

## Gang experts seek new approach

By Robert S. Hong, Staff Writer

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PASADENA - Some of the region's top gang experts gathered in Pasadena this week, and most agreed with community worker William "Blinky" Rodriguez's assessment of the county's dire gang situation.

"We cannot arrest our way out of this," said Rodriguez, executive director of the Communities in Schools anti-gang programs, who sat on a panel of gang intervention specialists at the Western Justice Center on Monday.

Rodriguez, who helped broker a gang peace treaty, is among just a small group of gang experts working directly with gang members to end violence and crime, said Nelson Pichardo, who moderated the panel discussion.

"There are fewer and fewer champions out there tackling the issue of gang violence," he said.

The center has regularly held gang conferences and town hall-style meetings. Monday night's focused on the different ways activists interact with gangs and how to help communities beset by gang violence.

In recent months, gang shootings have claimed the lives of both gang members and residents in the San Gabriel Valley. But that trend is nothing new, the panelists said.

They agreed that gang suppression and aggressive arrests by police should not be the only approach.

"The prison is not a place you get rehabilitated - it's a college for crime," said Alex Sanchez, executive director of Homies Unidos in Los Angeles.

To stop gang violence, the panelists said, gang experts and others who want

to help need to reach out to gang leaders. Often, the leaders are the only ones with the power to call a cease fire when gang rivalries flare up, the experts said.

"The only way to do intervention successfully is to talk to the people that are doing the shooting - there is no other way," said Noreen McClendon, vice president and executive director of Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles.

They also discussed how to involve families and provide teens with positive role models.

Last year in Pasadena, 10 homicides, all of them gang-related, occurred. Although the level of violence has gone down since then, this past weekend three men were shot.

Pasadena police, however, have not confirmed whether the shootings were gang related.

Tarik Ross, a Northwest Commissioner in Pasadena and a community activist who works with young people, said the concepts discussed by the panel ring true for Pasadena.

He has worked directly with gang members and believes, like the other panelists, that it will take a multifaceted effort to attack the problem of gangs.

"Any long-term solution has to be practitioner-based and practitioner-driven," he said. "There is no more effective way."

[robert.hong@sgvn.com](mailto:robert.hong@sgvn.com)

(626) 578-6300, Ext. 4586

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