Look Back.
Look Forward.

Our Community’s Story of Youth & Gang Violence Prevention

City of Santa Rosa
Introduction

Gangs? In Wine Country?

Those questions echoed in the minds of Santa Rosa city leaders during a briefing by police in 2001. According to Jane Bender, who was a City Councilmember at the time, that briefing was a wakeup call. Until that point, city leaders and most residents believed that gang activity was something that took place in bigger cities, like Oakland and San Jose. But Santa Rosa was becoming more violent, and police said law enforcement alone could not solve the problem.

Over the next two years, Santa Rosa leaders educated themselves and looked at how other cities were dealing with their own gang problems. In July 2003, then Mayor Sharon Wright established the Mayor’s Gang Prevention Task Force (MGPTF) now known as the Santa Rosa Violence Prevention Partnership or “The Partnership” -- modeled after a similar task force in San Jose -- with the unanimous support of the City Council. Ideally, it would have a three-prong executive leadership: the Mayor, Police Chief and the Program Manager of The Partnership would lead the effort. Other top-level leaders from throughout the City would also take part, and help identify key areas for gang and violence prevention and intervention.

But any prevention efforts would need community-wide support and steady funding. The passage of any tax increase is never considered lightly. In 2004, Santa Rosa voters did their part, overwhelmingly passing a quarter-cent sales tax known as “Measure O.” The tax brings in about $7 million revenue each year for 20 years, with 80% allocated to police and fire services, and 20% to gang prevention and intervention services.

Measure O funding became the fuel to reshape gang prevention and intervention efforts in Santa Rosa. It helped focus a community-wide effort to support its youth. During the past 10 years, the community has developed a comprehensive plan and pulled together top-level stakeholders, including law enforcement, criminal justice, education, public health, non-profits, the faith community and government — in ways that are drawing attention from other cities and even national leaders.

The Partnership and Measure O have reached the halfway mark, a perfect time to take stock and forge ahead. Those who are involved in violence prevention work in Santa Rosa tend to agree that the city is a safer place because of the investment and collaboration around Measure O, but measuring success can be challenging. Data and statistics cannot capture human experience and perspective.

This report is an attempt to capture those human stories — in three parts. It reflects on what our community was like before 2003, with a look back at the crisis that led to the Mayor’s Gang Prevention Task Force and the tax measure; it highlights the current efforts, from 2004-2014, including grants and programs that have transformed people and places touched by gang violence; and it explores the future focus for Santa Rosa’s gang and violence prevention efforts, including the recent evolution of the Mayor’s Gang Prevention Task Force into the Santa Rosa Violence Prevention Partnership.
By a twist of fate and a need for groceries, Vince Harper ended up at an intersection in front of Santa Rosa High School on the evening of May 5, 2002, — a place he called “ground zero.” On that night, thousands of community members were out along Mendocino Avenue, celebrating Cinco de Mayo and watching cars cruise along the thoroughfare. Harper said there was a real family feeling as he drove from the Safeway past Santa Rosa Junior College. Parents and their children stood on the sidewalks, waving Mexican flags.

When Harper drove closer to the high school, the atmosphere changed. He noticed a group of about 40 Norteño gang members who looked aggressive. Across the street, he saw a large group wearing Sureño colors. While stuck at a red light, he heard gunshots. “I immediately tried to get out of traffic and get home. That was a real eye-opener for me,” he said. Harper made it home safely, but six people were injured in the violence.

“People realized the problem wasn’t in this or that neighborhood. It was a more comprehensive problem, and we needed a more comprehensive approach to address it,” Harper said.

Violence at Other Santa Rosa Events

“I remember working the [Sonoma] County Fair and having to suit up in riot helmets to push people out because of gang fights that were going on,” said Santa Rosa Police Capt. Craig Schwartz, who was a patrol officer at the time. During the late 1990s and early 2000s the Fair started becoming more neighborhoods. He saw Cinco de Mayo 2002 as a turning point. “People realized the problem wasn’t in this or that neighborhood. It was a more comprehensive problem, and we needed a more comprehensive approach to address it,” Harper said.

Where We Started 1990s - 2003

“For the first time, city administrators were actually seeing what this violence looked like, and at the same time, the police department was coming to the realization that we cannot arrest our way out of this problem.”

and more out of control, with more gang members showing up toward the end of the night. Several times, police shut the Fair down earlier than it was scheduled to close because of the level of violence at the Fairgrounds.

The same increasing level of gang activity and violence was becoming a regular occurrence at the Thursday Night Market (now held on Wednesdays), a summer farmer's market and community gathering in downtown Santa Rosa. As the sun set, gang members started to mill around the city’s nearby Courthouse Square. City Councilman Ernesto Olivares, who was a police lieutenant at the time, described the crowds of gang members on those Thursday nights as “flexing their muscle and challenging each other.” He had joined the Santa Rosa Police Department in the late 1970s. He said Santa Rosa didn’t have the sophisticated and organized gang activity seen today during his first decade or so on the force. However, “in the mid-1990s we started seeing a rise in gang violence. That came to a peak in 2002.”

Olivares agreed that Cinco de Mayo 2002 was a “wake up moment” for the community. That night, because of the expected large crowds, about 100 extra officers from local agencies, including the Sheriff’s Department and California Highway Patrol, were called to Santa Rosa to help with traffic and crowd control. For the first time, the activity on Mendocino Avenue outside Santa Rosa High School was being videotaped by police. The grainy, black-and-white footage looks like a street fight, with the sounds of gunfire in the background. Olivares said that video had an impact on city leaders. “For the first time, city administrators were actually seeing what this violence looked like, and at the same time, the police department was coming to the realization that we cannot arrest our way out of this problem,” Olivares said.

Creation of Mayor’s Gang Prevention Task Force

Even before the Cinco de Mayo violence of 2002, the city of Santa Rosa had been looking at other communities that were fighting gang violence with more than just police response. One of them was the city of San Jose, which had established a Mayor’s Gang Prevention Task Force in 1991, using a strategy that involved not only suppression of violence, but also prevention and intervention.

In July 2003, then Mayor Sharon Wright established the “Santa Rosa Violence Prevention Partnership” (originally known as the Mayor’s Gang Prevention Task Force and now referred to as “The Partnership”) with the unanimous support of the City Council. Later that year, she established an Advisory Board and held large strategic planning meetings where the community was invited to participate. In her invitation to the community, she said at the time “As Mayor, I have seen the dramatic impact that gang activity is having on our community and the resulting drain on our resources. We cannot ignore the obvious – the time to take action is now.”

2 Santa Rosa MGPTF Strategic Work Plan, 2008-2012
Jane Bender, who was mayor from 2004-2006, was involved with The Partnership from the beginning and took the leadership helm when she became Mayor. She said one of the most difficult tasks in the early years was convincing the community that there was a problem. “We very consciously used the word ‘gang’ prevention because, when we started, there was such a denial that there were gangs in this city,” Bender said. “We had to cement that into people’s minds. There are gangs. And these are our kids, and we’ve got to help save them.”

