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## **Youth Diversion Program in Commerce, California<sup>1</sup>**

*Presenter:*

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### **Background**

Commerce, a heavily industrialized city with 12,500 residents, is located six miles southeast of Los Angeles, bordered by East Los Angeles on the north and Bell Gardens on the south. Incorporated in 1960, the city has a strong tradition of commitment to youth through education, libraries, and sports. The city has been working on issues related to gangs since 1982.

In late 1989, the city of Commerce suffered its first drive-by shooting. In early 1990, staff of the Social Services Division of the City of Commerce Department of Parks and Recreation and other members of the community noted attempts by a local gang to expand its membership into previously unaffected areas of Commerce. Residents complained to City Council regarding drug activity, graffiti, and vandalism produced by gang members.

As a result the Social Services Division established a Community Youth Gang Task Force, drawing individuals from City Council, law enforcement agencies, the Probation Department, schools, community-based organizations, and the community at large to address the issue of youth delinquency in Commerce. The Task Force currently meets on the second Wednesday of every month, or when an emergency arises requiring collaboration amongst agencies.

### **Program Description**

#### **Purpose and Goals**

The purposes of the Community Youth Gang Task Force are to:

- (1) coordinate community resources, discuss and develop policies, and recommend programming geared to controlling delinquent activity in Commerce;
- (2) unite as a community to insure the public safety of Commerce residents; and
- (3) maintain and protect the city's image as a safe environment to live and raise a family.

Special goals of the Task Force are as follows:

- a. *Gangs*: To reduce gang membership amongst city of Commerce youth. Ultimately to control the existence of gangs within the boundaries of Commerce.
- b. *Graffiti Eradication*: To reduce incidents of graffiti and recover restitution for damages incurred. To encourage and support legislation addressing gang-related issues.
- c. *Parent Education/Awareness*: To assist city of Commerce families by helping them to analyze their needs and providing parents with the knowledge to regain control of their own children. To help parents

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<sup>1</sup> Material is taken edited by Witt, P.A., & Crompton, J.L. (Eds.). (1996). *Recreation programs that work for at-risk youth: The challenge of shaping the future*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, Inc. Out of print, used by permission of publisher

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understand their legal rights, responsibilities, and liabilities.

d. *Prevention:* To continually educate Commerce children that gang activity is unacceptable behavior. To establish an early identification system of tracking and diverting high-risk youth to positive activity at an earlier phase of child development.

e. *Employment:* To develop employment opportunities and training for youth 14-21 years of age.

f. *Community Mobilization:*

i. To develop a spirit of community pride and involvement amongst residents, employees, churches, and local businesses.

ii. To unite efforts between City Council, the community, law enforcement, courts, the probation department, schools, all city departments, neighborhood watch groups, community-based organizations, etc.

iii. To plan, implement, and enforce a comprehensive community plan of action that ensures the utilization of available resources.

iv. To communicate actively and effectively toward the goal of controlling gangs in the city of Commerce.

### Programs

Through the efforts of the Task Force and a number of agencies in the community, a variety of services have been developed to help meet these goals. The City of Commerce Youth Diversion Program (YDP) helps to coordinate many of these strategies to prevent and divert youth from becoming involved in illegal and/or gang-related activities.

The Youth Diversion Program is sponsored by the Social Services Division of the Parks and Recreation Department. The Division operates on an annual budget of \$1,774,783 targeting approximately 4,227 youth (see Exhibit 3A). The Division's budget is 6% of the total city budget.

Commerce's YDP features a community psychological services partnership with the Los Angeles County Probation Department's Gang Alternative Prevention Program (with an in-house probation officer), the Community Gang Task Force, in-house parenting classes, local job placement programs, close work with the Sheriff's Department through the Special Problems Team and Community-Based Policing Program, and education programs focusing on prevention (grades K-6) and intervention (grades 7-12).

**Parent Education** Through a cooperative effort between Montebello Unified School District (MUSD) and Commerce Social Services, bilingual parenting classes are conducted year-round. Other specialized classes focus on issues such as self-esteem, communicating with one's child, and developing listening skills. In addition, guest speakers who deal with topics such as alcoholism or the juvenile justice system, are part of the program. All classes are run by MUSD faculty and a Social Services advisor. Staff time, materials, and the facility are provided by the city, and MUSD Adult Education assumes the cost of the instructor.

**In-House Counseling** A licensed psychological therapist is also available to work directly with troubled youth and parents enrolled in the Gang

### *Exhibit 3A* Youth Diversion Program Budget-1994

G.A.P.P. Los Angeles County Probation	\$ 42,000
Social Services Advisors	333,024
Community Safety Specialist	376,614
Special Problems Team East Los Angeles Sheriff's Office	316,614
Dedicated Sergeant East Los Angeles Sheriff's Office	244,376
Community Psychologist	10,000
Graffiti Removal	200,000
Parenting Classes	4,155
Employment Referral Office	240,000
50/50 Program	8,000
Total	<u>\$1,774,783</u>

Alternative and Prevention Program (G.A.P.P.). The psychologist's services are not limited to G.A.P.P. cases, but are also available to residents requesting counseling.

**Counseling Services** Commerce also contracts with Consolidated Youth Services Network (CYSN) which provides professional licensed counseling dealing with behavior modification, drugs, alcohol, potential suicide, parenting, and other issues. The Sheriff's department diverts arrested Commerce youth to CYSN, which later refers them to Commerce Social Services for follow-up.

