

Antioch program helps families learn to coexist

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ANTIOCH -- Things seem pretty normal in Deborah Lawson's home.

Her two sons, Traevon Taylor, 16, and Brandon Lawson, 12, enjoy playing Xbox 360 video games and staying active. Bookshelves and walls in the townhouse are covered with academic awards and family pictures. Both boys have a list of chores they dutifully complete.

Yet, it hasn't always been so harmonious. At one time, the home was full of quick tempers, slammed doors, curse words and bad attitudes.

Brandon was expelled from school for fighting and attended a continuation program in Antioch. Tempers often flared between mother and son.

In January, the family started working with a more intensive mediation program called the Youth Intervention Network.

The network aims to engage at-risk youths and their families and have them talk through their troubles, said program co-leader Antioch police Chief Jim Hyde.

Many kids have become disconnected, but they can be reached, said program founder Iris Archuleta.

"The thing to remember about these kids is that they're still kids," she said.

The network has helped 25 families of all ethnic and socioeconomic groups since 2007.

Volunteers Michael Bell and Chavean Orr met with Lawson and her sons once a week in their home and slowly unwound the tension that had built up.

The visits brought a lot of family issues to the forefront, especially anger management and the need for personal space, Lawson said.

"I see things better now. They both want to have their space or sometimes (Brandon) wants to be by himself. And that's OK," she said.

It had also been frustrating when Deborah randomly told the boys about chores to do, Traevon said.

Deborah now writes out a list of required chores. When the boys get in trouble for mouthing off or coming home late, they have to pick from a list of punishments in a hat.

The mediators helped give that "extra push," she said.

Brandon's grades have picked up since January. His grade point average went from 1.8 to 2.83 and he's looking forward to improving more at Antioch Middle School this fall.

The nonprofit Youth Intervention Network was formed in late 2006 to pool existing community resources and help steer juveniles away from gangs and crime.

When the program started, officials collected extensive data on all of the 8,763 teens in Antioch public schools to identify those most likely to become involved in crime or violence. The study used fictitious names and student IDs to protect privacy.

The top two indicators of potential to commit crimes were truancy and student disengagement, Archuleta said.

Anyone can refer juveniles into the program if they submit a written form explaining their rationale, and parents and students consent to participate.

"This pioneering work allows us to identify our neediest families and children and helps deal with a number of disciplinary issues," Antioch Unified School District Superintendent Donald Gill said.

The program is structured so that families do all the problem solving. Mediators are there to draw out discussion on things that might not otherwise be discussed, said Rev. Linda Vogelgesang of St. John's Lutheran Church, a program volunteer.

A parent in the program, who asked to remain anonymous, said her son had stopped doing homework, was suspended from school for fighting and was generally succumbing to peer pressure.

With the network's help, he has gone from straight F's to straight C's, his mother said.

"We've seen some of these kids have their lives changed and whole families transformed. To see that process is just "... incredible," Vogelgesang said.

Some aren't willing to change, however. Thirteen families that started the intervention process dropped out early.

Participation lasts at least a year, depending on whether the juvenile meets his goals. Some are in closer to three years, Archuleta said.

Part of the network's mission is to help teach better ways to handle conflict, said Jaap Van Der Sar of Dialogue for Peaceful Change, an outreach program in Northern Ireland on which the program is modeled. About a dozen workers from that program helped train Antioch High staff members last week.

The Youth Intervention Network's work has received national recognition from the U.S. Department of Justice, which gave it the Outstanding Community Involvement award last month.

"We can't arrest our way out of problems with gang violence. There's a need to have intervention and prevention in order for us to be successful," said Joseph Russoniello, attorney for the Northern district of California.

The network relies on members of the community interested in saving lives, said Russoniello, who nominated the program for the award. After community members receive 40 hours of training, they become trainers themselves.

"It's truly amazing how these people take time out of their busy lives," Archuleta said of the network's 113 volunteers.

The Youth Intervention Network model is being used in other communities, including Salinas.

Members of the Youth Intervention Network team will travel to Washington, D.C., next month to discuss the program with the Department of Justice. They will also seek federal grant money to sustain and expand the Antioch program.