Gail Andrade Ahlas, retired Superintendent of Roseland Schools in southwest Santa Rosa, was a principal in the district in 2003. She said, before that time, many people were reluctant to talk about gangs at all. “There was a real hesitancy to even say, ‘We have gang issues and let’s talk about that.’ There was concern of course about how that might make either your organization or your school district look or how it might affect business and so forth,” she said.

Once the The Partnership was formed, and citizens started talking, “we would have fabulous conversations about [gang prevention],” Ahlas said. But the efforts needed more than just talk to keep the ball rolling. They needed funding. “I think there were a lot of great intentions but not the systems in place to make it successful,” she said.

Lack of Targeted Programming

Vince Harper, from CAP Sonoma, said reaching youth who were susceptible to gangs was “hit and miss” in the late 1990s and early 2000s. “There was some school-based programming,” he said. “It just wasn’t enough in terms of getting to the kids who needed prevention and intervention services.” Moreover, he said most prevention efforts at the time were focused on substance abuse. “The debate would always be, ‘Yeah, we have a gang problem, but there are other problems out there,’” he said.

Police officers who encountered young people at risk of joining gangs were frustrated by the lack of help. Captain Rainer Navarro did gang enforcement for the Santa Rosa Police Department. “When I was in the gang unit back in 1997, I recall a homicide investigation,” he said. “We went in and briefed the community and they kept saying ‘we need resources’; and there was really nothing we could do. We didn’t have the opportunity to provide them anything else.”

It became obvious that to make real progress, a stable source of funding was needed to provide consistent, long term support and programs for youth and families.3

Development of Measure O

In August 2004, one year after the creation of The Partnership, the City Council voted to introduce a measure on the November ballot to enact an ordinance for a quarter cent sales tax. While polls showed that voters were not convinced about the need for services for youth, when the gang prevention and intervention was combined with increased police and fire services, “as an overall enhancement of public safety services, then it was really resonating with the voters,” Councilman Olivares said. With the possibility of reliable funding, gang prevention programs that could change young people’s lives seemed within reach.

3 Santa Rosa MGPTF Strategic Work Plan, 2008-2012
It feels like hot grease splattering on his head. But for 19-year-old Pedro Lopez, the skin-searing tattoo-removal laser treatments are well worth the excruciating pain.

Once a month, for more than 15 months, Lopez gladly endured the treatments to erase the gang tattoo that stretched from ear-to-ear on the back of his head. He is one of about 100 Sonoma County residents to benefit each year from the Clean Slate Tattoo Removal Program operated by Social Advocates for Youth (SAY) with funding from a Measure-O CHOICE grant.

“Just the fact that I knew I had a tattoo on the back of my head kind of haunted me,” Lopez said. “I didn’t like the fact that I want to go to medical school and potentially be a doctor who has a gang tattoo.”

Lopez’s ambition for the future shows just how far he has come since his first exposure to gang life five years ago. He started hanging out with gang members as a freshman in high school. “I kind of made a pattern of going in and out of Juvenile Hall after that,” he said.

Lopez got the large tattoo on the back of his head at the age of 16. A year later, he realized that the gang life was not the life he wanted.

He applied to the Clean Slate program while in Juvenile Hall, and began the laser treatments before he was released. Youth, ages 14-24, pay a one-time fee of $50 and are required to provide 25 hours of community service. Matt Martin, SAY’s Executive Director, believes the program can make a huge difference in the lives of current and former gang members. “Young people make decisions early in their lives, sometimes without the support they need to guide them along,” Martin said. “To have a do-over, essentially, is something that is critical to their future success.”

SAY Program Manager Toni Abraham visits local middle schools to try to catch students before they get a tattoo, asking them, “Why add another reason for people to judge you and assume that you are a bad person because you have a tattoo?”

Lopez joined Abraham at a recent presentation to 200 students. In many ways, he is the ultimate success story. His gang tattoo is nearly gone. He is attending Santa Rosa Junior College, and plans to go to medical school. In fact, his mentor from Juvenile Hall arranged for him to watch a five-hour open-heart surgery, and now Lopez wants to be a doctor more than ever.

Lopez said he told the students to look for after-school programs, sports and hobbies; to stay close to their families; and to study. “If you are up to negative things, you are going to get negative outcomes in the future,” Lopez told them. “Live a positive, healthy lifestyle and you’ll succeed.”
Deisy Vargas was in elementary school in November 2004, when Santa Rosa voters went to the polls. She was too young to vote. But in many ways, her life was changed by that election. Santa Rosa voters approved Measure O by 73%, overwhelmingly choosing to fund public safety and gang prevention/intervention programs for the next 20 years.

Measure O’s quarter-cent sales tax increase would generate an estimated $7 million per year, with allocations of 40% to police, 40% to fire, and 20% to manage the City’s gang and violence prevention and intervention effort. This was the steady source of funding that the Santa Rosa Violence Prevention Partnership (The Partnership) had determined to be critical to success in reaching youth and families, and providing alternatives to violence.

As Vargas entered middle school, some of that Measure O funding was heading to programs in organizations like Community Action Partnership of Sonoma County (CAP Sonoma). The nonprofit provides services for parents and youth in some of the most economically disadvantaged neighborhoods in Santa Rosa. At a time when she felt she wasn’t doing well in school, and she saw young people around her turn to drugs and violence, Vargas joined a youth leadership program through CAP Sonoma. That set her on a course to become a youth leader, a community activist, and now a college student, with hopes of an eventual career in broadcasting, in order to bring a voice to her community.

“As much as my mother encouraged us to go to school, she was always working so she wasn’t always able to help us,” 21-year old Vargas said. Her mother worked two jobs to support Vargas and her brother. “Growing up like that, I think the community program was my family. That’s really where I got on track and realized there’s so much more.” Vargas is one of thousands of Santa Rosa young people who have grown up with and benefited from services and programs that are a direct result of Measure O.

The Partnership Policy and Operational Teams

Since its creation in 2003, the The Partnership has had an Advisory Board, now referred to as the Steering Committee, to plan and identify strategic areas for gang prevention and intervention. In 2005, after the passage of Measure O, the The Partnership adopted a new model that involved the creation of a Policy Team and an Operational Team.

The Policy Team had a three-prong leadership approach that many people still consider crucial to the The Partnership’s success. Under ideal circumstances, the Mayor chairs the Policy Team, with co-facilitation by the Chief of Police and the Program
Manager (originally a position within the Santa Rosa Recreation & Parks Department, now part of the City Manager’s Office). The City’s Vice-Mayor Tom Schwedhelm said the importance of having those key people in the three-prong executive leadership team cannot be overstated. The Partnership went through some years in which a former Chief of Police, for example, did not lend personal support to the effort. “If you had a Captain or a Lieutenant, who were in management positions, but the Chief wasn’t on board, you’re not going to be as effective,” Schwedhelm said. When he was Chief of Police from 2009 - 2013, Schwedhelm lent his full support to The Partnership, especially under the leadership of then - Mayor Ernesto Olivares. “We seized opportunities and were able to take advantage of them. We were able to leverage our positions to the benefit of The Partnership,” Schwedhelm added.

