

# Alexandria Gang Prevention Community Task Force

## Minutes

Wednesday

January 17, 2024

6:00 p.m. – 8:00 p.m.

Charles Houston Recreation Center

901 Wythe Street, Alexandria, VA 22314

- ❖ Please advise Chairman Dillon of any discrepancies regarding attendance. It is respectfully noted that Task Force members are expected to attend at least 75% of scheduled meetings. Please advise Chairman Dillon if you need to be excused.

Task Force Members Present: Councilwoman Alyia Gaskins (Alexandria City Council), Councilman Canek Aguirre (Alexandria City Council), Jim Dillon (Chair, Business Community), Dana Wedeles (City Manager's Office), Rachael Dischner (Elementary School Representative), Tim Brannon (Francis C. Hammond Middle School), Noraine Buttar (City Manager's Representative/DCHS Representative), Roberto Gomez (Member, Parent of Youth), Frank Broomell (Citizen Representative), and Brian Kirkes (Citizen Representative)

Senior Policy Group on Gangs Members Present: Sheriff Sean Casey (Alexandria Sheriff's Office) and Mike Mackey (Alexandria Court Service Unit)

Guests/Staff: Raul Pedroso (Assistant Chief, Alexandria Police Department), Ian Rachal (Northern Virginia Juvenile Detention Center), Michael Diggins (Alexandria City Public Schools), John Contreras (Alexandria City Public Schools), Deputy Carlos Canas (Alexandria Sheriff's Office), Michael Johnson (Alexandria Police Department), and Carlos Mendieta (Alexandria Court Service Unit)

Alexandria Gang Prevention Community Task Force Members:

1. Councilman Canek Aguirre (Member, Alexandria City Council)
2. Councilwoman Alyia Gaskins (Member, Alexandria City Council)
3. Ms. Dana Wedeles (City Manager's Representative)
4. Ms. Noraine Buttar (DCHS Representative)
5. Mr. Michael Burch (Alexandria City High School Representative)
6. Mr. Tim Brannon (Francis C. Hammond Middle School, Middle School Representative)
7. Ms. Rachael Dischner (Elementary School Representative)
8. Mr. Steve Nelson (African American Community Representative)

9. Mr. Bryan Kirkes (Citizen Member, At-Large)
  10. Mr. Jim Dillon (Chair/Business Community Representative)
  11. Ms. Marilyn Nevy Cruz (Vice Chair/Latino Community Representative)
  12. Reverend Anthony T. Oliver (Faith Based Community Representative)
  13. Mr. Roberto Gomez (Parent Representative)
  14. Mr. Mubashir Adelaja (At-Large, Representing Youth of the City)
  15. Mr. Everin Zelaya (At-Large, Representing Youth of the City)
  16. Mr. Frank Broomell (Citizen Member, At-Large)
  17. (ARHA Representative) – Vacant
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1. Call to Order and Roll Call: Chair Dillon called the meeting to order at 6:02 p.m. All present confirmed their attendance. Chair Dillon announced vacancy filled
  2. Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes: On October 18, 2023, there was not a quorum to approve meeting minutes from September 20. Thus, minutes from September 20 and October 18 were approved.
  3. Our Lenses:
    - Focus on At-Risk and At-Promise kids, versus crew and gang members
    - Widen our age target, as early as 5<sup>th</sup> grade, while not losing site of the parents
    - Build opportunities and support outside of school and home
    - Look more critically at areas that face the biggest challenges
    - Advocate to support our partner efforts
  4. City Council Opening Comments: Councilwoman Gaskins announced that on Saturday, February 3, Percy White will be posthumously recognized at the Child Advocacy Center's Annual Gala. He will receive an Outstanding Dedication to Alexandria's Children Award at the Durant Center. Percy White will be recognized for his outstanding dedication to the City of Alexandria and its youth.
  5. Public Comment: None.
  6. Partner and Task Force Member Updates:
    - Sheriff Casey expressed his happiness to be present and back with the task force.
    - Deputy Canas similarly expressed his commitment to the task force and interest in doing soccer activities; he expressed that the Sheriff can contribute some funding to soccer activities.
    - Raul Pedroso introduced himself as the new Assistant Chief with the Alexandria Police Department.

