



Fighting gangs from inside, out

Correctional facility becomes first in state to operate anti-gang program, which offers job training, remedial education, sense of family

BY MITCHELL FREEDMAN

Newsday Staff Writer

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Ceremonially signing a \$25,000 check, Suffolk Sheriff Vincent F. DeMarco yesterday made the Riverhead correctional facility the state's first county jail to run an anti-gang program with the Council for Unity, which operates school and community anti-gang programs.

Riverhead thus became the first community in New York State to team a jail-based program with a school-based one, also run by the council, a national not-for-profit group. And, the Riverhead Police Department is working to develop a companion anti-gang program with the council.

The program is designed to show gang members who are inmates that there is an alternative to street violence, and that gang membership often leads to long jail time, with former gang members sharing their own experiences. It offers job training and remedial education, and it strives to give those who enroll a sense of belonging to a different kind of family.

Founded in Brooklyn in 1975, the Council for Unity started its first jail-based chapter in 2004 at Sing Sing. The council says about 100,000 youths take part in its various programs. It has about 60 programs in New York, Texas and California.

"The cycle [of gang membership] ends here," said Robert DeSena, president of the Manhattan-based council and recipient of the \$25,000 from the sheriff.

One of the goals is to train gang members so they can find a job when they get out of jail. Some of them end up working for the council as youth counselors, DeSena said.

The Riverhead school program started last year as an after-school activity and is now given as a two-credit class.

Officials in Brentwood and Central Islip are looking at similar school programs, according to Eastern Suffolk Board of Cooperative Educational Services.

The jail-based program, which is expected to start in the next few weeks with a pilot class for about 20 gang members, is paid for by the prisoners themselves. The money comes from a special fund built with profits from the jail commissary.

Eventually, DeMarco said, the jail program will accept as many of the estimated 400 gang members in Riverhead's jail who are interested.

"Gangs are the biggest threat to public safety on Long Island," DeMarco said. "... We want them [gang members] to leave here with a job, to drop their colors, and don't come back."

Riverhead Supervisor Phil Cardinale said he was optimistic that the combined program at the jail and in the town could work to reduce gang membership, because it provides youths with something to look forward to. "Hopefulness is what attracted me to it, hopefulness with a history of results."