The Policy Team was charged with setting the policies for The Partnership and monitoring the effectiveness of the effort. From the beginning, the members included a “who’s who” of top leaders in government, law enforcement, education, nonprofits, criminal justice, and faith-based organizations.

“I think it’s one of those unique policy groups that has such a cross section group of leaders. You don’t see that anywhere else, where you have law enforcement, health and human services, community-based organizations, district attorney, school districts,” said Oscar Chavez, Assistant Director of Sonoma County’s Department of Human Services. He has been on the Policy Team since 2009, when he was Executive Director of the nonprofit CAP Sonoma. “It really is a cross section of our entire community, with a very targeted focus on saving our kids and providing them with meaningful opportunities to overcome the temptation of joining or being involved with gangs. It’s a pretty powerful group of people, and I think sometimes we forget that.”

By contrast, the Operational Team was comprised of people who were the so-called “boots on the ground.” They were appointed by members of the Policy Team as a representative of their organization who were able to bring knowledge, expertise and resources to share with the community. Members came from the Police and Probation departments, Recreation and Parks, the District Attorney’s office, non-profit organizations, community groups, neighborhood groups, and included individuals who were directly involved with youth. The Team’s responsibilities

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included: collaboration on specific youth and gang violence prevention, intervention or enforcement issues; coordinating efforts with each other; and implementing the Strategic Plan set out by the Policy team.

Although the goals and measurements continue to evolve through the years, the basic framework of communication and collaboration has not changed since 2005. Members of both the Policy and Operational Teams still cite the value of sitting around the same table every month or two, and making connections that will ultimately benefit Santa Rosa youth and families.

“One of the key things we’re doing is not working in isolation,” said Socorro Shiels, former Superintendent of Santa Rosa City Schools. “We’re finding ways to speak to all of these different organizations. And I think The Partnership really has been a forum for us to get together and speak about what we all care about — which are our youth — and what they need from us in terms of their development, their growth, their safety, and for us, of course, their education.”

The former Program Manager of The Partnership, Khaalid Muttaqi, said the setup of The Partnership, and the Policy Team in particular, is envied by other communities that are trying to do similar gang-prevention work. In most places, it’s hard to get so many leaders together at one time on a regular basis. “We have a pretty high level of commitment from our stakeholders,” Muttaqi said. “It’s a pretty impressive group of people sitting around the same table having dialogues, sharing information, networking, problem solving. I would say that’s a hallmark of the initiative overall.”

**CHOICE Grant Program Begins**

Santa Rosa residents made several choices by voting for Measure O. They made a choice to reduce the number of gang-related violent crimes and the level of gang membership in the city; a choice to help young people to make healthy lifestyle decisions; and a choice to contribute toward safer schools and neighborhoods. Therefore, the funding program for gang prevention and intervention from Measure O was labeled CHOICE: Community Helping Our Indispensable Children Excel.

The tax increase took effect in April 2005, and the initial revenue started coming in later that year. The first CHOICE grant funding cycle began in December of 2006, with $830,000 from Measure O funds and it has continued to provide an average of $500,000-$600,000 per year.
Since 2006, the CHOICE grant program, funded by Measure O, has provided more than $7 million dollars to community-based organizations. But the total funding available for youth and gang violence prevention and intervention in this community has actually been more than double those CHOICE grants, because the City and community-based organizations have been able to leverage matching funds from other sources. The latest figures show a total of more than $14.2 million in youth and gang violence prevention and intervention funding between 2006 and 2014.

One example of matching grants is the California Gang Reduction, Intervention, and Prevention Grant, known as CalGRIP, funded by the Board of State and Community Corrections. In 2010, the City of Santa Rosa was awarded a $315,000 CalGRIP grant. In 2012, it was awarded another $500,000 state grant, as one of 19 cities splitting $8.2 million. Social Advocates for Youth’s (SAY) Executive Director, Matt Martin, said his organization and other community-based organizations are always looking for ways to be able to leverage Measure O funding. “The investment made by the citizens of Santa Rosa in Measure O is a real hefty one,” Martin said. “It’s one I absolutely appreciate as a Santa Rosan myself, as well as a parent in our community.” He said Measure O is so innovative and impressive, it attracts the attention of funders. “We will go out and work with private donors and foundations, (and tell them) this is what we are doing as a community. It’s very exciting.”

Santa Rosa was able to secure a third CalGRIP grant beginning January 2015 for an additional $1.5 million through 2017. The ability to get such matching funds is also enhanced by networking and relationships. Councilmember Ernesto Olivares said the CalGRIP funding is a perfect example. “It’s no accident that many cities that belong to the (California Cities Violence Prevention) Network were recommended for funding this funding cycle.” He said 48 cities in California applied for CalGRIP grants, and only 18 received them. Of those, eight, including Santa Rosa, were cities in the Network. Olivares explained that it is not preferential treatment, but the power of collaboration and a willingness to share good ideas with each other that attracts the funding. Cities that have local action plans to address gang violence, and who follow best practices developed in other communities, fare better.

**California Cities Violence Prevention Network**

Formed in 2007, the California Cities Gang Prevention Network, now known as the California Cities Violence Prevention Network, was the first of its kind in the nation. It focused on successful anti-gang policies and practices.
that interweave prevention, intervention, enforcement and a community’s “moral voice” as an alternative to prison-only solutions. The effort began with 13 cities, including San Jose, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego and Santa Rosa. Jack Calhoun, a senior consultant to the National League of Cities, was asked to run it.

Calhoun explained his thesis regarding gang violence: “Nothing would really change unless all key segments of the community were involved and were making very specific commitments in each of four areas.” Those areas are: prevention, intervention, enforcement and re-entry (see box).

“The governance was critical,” Calhoun said from his office in Virginia. “It had to be the mayor, the [police] chief, schools, public health — you know, the big ones — as well as bringing in providers and others.” Those providers are the community-based organizations, faith-based groups and other agencies who can provide services.

The 13 cities started working with Calhoun to try to come up with “best practices” in gang and violence prevention. “We met by phone monthly to help each city craft a comprehensive [gang violence prevention] plan, and Santa Rosa’s was one of the best,” Calhoun said. “The leadership showed great energy and great intellectual and policy zeal, putting together a huge MGPTF — schools, public health, community folks, folks in the political world, advocates, others. [Santa Rosa] became one of the leaders throughout the state because of the rigor of your plan, the frequency of your meetings, and the transparency and the accountability.” By accountability, Calhoun said The Partnership kept track of recommendations and promises, and made sure The Partnership members followed through.