- Sgt. Torrance announced SROs will be engaging in several different trainings this coming year.
- Michael Johnson said there is a meeting tomorrow at 10 a.m. at the police department to plan for cookouts this year.
- Ms. Buttar announced youth ambassadors will be presenting at the City Council on Tuesday 1/23 to recommend different types of programming for youth, based on feedback from the youth summit that occurred this past November.
- Mr. Mackey announced that the G.R.E.A.T. (Gang Resistance Education And Training) program will be implemented this year. The youth in this program will be court involved. The evidence-based program will be rolling throughout the year, anywhere from 5 -12 youth will be participating.
- Councilman Aguirre shared that efforts will be made to secure additional funding for Intervention Prevention and Education (IPE) program during the upcoming budget meetings.
- Mr. Daniele announced that this month is National Mentoring Month and mentioned the launch of Mentor University, a virtual opportunity for caring adults to take free online courses to improve their capacity to mentor youth. He also mentioned multiple school presentations and workshops were conducted in previous months, in collaboration with Northern Virginia Family Service (NVFS) IPE counselors and substance abuse coordinators from ACPS. Lastly, he announced that the Junior City Academy is projected to kick off on April 4.

7. Northern Virginia Youth Detention Center:

- Ian Rachal stated that “business has picked up” at the Northern Virginia Juvenile Detention Center (NVJDC), averaging a daily population of 26 kids. The average length of stay for a youth at NVJDC is 17 days. Kids who are placed at the NVJDC are brought in for a range of infractions, and the center has seen a rising number of cases involving drugs, particularly marijuana and fentanyl. According to Mr. Rachal, the biggest challenge is not the number of kids, but rather the level of acuity and severity of the problems they are facing.
- Mr. Rachal expressed that the NVJDC is not necessarily equipped, or that the level of issues is unprecedented.
- Roberto Gomez talked briefly about his program, Cornerstone Craftsman, that works with high risk and court involved youth. He talked about how youth tend to show up for opportunities to learn skilled trades and get paid for it. Mr. Gomez talked about how if kids are not given opportunities, they will likely go back to what they know, so Cornerstone Craftsman gives them an opportunity to learn skilled trades as alternatives to what they know and what they are used to. Mr. Gomez will be partnering with NVJDC to help the kids who are there so they have a way to use their time productively and make money during their transition back to their communities.
- Bennie Evans mentioned the possibility of having a juvenile treatment court in addition adult drug treatment court. He referenced the National Association of Drug Court Professionals (NADCP).
- Ms. Rachael Dischner talked about how ACPS substance abuse programs could be a potential partnership. She mentioned that there are now drug related issues

occurring at the elementary school level, and mentioned her level of surprise about how parents do not really know about the extent of the drug issues with their kids.

- Mr. Brian Kirkes asked about gang trends in detention. Mr. Rachal mentioned that there are less of the really well known gangs and more of a crew presence at the NVJDC.
- Councilwoman Gaskins asked about the physical condition of the facility. Mr. Rachal said there are certain things that need to be fixed, but overall it is in pretty good condition. Drug treatment would require the most change, as the facility was not set up for this purpose. Councilwoman Gaskins asked about the population in regards to proportion of Alexandria kids versus kids from other jurisdictions. Mr. Rachal stated Alexandria kids make up the majority, although there are Arlington kids as well.
- Chair Dillon again highlighted Cornerstone Craftsman and how impactful this program could be on the center, as well as other potential vendors who can become involved.
- Mr. Mike Mackey mentioned there will be research into what types of crimes are being committed and how that plays into the revolving door for some youth when it comes to the detention center.
- Dana Wedeles asked about the population at Shelter Care. Ian Rachal mentioned that there are 14 beds and they are mostly occupied by Alexandria youth. He said Shelter Care is dealing with the same problems as the NVJDC. For example, there is concern that children are getting access to a drug while in Shelter Care via outside exposure during appointments, family member visits, etc. Shelter Care is a less restrictive environment, making this an ongoing concern.
- The owner of the BeeLiner Diner on King St. offered his restaurant as a Safe Place in the event of an emergency situation at the Bradlee Shopping Center. Mr. Johnson mentioned offering training in order to make it a certified Safe Place.
- Mr. Gomez asked about the severity of the crimes at the NVJDC and the number of Alexandria residents. Mr. Rachal said that kids in the center are there for charges such as drug possession, robbery, even one resident for murder. The severity of the offenses has increased. For example, a kid's first time in the center is for simple possession, the second time is for distribution, and the charges tend to escalate.
- Councilwoman Gaskins mentioned there have been several conversations across different commissions regarding the detention center, and she proposed getting these groups aligned on the topic.
- Mr. Mackey mentioned the spectrum of reasons why a kid is ordered into the NVJDC, from serious crimes to being there for their own safety.

