Denver's Montbello neighborhood gets rolling on federal program to curb youth violence

By Yesenia Robles
The Denver Post

Taleah Howard, left, holds her daughter's hand, Tami'Jaye Howard, 2, along with family friend Jazmine Lockett as they cross the street to their apartment Thursday in Montbello. Members of the Montbello community launches talks about reducing violence in the neighborhood. (RJ Sangosti, The Denver Post)

A $6.5 million federal award was slow to arrive, delaying a five-year project to research — and decrease — youth violence in Denver's Montbello neighborhood. But the program is finally taking off this week.

Interested community members met Thursday and will meet again this morning at the Evie Dennis Campus to form two boards that will be tasked with different areas of the project.

"We should be back on track by late fall," said Del Elliott, founding director of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado at Boulder. "It's not a concern."

The award, funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, flows through an Academic Center of Excellence award. Five other communities also are receiving funding, including Baltimore and Chicago.

The Montbello project is led by researchers from the Boulder campus and the CU School of Medicine, in partnership with the CDC.
"It's a rare thing to have such a partnership, but it presents a real opportunity for real change," said Dr. Eric Sigel, one of the project investigators from the Children's Hospital. "My goal is of getting the health care community involved in intervention and prevention."

As a pediatrician, Sigel said he sees a lot of at-risk kids, some of whom open up to him. He said he believes there is a role for health care professionals to help youth.

Elliott said the plan is to have neighborhood volunteers on the ground by March administering community surveys to 10- to 24-year-olds as well as all parents. The aim is to identify attitudes in the community and pinpoint risk factors for children.

Schools in the neighborhood are also signing up to help administer surveys to children in grades 4 through 12. The first set of data may be available by June and will help the boards determine what kinds of programs are required to address problem areas.

An introduction on Thursday presented current research in the areas of youth violence, and discredited many well-known approaches, including boot camps, police D.A.R.E. programs, neighborhood watches, and scared-straight programs.

"What else is left?" community members in the audience joked afterward.

Researchers at CU say there is evidence to suggest that effective and cost-effective programs include nursing home visitation programs, Big Brothers Big Sisters, and life-skills training.

"When these programs work and can pay for themselves, that's how these programs sell themselves," Elliott said.

None of those programs is necessarily being targeted for use in Montbello yet, however.

"Until the risk assessment is completed, we won't know what we need," Elliott said. "We're not doing this to the community, we are doing this in partnership with the community."

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