Councilmember Olivares remembered the early days with the Network. “Even though we had a lot of great nonprofit organizations in Santa Rosa, very few had the capacity to deal with this type of work with gang-impacted youth,” he said. Capacity in prevention work can be defined as the resources and the readiness. “Measure O funds allowed us to help them gain the capacity, but at the same time, our membership with the 13 cities allowed us to develop even more capacity — picking and choosing the kinds of things that we believed would help us, not just taking a program off a shelf, asking questions and getting the technical assistance.”

An evaluation of the Network completed in 2012, explained the value of working together:

“The Network helped promote strategies that had not commonly been used in gang violence prevention, and propagated these strategies into other cities. When the Network began, each city was at a different phase of its plan development, but all participating cities

Commitment to Violence Prevention Requires:

- **Prevention** - such as early childhood education and family support.
- **Intervention** - including after-school programs, mentoring, street work (outreach workers who connect with youth on the streets), and alternative schools.
- **Enforcement** - police and the justice system.
- **Re-entry** - dealing with return offenders.

(from Jack Calhoun, senior consultant to National League of Cities)
committed to implementing a comprehensive approach that included prevention as well as intervention and suppression… Overall, the Network served as a context for discussion and opportunities for team members to interact collaboratively and in comprehensive ways around the issue of gang violence.”

Calhoun said the work in California attracted national attention. He helped set up the National Forum on Youth Violence Prevention, which operates much like the California Cities Violence Prevention Network. Although Santa Rosa is not one of the large cities in that forum, Calhoun said “the impact of what California has done — with Santa Rosa as one of the leaders — has made an absolute sea change in federal policy.”

The Partnership Creates Strategic Approach

In 2008, the Ther Partnership built upon its work with the Network to issue its first Strategic Work Plan for the years 2008 - 2012, entitled: “Reclaiming our Youth for their Families, Schools, Communities and Futures.” That vision statement was the first key component of the Plan. It also called for:

Engaged stakeholders - A critical look at who needs to be at the table, with particular consideration to bringing the voices of young people from all segments of the community into planning and implementation efforts.

Strategies - To mobilize and align community resources through gang prevention, intervention, and enforcement.

Shared accountability - Building a foundation for a strong system of shared accountability with outcomes.

Coordinated Initiatives - Use the efforts of The Partnership Policy and Operational Teams, and the implementation of Measure O, to monitor and report on progress in implementing gang prevention initiatives.

The Plan’s “Strategic Goals” for the next four years encompassed these five key strategies:

Awareness - Create an education and awareness campaign regarding the risk factors affecting youth and the resources available to them.

Prevention - Increase the number of prevention programs with the priority target being high-risk neighborhoods.

Intervention - Increase intervention services and create positive opportunities for high-risk and gang-involved youth and their families.

Enforcement - Increase enforcement efforts of serious and violent crime and enhance the sense of safety reported by the public.

Systems/Metrics - Create a delivery system and measures to track ongoing programs.

Four years later, the The Partnership Strategic Plan Update for 2012 - 2016, built upon the 2008 - 2012 framework. Along with the five Strategic Goals above, it included two new goals:
Re-Entry – Ensure the successful re-entry of youth and adults back into our community after incarceration.

Regionalization – Assist other communities in our region to work together to address the mobile nature of youth violence and gangs.6

Move Into City Manager’s Office

In 2012, the administration of Santa Rosa’s gang prevention program moved out of the City’s Recreation and Parks Department and into the City Manager’s Office5, while Recreation and Parks continued to run the after-school and summer programs for at-risk youth. The move came as The Partnership completed its 2012-2016 Strategic Plan, emphasizing regional gang prevention and programs to help gang members re-enter the community after serving time in prison. The City Manager’s Office already had relationships with other governments and those contacts could be used to support the regional gang-prevention efforts.

Building the Capacity of the Community to Deliver Programs

In the 10 years since the The Partnership first sought a stable source of funding to provide consistent, long term support and programs for youth and families, the Measure O funds have made a clear difference. Through CHOICE grants, the community has successfully developed the capacity to serve high risk and violence/gang-impacted children, youth and families.6

The Partnership has chosen to build on the natural resiliency in the Santa Rosa community. The 2012-2016 Strategic Plan Update explains how The Partnership is working within the framework of an “asset-based” view. That view was recommended by the California Attorney General’s Policy Council on Violence Prevention.

Instead of the “deficit-based” views of the past generation — where government responded to problems after the fact with incarceration or treating symptoms and ignoring underlying causes — the asset-based model has government supporting the healthy aspects of families and communities. Solutions should be locally owned and controlled, and policies and services should be family-focused and community-centered.7

In the asset-based model, individuals, families, and communities are seen as naturally resilient. They are recognized as having the ability to identify and solve their own problems. The role of family, community and government is to nurture the healthy development of individuals, to provide them with opportunities, and to help them develop the self-reliance and self-determination they need to meet and overcome adversity and to contribute to their community.

Highlights of Gang Prevention/Intervention Programs and Services

Before the passage of Measure O, many local service providers noted that the funds and resources to combat gang violence

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tended to focus on symptoms. “For example, we’d get funding to address homelessness, or to help certain kids who had already been involved in the criminal justice system. There wasn’t a lot of funding that addressed root cause issues,” said Oscar Chavez, the former Executive Director of Community Action Partnership of Sonoma County (CAP Sonoma).

“One of the transitions that I saw through Measure O was this commitment to prevention. If we wanted our young people to have a different path, we had to address the underlying issues impacting them and their families — recognizing that where people live matters. That the neighborhoods in which they live in matter, the resources they have access to, the quality of their schools, whether the parents have access to parenting skills, whether they have a strong social network, whether the parents were employed. We really began to invest in those issues,” said Chavez.

CAP Sonoma is one of several service providers to approach gang violence at the prevention and intervention level, before it becomes an issue for law enforcement. For example, CAP Sonoma educates parents with Padres Unidos, a 16-week Spanish-language parent training program, designed specifically for the parents of strong-willed and out-of-control teenagers. CAP Sonoma’s youth programs, such as the DIG Leadership program, encourage young people in Santa Rosa’s low-income neighborhoods to make positive life choices, improve academic achievement and avoid gangs.

The following is a look at a few other Santa Rosa gang prevention and intervention programs that highlight some of the work being done with Measure O and matching funds:

**Gang Resistance Education and Training Program (GREAT)**

When Captain Rainer Navarro was the Gang Sergeant in the Santa Rosa Police Department in 2011, he got the idea to reach out to children in disadvantaged neighborhoods before he met them through more unfortunate, or violent, circumstances. He and several other police officers visit 5th and 7th grade classrooms in Santa Rosa City, Bellevue Union and Roseland school districts, as part of the Gang Resistance Education and Training Program, known as GREAT. The curriculum was developed by law enforcement

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<td><strong>Total Funding</strong> = $14,258,142</td>
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<td>Measure O = $7,069,172</td>
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<td>Matching Funds = $7,182,970</td>
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<td><strong>Total number served</strong> = 27,536</td>
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“*If we wanted our young people to have a different path, we had to address the underlying issues impacting them and their families — recognizing that where people live matters.*”

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personnel, educators and psychologists. Police officers go through training to learn to teach it. During 6-12 classroom visits, they talk to students about issues such as bullying, peer pressure and violence. The goal is to provide children with the necessary skills to resist the pressures of gangs.