#### 8. Chairman's Readout:

- Chair Dillon had conversations with gang task force members and received the following feedback about the status of the task force:
- Task Force members said there is a clear vision, direction, and mission, there is regular and transparent communication, there is a young adult and youth voice

during the meetings, the meetings are focused on action, there is a good push for people to lead, and it is good that we are trying to create new partnerships.

- Task Force members mentioned the following ideas to improve: mix in overall teen wellness with gang prevention; target younger age ranges and potentially mentor younger kids around 10 – 12 year old; teach anger management; share more successes; engage with Casa Chirilagua; engage with more young people; engage different perspectives; conversation blurs between gang activity and violence; there are not enough prosocial activities for kids; we are missing opportunities to help different communities; need to engage more with SAPCA (substance abuse coalition)
- Additionally, a question was raised about what City Council expects from the AGPCTF. There was a thought about how can we come into alignment with Council priorities, reach parents, engage with the PTA and have more adult education. Someone mentioned that ACPS is breaking the gangs up in school, but gang and crew activity is becoming more prevalent are happening in the community. There was also mention that the Afghan population is the largest growing group at ACHS.
- Chair Dillon mentioned how gang task force members are either information providers vs. or action-oriented contributors, and he requested each member examine and evaluate which category they fall into.
- NOVA RAFT – Owner stated that top needs include situational awareness – to communicate with kids and family.
- There was mentioned regarding a need to hire a Dari speaker, a parent liaison, at Junior and High School at Recreation Center – these were some ideas to help reach Afghan population.
- Chair Dillon discussed a mapping idea with multiple overlays. He suggested we take a look at the hot zones for general crime in the City on the first level. On the second layer, we take a look at the map with the different ages (for example, 13 - 21). On the third layer, we have resources and opportunities that may or may not be currently utilized or need strengthening.
- Councilwoman Gaskins mentioned that Dana Wedeles is working on similar maps.
- Councilman Aguirre mentioned “low hanging fruit” in utilizing members of the community who speak different languages.
- Rachael Dischner mentioned the importance of getting information out there about resources available in the community.
- Dana Wedeles said Ramsay Recreation Center is hiring a Dari speaker and asked for potential assistance from NOVA Raft for hiring more.
- There was mention of a need to establish and enhance cultural competencies.
- Timothy Brannon said there is a large population of Afghan students in the middle schools. He mentioned that NOVA RAFT didn’t even exist two years ago, but since being formed, they have helped these kids in a variety of aspects, such as connecting kids and families with resources and meeting their needs.
- Bennie Evans mentioned two cultural factions in conflict with each other.
- Rachael mentioned exploring if there are ways we can replicate what NOVA RAFT does in the Afghan community and apply it to other communities.

9. New Topics:

- Deputy Canas mentioned the idea of identifying local gang members residence, specifically those who are adults, and putting their location on a map as well.
- Bryan Kirkes asked about the ACPS tip line and if it's being used, is effective, etc. Mr. Diggins said there are concerns about kids not wanting to share information for safety reasons. Says that more adults are using the tip line than students.
- Mr. Diggins announced that on February 24, ACHS will host "Your Future Today" The target of this one day mentoring event is African American males. He said there will be different sessions to address different developmental assets in youth.
- Mr. Diggins mentioned there may gaps in engaging youth with different opportunities.
- Chair Dillon announced the Pillars Series will be continuing January 30.

10. Administrative Items:

- Task Force members shall attend at least 75 percent of the meetings of the bodies on which they serve each year.
- Dana Wedeles was recently designated to the Task Force, representing the City Manager's office. There are two remaining vacancies (**ARHA Representative or ARHA Resident and School Board Representative**).

11. Next Meeting: Wednesday, March 20, 2024, 6:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m. at Charles Houston Recreation Center.

**Remaining 2024 Schedule**

March 20<sup>th</sup>

May 15<sup>th</sup>

June 26<sup>th</sup>

September 18<sup>th</sup>

November 20<sup>th</sup>

12. Meeting Adjourn: 7:49 p.m.