CU Boulder Program Targets Youth Violence in Northeast Denver

By Kirk Siegler

A five year project that aims to lower a recent alarming rise in youth violence in some of Denver’s poorest neighborhoods is underway.

The Centers for Disease Control awarded the University of Colorado at Boulder a $6.5 million grant to tackle gang and youth violence in northeast Denver, specifically the Montbello neighborhood near Denver International Airport.

The project’s backers met with community leaders and neighborhood activists Thursday and Friday in northeast Denver.

"It's not immediate change, it has to be a whole process of community buy-in, community investments, commitments to the issue," said Dr. Eric Sigel, a pediatrician at the CU med school and co-investigator on the project.

Sigel said in this first year, researchers will go door to door, surveying teens and others to try and get a handle on the breadth of the problem. A community board that formed at meetings in Montbello Thursday and Friday will then come up with an action plan and launch programs that organizers say have worked in other cities. Almost everyone attending those meetings agreed the biggest hurdle right away would simply be getting accurate data.

Still, the effort is based on a model the CDC has promoted successfully in other tough neighborhoods around the country.

"Montbello is a great community, and I just think it's under-served in some instances," said Sharika Towers, a member of the new community board.

Towers lives in Montbello and also works for a city of Denver program called "Safe Cities," which targets at-risk youth in public schools. She said youth violence has escalated dramatically in recent years due to the poor economy and other factors stressing families. Towers said it's led to a lot of kids who are angry and vulnerable to violent activities.

"I'm happy to see the resources out here and I hope it really makes a difference," she said.

The CU project will specifically target 10 to 24 year olds and aim to reduce violent crime rates, but also incidents of drug and alcohol abuse and bullying.