“The GREAT program is a wonderful program,” said Gail Andrade Ahlas, retired superintendent of Roseland Schools, who agreed to pilot the program at Roseland Elementary. “I always encouraged the officers to wear their uniforms when they came because I wanted the kids to see police officers as friendly figures.”

The GREAT program is one example of the philosophy of “community policing” – getting out of police cars and getting to know the community. City Councilmember, and former Police Chief, Tom Schwedhelm said the philosophy is part of violence prevention. “The approach is not just ‘hook ‘em and book ‘em,’ but to build trust.”

Navarro has seen the benefits of that trust first-hand. “I see kids from my first year, and they’re in middle school now. They’ll come up to me and shake my hand and give me hugs. That’s not stuff you usually see in middle school students.”

“If we can change one life, we’re making a huge difference,” he said.

**CYO Gang Mediation and Intervention**

California Youth Outreach (CYO) literally takes its intervention work to the streets, targeting youth ages 15 to 25 who have already joined gangs. “Basically you try to be as visible as possible in the areas where gang members tend to congregate,” said Gustavo Mendoza, CYO’s Lead Youth Intervention Specialist. He said the four CYO outreach workers are seen as credible by young people because they have come from the same upbringing. Mendoza grew up in Roseland, and although he didn’t join a gang, some friends and family members did.

Intervention specialists take that knowledge about where the youth are coming from and use it to try to put them on a different path. “People don’t understand why outreach works. Ideally you have to be a jack of all trades, and be able to get the toughest kids to relate to you and to buy in to what you’re trying to sell to them,” Mendoza said. “We have all kinds of different techniques where we try to engage them and reach them, and from there we try to persuade them into a different type of lifestyle. It’s not easy.”

Some of those techniques include counseling and referrals to other services.
But Mendoza said it can be just as valuable to expose young people to the wider world. CYO has led camping trips to Bodega Bay and outings to sporting events. Outreach workers have even packed their cars with kids, and taken them to UC Berkeley and Stanford. “We take them to all these different places, and expose them to activities that they are not exposed to because it’s not in their community,” he said.

CYO intervention specialists also work with teens at the Sonoma County Probation Camp in Forestville, and at some continuation high schools. Although they do some work with students at selected middle schools, Mendoza said he would love to have full-time outreach workers at every middle school in Santa Rosa. Many gang members tell him that middle school was when they decided on the gang life. “They feel that if they had been engaged by people and had positive activities to do, they wouldn’t have chosen the gang lifestyle. But that wasn’t available to them,” he said.

“My goal is to have a community with zero gang presence,” Mendoza said. “If you’re not shooting for that, you shouldn’t be in this type of work.”

**SAY Esperanza Resource Services**

Social Advocates for Youth’s (SAY) Esperanza Resource Services are provided specifically for youth who are in a gang, or are at risk of joining one. The services are focused on helping the young people become productive community members. SAY provides job assistance, educational support, mentoring, social activities, field trips, community service opportunities, work experience and tattoo removal for youth ages 14-24.

Matt Martin, SAY’s Executive Director, described one young man, whom he called Charles, who came to SAY in his early 20s, after he got out of prison. “He was tired. He was tired of the trauma. He was tired of carrying this load of what it meant to be a gang member,” Martin said.

Charles began attending the Esperanza Resource center. He also got involved in SAY’s Clean Slate gang tattoo removal program. (FOR MORE ON CLEAN SLATE, SEE THE SPOTLIGHT STORY ON PAGE 5) “He got [gang] tattoos removed from his neck, face, and arms that were keeping him from being employed,” Martin said. That process took about 18 months. “Meanwhile, he was getting support from staff in a job readiness workshop — learning what it meant to get and keep a job. He wanted to work outside and became a plumber’s apprentice.” Martin said Charles also got engaged to be married.

“These young people, they want to belong. They want to feel useful. They want to feel like they have an influence over their life and the world around them, and they want to feel competent,” Martin said. “You can get those assets from a lot of different places. You
can get those very same assets from a gang. Our goal, though, is to give a young person having to make that decision — to offer those assets to them in a much more constructive, pro-social way.”

Martin holds Charles up as an example of the hundreds of young people who have benefited from the Measure O-funded services at SAY. “The citizens of Santa Rosa said ‘yes’ to lives that have too often heard the word ‘no,’” he said.

Recreation and Parks Department Programs

The City of Santa Rosa Recreation and Parks Department Neighborhood Services Division runs after-school and summer programs for youth in some of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in the community. They bring homework help, activities, art, and sports right to the neighborhoods where gang-impacted children live.

Recreation Coordinator Jeff Tibbetts referred to the programs as “a large safety net for the community” because they reach children in their early years, between kindergarten and 6th grade. “Our staff are specifically trained in gang prevention,” he said. For example, if staff see a child showing signs of aggression, or talking about gang issues or violence in their family, the Recreation and Parks staff can refer the family to other community organizations for help.

The three programs that affect the most at-risk children are the after-school and sports programs that take place in schools and in low-income housing complexes throughout the city; and Recreation Sensation, a free, full-day, seven-week long summer program at three school sites. It serves 120 kids at each site, with an emphasis on literacy, crafts and recreation.

“You need these programs to give these kids a normal childhood. Even if they’ve already decided that gang activity isn’t a path they are going to go on, there are communities at large that are affected negatively by the gang presence in their neighborhood,” Tibbetts said. “(The kids) might not feel safe playing outside after school, if we’re not in the neighborhood playing with them.”

Tibbetts estimated that he has worked with about 5,000 - 6,000 children in his 10 years with the Department. Success is hard to gauge. Often, when the kids reach middle school age, and are too old for the programs, he doesn’t see them again. But sometimes he is surprised to encounter familiar faces when they come to Recreation and Parks a few years later, to interview for jobs. “Even
though I can’t track every single kid who goes through the program, I know we’re making a difference because I’m hearing this person come back and say ‘I probably wouldn’t still be in high school, and I probably wouldn’t be applying for a job right now, if it weren’t for this program.’

He said seeing those kids come back with a desire to be positive role models in their neighborhoods, is heartwarming. “For most of our staff, this isn’t just a job for them. The expectation is that you are going to make a difference in a child’s life.”

Gang Prevention Awareness Week

In 2009, even though the Mayor’s Gang Prevention Task Force, now The Partnership, had been working diligently to address youth and gang violence in Santa Rosa for six years, many people in the community still didn’t recognize that Santa Rosa had a gang problem. So that year, The Partnership created the first annual Gang Prevention Awareness Week, known as GPAW, during the month of August.

