what their community could become through basic core services.

Lastly, we can all address gang and crime issues in the future by fully embracing the Youth Promise Act sponsored by our own Rep. Bobby Scott. This important pending legislation will go a long way to helping communities across America meet the challenge of addressing community violence as a process and not an event.

My wish for our community in 2010 is that we will all unite in a strategy to reduce violence that will make my next ride down memory lane a good one. If we build it, they will come.

### **Community voices**

A former Newport News police officer and an expert on gangs, Bobby Kipper is director of the National Center for the Prevention of Community Violence.

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