Santa Rosa Councilmember and Executive Director of the California Cities Violence Prevention Network Ernesto Olivares initiated the week when he was Chair of The Partnership, to help educate the community about the efforts of The Partnership. According to Olivares, “It takes a community-wide effort to reduce youth violence in any community. [GPAW] is a good example of our community coming together as families, service providers, and supporters to highlight the success of this effort and to acknowledge the strong partnerships we have developed to continue building a community where we all feel safe and our children thrive.”

Over the years, GPAW has expanded from three events to six, with growing participation from the community. Some of the events include a boxing exhibition hosted by The Salvation Army Double Punches Boxing Club, a life skills development program for youth, a Gang Prevention Seminar co-hosted by the Santa Rosa Police Department, and the South Park Day & Night Festival (see Spotlight about South Park).

GPAW continues to be an annual signature event for The Partnership during the month of September. Serena Lienau, Program Analyst for The Partnership shares, “GPAW is a great opportunity for us to not only highlight, but celebrate the positive work we’re doing for our community.”

“GPAW is a great opportunity for us to not only highlight, but celebrate the positive work we’re doing for our community.”
Moving Forward 2015 and Beyond

For Santa Rosa Police  

Captain Rainer Navarro, the difference that Measure O has made can be summed up in the tale of two young men. He remembers that, in the late 1990s, there was a young man who seemed to always be on police radar; always getting in trouble and getting arrested. The prosecutor who was involved in that case asked if there was anything that they could do for that boy, and there wasn’t at that time.

In 2009, “that same family had a cousin or brother” of that young man, Navarro said, who was also getting into trouble. But police were able to refer the family to anger management and other gang-prevention programs. “You can actually see it from the family’s point of view,” Navarro said. “Where one kid ended up going to prison and another one, 10 years later, was getting resources to divert him from getting into serious trouble.”

Capt. Craig Schwartz had a similar story, of a 10-year-old boy whom police felt was starting down the path toward a gang lifestyle. Police had found pictures of the boy making gang signs and emulating an older gang-involved brother. Schwartz asked the parents, “Is this what you want for your youngest son? If not, I have some people who might be able to help you, and get him into some programs after school. Whether it’s martial arts, or boxing, or after-school homework help — something to keep him active and productive and away from the influence of the gang.” The parents were interested and Schwartz referred them to Measure-O funded programs.

“How we handle the gang issues now as opposed to how we handled it in the past is that we don’t look at it as strictly a police problem anymore,” Schwartz said. “We recognize that we are one leg of the stool, but you also need strong prevention and intervention legs to stand on, and to really try to improve the outcomes for people and for the communities they live in.”

Councilmember Tom Schwedhelm, who was Chief of Police from 2009-2013, said such stories are consistent with the “community policing” philosophy that is now in effect at the department. “Community policing philosophy is to take a comprehensive approach to a long-term strategy to solve a problem,” he said.

A Need for Diligence

Although there are many more gang-prevention and intervention programs available in Santa Rosa than there were 10 years ago, the gang violence problem itself has not disappeared. A September 2014 article in the Santa Rosa Press Democrat reported that “gang detectives have called 2014 an aggressive year so far.” 1 The article continued, “Illegal gang activity — just like crime overall — is not what it was in the mid-1990s and again around 2003 when crime rates surged. Yet gang involvement is

still an outsized factor in some of the most violent crimes in Sonoma County, from home-invasion robberies to stabbings and shootings.” According to a police estimate in the article, nearly 4,000 people are involved in gangs in Sonoma County, or one out of every 125 people in the county.

The latest gang incident figures and violent crime offenses in the FBI’s Uniform Crime Report reinforce the need for continued diligence in anti-gang efforts.

Although violent crimes and juvenile crimes have decreased, gang-related incidents have increased. The former Program Manager of The Partnership, Khaalid Muttaqi said the metrics (method of measuring gang-related crime) will usually show an increase in the summer months, when young people are not in school. He said the other explanation for the uptick could be that “we’re just being more diligent on how we track gang activity.”

Councilmember Olivares cautioned that decreases in crime statistics from one year to the next do not mean that the gang problem is solved. “Some people say ‘crime is down and you could back off a little bit.’ You can’t,” he said. “You couldn’t do that for a disease. You keep vaccinating. So we are going to keep doing the same thing here in Santa Rosa.”

**Neighborhood-based Efforts**

Although any young person could be theoretically be at risk of joining a gang, the actual risk is much greater for youth who come from families with gang ties, or who live in neighborhoods with high crime and low academic achievement. That is why gang prevention efforts have taken a neighborhood-based approach. Programs are brought into high-need communities — places with higher rates of poverty, crime and violence — and provided in schools or low-income housing complexes. That also eliminates any transportation issues that could be barriers in linking people and programs.

In Santa Rosa and its surrounding area, the Latino community is particularly impacted by poverty and violence. For that reason, gang-prevention and intervention providers who expect to work in that community and receive Measure O funds, have to demonstrate cultural competency. In addition, the The Partnership has
hired two bilingual Community Outreach Specialists to work with the Latino community.

Muttaqi said that new studies are also showing that the “neighborhoods” themselves need to be a focus of violence prevention efforts. “You also have to address the conditions in the neighborhood … the broken down parks and the street lights, and the graffiti, and the broken down cars. The different factors combined make a neighborhood that some might call a ghetto or a neighborhood in disrepair.” Muttaqi said that local kids have expressed the same idea. “When we do a survey and we’re trying to talk about safety, they want to talk about how ugly the neighborhood is, and that it makes them not feel safe,” he said. “If there are things to do, where they feel safe, they feel that it impacts youth violence. And I think they’re on to something.”

For example, Muttaqi said the West Ninth Street neighborhood, which has seen a surge in violence in the past year, does not have many businesses, stores or other places for residents to go. “The main thing they have is [a] huge park that has a huge field, and trees and picnic tables. But the gangs pretty much run the park,” Muttaqi said. “The neighborhood assets approach would be to revamp that park, make it user-friendly, get people utilizing it.”

Other parts of Santa Rosa have dealt with similar issues, and have worked with police and service agencies to “take back” their neighborhoods. (SEE SPOTLIGHTS on Apple Valley page 25 and South Park page 26)

Evolution from Mayor’s Gang Prevention Task Force to Santa Rosa Violence Prevention Partnership

When Muttaqi was hired as the new Program Manager for The Partnership in 2013, he entered an organization that was ready to go to the next level. “It started out [in 2003] as a Task Force, and there were maybe ten people around the table. But now it’s evolved to this city-regional collaboration with over 50 organizations,” he said. Normally a “mayor’s task force” is a specific group of people who come together for about a year to look at a problem and make recommendations to a city council. But the Mayor’s Gang Prevention Task Force was doing so much more. “It evolved into this bigger identity, but
the name never evolved,“ Muttaqi said.

An effort to “re-brand” The Partnership began in 2014. With community input, outside marketing help, and lots of meetings, it was determined that the term “Gang Task Force” had to go. It was interpreted by many people in the community to be an arm of law enforcement, to do gang sweeps and make arrests. That definition did not sit well with many of the gang-prevention partners who work directly with kids and families. Also, the effort was no longer just the “Mayor’s,” but really a partnership with everyone in the community. The Mayor’s Gang Prevention Task Force was re-branded, and is now called the “Santa Rosa Violence Prevention Partnership,” or simply “The Partnership.” The tagline associated with the new logo also speaks to the purpose of the Partnership: Community Awareness, Youth Development and Safe Neighborhoods.

Muttaqi said the goal is to have all residents in Santa Rosa understand that “there is an issue that we have in our community — we’re not in denial — that requires some strategic approaches. It behooves all of us to make those investments. And if we get those right, then it does equate into a better sense of safety for the entire community and hopefully for the young people who receive those services.”

Community Safety Scorecard

Although the number of violent crimes in a particular neighborhood can be counted, it’s harder to measure something like fear or a feeling of safety. One Los Angeles-based organization has developed a way to look at both the good (protective factors) and the bad (risk factors) in different neighborhoods, then combine that with data about crime and education, to give an overall idea of safety.

That organization, Advancement Project’s Urban Peace program, was hired to create a report for Santa Rosa called a “Community Safety Scorecard.” The report, released in Fall 2015, divides Santa Rosa into nine zones, and identifies health and safety indicators across four domains: Economic Conditions, School Conditions, Crime and Safety, and Family and Community Connectedness. The Scorecard is a tool and system for shared accountability, highlighting where the community, government and the private sector have the most work to do to deliver basic safety, and thus encourage healthy living conditions for all residents.

Serena Lienau, Program Analyst with The Partnership, worked with Advancement Project to create the Community Safety Scorecard. “The Scorecard provides us with an opportunity to not only look at crime and safety statistics, but also other critical indicators that help to tell the story of what our youth are being exposed to so we can better understand and identify ways to reduce, and ultimately prevent, youth violence,” she said. At both the physical level (obesity and lack of physical activity), and the mental health level (stress and anxiety), Santa Rosa residents in low-income, high-need areas suffer the ill effects of widespread violence. All people, regardless of their socio-economic status, deserve the right to
good health, safety and access to resources that help sustain their well-being.

Moving Forward - A Public Health Approach

The designation of youth violence, including gang violence, as a public health issue means that it is not just a concern for law enforcement, but that it touches everyone’s life within a community. Public health brings a strong problem-solving approach that has worked on other issues, such as encouraging prenatal care. The public health approach — monitoring trends, researching risk and protective factors, evaluating interventions, supporting the dissemination and implementation of evidence-based strategies — is an important complement to law enforcement efforts.2

In 2013, the National Institute of Justice and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published Changing Course: Preventing Gang Membership to address the challenge of youth gangs in America. In the book (available in a free Web version at nij.gov), some of the nation’s top criminal justice and public health experts look at the evidence. They write: “The consequences of gangs — and the burden they place on the law enforcement and public health systems in our communities — are significant. People who work in the fields of public health and public safety know that efforts to address the problem after kids have already joined gangs are not enough. To realize a significant and lasting reduction in youth gang activity, we must prevent young people from joining gangs in the first place.”3

Rita Scardaci, retired Sonoma County Director of Health Services, was previously on the Policy Team of the Santa Rosa Violence Prevention Partnership. She said The Partnership has been “really looking at what do you measure to show a reduction in gang violence in a community?”

In addition to the Community Safety Scorecard, mentioned above, The Partnership has access to a report that Health Services

Here are some things we know from the research:

• The large majority of kids who join a gang do so at a very early age — between 11 and 15 years old.
• Joining a gang is part of a life course; therefore, it is important to understand the risk factors for children starting at birth.
• Very early prevention efforts — including programs focusing on low-income pregnant mothers and families with young children — show promising results.
• Communities — not just classrooms — should be regarded as a valuable resource for reaching kids at risk of joining gangs.
• Girls join gangs in large numbers; therefore, some prevention efforts should address gender-specific concerns. From National Institute of Justice, “Changing Course: Preventing Gang Membership.”

1. Communities for Disease Control and Prevention, “CDC and NUF Book Guides Gang-Joining Prevention Efforts,”
released in May 2014, which ranked Sonoma County’s 99 census tracts (geographic regions). “A Portrait of Sonoma County,” ranks the tracts according to a human development index — a measure of well-being that includes health, education and income factors. The report showed large disparities in well-being between the east and west sides of Santa Rosa, which is consistent with the findings of the Community Safety Scorecard. Roseland Creek, a mostly Latino census tract located between West Avenue and Stony Point Road south of Sebastopol Road in the unincorporated Roseland area west of Santa Rosa, had the lowest index at 2.79 out of a possible 10. East Bennett Valley, an affluent, nearly all-white tract on the east side of Santa Rosa, had the county’s top index at 8.47. Such documents help ensure that evidence-based strategies are responsive to the community’s needs.

Scardaci emphasized that gang and violence prevention really means addressing poverty, and that it affects everyone in Santa Rosa, not just residents of the more disadvantaged parts of the City. “There’s an economic cost to everyone. There’s also a societal cost. In the public school system, the greater the amount of time, energy and money that is spent to bring kids along in failing situations is taking something directly away from the rest of those students and from that community,” she said. “The money that is spent on incarceration and the criminal justice system,” she continued, “is money that is not going to be spent on roads and taking care of parks and other activities that the general population would benefit from.”

Oscar Chavez, Assistant Director of Human Services, agreed that improving the most impoverished areas of Santa Rosa — adding more sidewalks, parks, and healthy food options — will help improve outcomes regarding gangs and violence. “Our community is divided along race and class, and in our low-income communities, particularly southwest Santa Rosa, we have had white and affluent flight over the years. It’s left schools with high concentrations of economically disadvantaged children, high concentration of English language learners,” he said. When more affluent families leave schools, “they take the social capital with them. So children are not having the same education as somebody in a different part of our community. I think recognizing that some schools need to be

resourced differently will go a long way in making sure that our children have equality of opportunity,” Chavez explained.

The former Superintendent of Santa Rosa City Schools, Socorro Shiels, was one of several superintendents to sit on the Policy Team of The Partnership. She said schools already are “the backbone” partners in any effort to reach youth and families, because they are the places where students and families come nearly every day.

Shiels agreed with Chavez that place — where you live — matters. “Our community needs to begin very critical, crucial, honest — and potentially difficult — conversations about equity in our community,” she said. “So are there jobs? Are there supermarkets? Are there opportunities for students and for families in every corner of our community to live a successful, healthy, thriving life?”

“I think we can’t ignore the role race and ethnicity play in our society in general, and can’t believe that it’s happening everywhere, but not here in Sonoma County or Santa Rosa. It’s not an issue of blame. It’s not an issue of fault, but of recognizing it,” Shiels said. “Realizing that different people, by how they look, where they live, experience Santa Rosa differently.” Shiels said that schools are working to address inequities and “to the extent that our schools can be used as spaces and places to create even more opportunity — beyond the literal school day — we are excited to partner with the City and other community organizations to bring those opportunities to our students and families."

Jaime Peñaherrera, the City’s new Director of Community Engagement, oversees The Partnership and agrees with Shiels and Chavez. “It’s very important not only to recognize the social determinants of health that negatively impact our youth and families, but also to address these disparities by implementing evidence-based intervention programs that can positively influence our overall community well-being,” he said. Peñaherrera said that addressing these disparities in the community is a key focus for the Partnership moving forward, “especially for neighborhoods identified in both the Scorecard and Portrait of Sonoma County.”

With members of The Partnership already committed to communicating and collaborating with each other, Scardaci said the public needs to be drawn into the discussion. “The preeminent place where [The Partnership] should be focused is getting the community engaged about why this issue is important and how when one kid fails in school, the whole community fails,” she said. “It’s about workforce development. It’s about a strong economy. It’s about helping families — entire families — move out of poverty.”
Dead bodies, drug arrests and foot chases. Those are the things that Santa Rosa Police Captain Craig Schwartz remembers about the Apple Valley neighborhood in the 1990s, when he was a patrol officer there. “There was a real cat-and-mouse game going on between the police and the gang members and the drug dealers,” Schwartz said. “I would either see or hear gunfire almost every night.”

The neighborhood was basically two small, dead-end streets on the city’s northwest side — Apple Valley Lane and Papago Court — that were known for their neglected rental units and one of the highest crime rates in the city. But the tiny neighborhood also housed families, many of them recent immigrants. Conditions in Apple Valley began to change in the late 1990s when Burbank Housing Development Corporation bought more than 100 rental units and started to fix them up as part of the city’s first Neighborhood Revitalization Program (NRP).

Through NRP, the City coordinated building and fire inspections; low-interest loans for building rehabilitation; youth after-school programs through the Recreation and Parks Department; and hired a bilingual Community Outreach Specialist to help residents connect with resources and coordinate cultural events.

Schwartz said he worked with a group known as the Apple Valley Lane - Papago Court Crime Elimination Committee. “Instead of just being a police problem to deal with crime in the area, it became more of a collaboration to deal with the issues. I credit the City and Burbank Housing to go in there and fix a lot of the structural problems and clean up the area. They also did a better job trying to screen tenants,” he said.

Residents who wanted a change got to know each other. They held regular neighborhood association meetings, went on “night walks” together, and attended community events and barbecues. If they spotted graffiti, they would call it in to the City’s abatement program, which would clean it up the same day. Residents also became less afraid to call the Police Department’s anonymous tip line and report gang activity or violence.

The City continues to invest resources in the Apple Valley neighborhood that support youth and families, including an Activity Center operated by Santa Rosa Recreation & Parks and a community garden organized and coordinated by residents. “That neighborhood seems to be a much better place and a much different environment than it was 20 years ago,” Schwartz said.
In April 2009, the air in Santa Rosa’s South Park neighborhood, near the Sonoma County Fairgrounds, was thick with fear. A 17-year-old boy had been shot and killed because of a gang rivalry, just blocks from Martin Luther King Jr. Park. After that murder, many kids stopped going to the youth center in the park. Vince Harper, Assistant Director of Community Engagement for CAP Sonoma, said the murder “struck a chord with the neighborhood. People weren’t coming out any more.”

Deisy Vargas was a CAP Sonoma youth leader who asked members of the South Park neighborhood to help plan a summer event to get people back outside. She said she told them, “This is your neighborhood and you need to take over.” The South Park Summer Day & Night Festival was born. It included games, performances and community resource tables.

Harper said the event, which lasted from noon to 11:30 p.m., purposely ended with a movie at night, to “symbolically take back the park. You know night is the time when people are most vulnerable and concerned.”

The Festival has become an annual summer event that draws hundreds of people from throughout the community.

Since 2009, the City rehabilitated the park itself to make it more family-friendly. Harper said they pulled out an old baseball backstop and took away some of the hiding places that gang members would use. “All these things help bring about change,” he said.

In 2011, Santa Rosa Police helped find funds to create a mural on the back wall of the youth center, a building that was often tagged with gang graffiti. The mural depicts Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, and local people who impacted the South Park community. “We wanted to show kids something positive,” Vargas said. “It’s beautiful, and people drive by it and see something beautiful in the neighborhood. That also brings safety.”

Neighborhood pride has brought people back outside. “There are women who walk in the park in the evening and the morning. There’s soccer and basketball. All things you want to see in a park,” Harper said. “The approach of working together — those better relations — have made a real change in the neighborhood. There’s still work that needs to be done, but it’s so much better.”
“I think this story could have gone a lot of different ways,” said Matt Martin, Chief Executive Officer of SAY. “The fact that we’ve been able to really, overall, keep Santa Rosa safe and the region safe — compared to other like-sized communities throughout Northern California and the Bay Area region — is something that is remarkable. The community of Santa Rosa deserves a lot of accolades for making that upstream investment decision when it was such a critical time to do so.”

Prevention means going “upstream” and fixing a problem at the source, instead of waiting “downstream” and trying to save victims one by one.

Oscar Chavez, Assistant Director of the Sonoma County Department of Human Services, explained, “to address the gang problem, it’s not really about addressing gangs. It’s really about how we invest in maintaining and creating healthy communities and healthy families.”

When voters approved Measure O eleven years ago, they voted to not only improve public safety and law enforcement, but also to invest in our families and community.

Jaime Peñaherrera, Director of Community Engagement for the City of Santa Rosa agrees, “It takes an entire community to do this work, and having the ongoing support of the members of The Partnership, underscores the power of a network of dedicated individuals and the beneficial transformation that can occur when people are committed to help our youth and our community.”

We have learned from our successes and failures during the past decade. We have also learned to keep listening to each other and working together. Most importantly, we have developed a Partnership that will continue to move our community forward during the next ten years and beyond.
Become Part of The Partnership!
Our success requires a collaborative effort.
Take Action: #PartnerUpSR

- Apply for our grants
- Refer youth and families for services
- Mentor a youth or provide one with a job
- Join us for our public meetings and events
- Spread the word about our Partnership
- Visit our website
- Follow us on Facebook

Contact Us
(Se habla español)

Jaime Peñaherrera
Community Engagement Director
(707) 543-3023
jpenaherrera@srcity.org

Beatriz Florez Huertas
Community Outreach Specialist
(707) 543-4671
bflorez@srcity.org

Serena Lienau
Interim Program Manager
(707) 543-3457
slienau@srcity.org

Angelique Sweetman
Senior Administrative Assistant
(707) 543-4676
asweetman@srcity.org

www.ThePartnershipSR.org /PartnerUpSR