**Educational Seminars** These sessions provide a forum to discuss current topics affecting the city and its residents (e.g., drugs, graffiti). Residents have the opportunity to express their opinions and provide the city with viable solutions for dealing with problems.

**Information and Referral** Some families have serious problems, e.g., a family member's addiction, a battered spouse, an elderly relative in need of special services, or an unemployed family member. Often people seek support from friends and relatives, but prefer to avoid the embarrassment of sharing problems with relatives and turn elsewhere for assistance. The Commerce Social Services Division staff is trained to listen to the needs of residents and refer them to the local, state, and federal agencies best qualified to assist them. Social Services staff may also communicate with these agencies on their behalf to explain special circumstances or schedule appointments.

**Employment** The Employment Referral Office places local residents and youth in local industry free of charge. The service averages approximately 500 placements per year.

**Job Training Partnership Act and Summer Youth Employment Program** The city, along with the West San Gabriel Valley Consortium, participates in providing summer employment opportunities for low-income youth between the ages of 14 and 21. Youth must meet eligibility criteria set by the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA)/Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP). Job sites are found throughout city departments. Typical types of work experiences include: gardening, clerical work, and park and recreation assistants. Social Services Division staff are responsible for collecting eligibility paper work of local Commerce youth, and monitoring work sites to ensure credible work experiences.

**50/50 Program** The city utilizes Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) funding to provide low-income youth temporary employment. However, in cases when youths do not meet state eligibility criteria, 50/50 program funds are allocated to partially pay for a youth's salary. This program is utilized for youth 18-21 years of age who respond positively to G.A.P.P. The program is not solely for G.A.P.P. minors; there are cases where Social Services have utilized the program for other youth of Commerce who display the desire to redirect their lives. This program entices local businesses to give troubled youth an opportunity to become employed. The agency says to a business, "Are you looking for an employee? We have somebody here who is at-risk, but has been through our program. He is trying to turn his life around. We believe he can. Give him a shot at this job and we will pay his wages for the first two weeks. If you like him, you keep him. If you don't, then you can terminate him and it has not cost you anything."

**Youth Leadership Development** The Youth Advisory Committee (YAC) is made up of five members (ages 13-19) appointed by the City Council. YAC's primary purpose is to help City Council and staff understand the needs and concerns of Commerce youth. The appointed youth hold two meetings monthly to discuss current events and plan educational projects. All youth are invited to attend meetings. A Social Services Advisor serves as a liaison between the Council and YAC. He or she oversees meetings, trips, and other special events occurring in the city.

The primary objective of the Youth Leadership program is to use YAC and other park development teen groups to teach fundamental management and positive organizational skills, and to promote and increase college enrollment amongst Commerce youth. Youth are taught to take pride and become actively involved in the community. The program provides an alternative for youth who are not active in sports programs sponsored by the city.

**Drug Education** The Substance Abuse Narcotics Education (SANE) and Drug Awareness Resistance Education (DARE) programs are taught by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department in conjunction with the Social Services Division. SANE is a drug awareness program taught to all third and fourth graders at local schools. DARE is implemented in all fifth and sixth grade classes at Suva and Bell Gardens intermediate schools.

**G.A.P.P.**

The Gang Alternative Prevention Program (G.A.P.P.) is a comprehensive approach to prevention. Minors who have demonstrated gang-related behavior such as graffiti, gang-style dress and/or associating with other known gang members (see Exhibit 3B) are referred to the programs by a parent, school, police, probation, and/or local park personnel. Contrary to popular stereotypes, a majority of the cases-52%-came from two-parent homes. Thirty-three percent of the G.A.P.P. cases are known gang members who are considered to be a stage beyond “at-risk” status. Of the 57 cases that have come to G.A.P.P. only one case has been remanded and sent to a youth probation camp.

Youth are directed to G.A.P.P. only after all youth diversion alternatives offered by the Social Services staff are exhausted. To participate, parents and the minor must agree to join G.A.P.P. as a voluntary probationer under the 654 Welfare and Institutions code.

Under the terms of agreement, the minor is required to attend ten weeks of individual or group therapy sessions. If further counseling is needed, the G.A.P.P. Officer will require the youth to attend other sessions. While this is occurring, the youth’s parents are required by the Deputy Probation Officer (DPO) to attend ten parenting classes offered by the city in conjunction with the Montebello Unified School District.

**Networking Resources** G.A.P.P. success is attributable to the vast network of resources it utilizes, including schools, juvenile camps and courts, local police departments and other youth referral agencies. The Commerce G.A.P.P. Office has established this kind of network to ensure that it has all the information on a case, information on possible disciplinary alternatives for each case, and a full range of assistance as necessary.

**Exhibit 3B Dress/Style Found Among Youth in Commerce-1994**

**Rave:** Nonviolent, baggy clothing, usually colorful and/or containing a lot of denim material. Unusual haircuts or shaved heads (often dyed). Piercing of both ears in males (as well as nipples or navels) is common. This group often enjoys dancing for long periods of time.

Party Goers: Underground and warehouse parties and nightclubs.

Music: Techno/house similar to disco sound, imported music.

Drug Use: Focuses on hallucinogens. Amphetamines and methamphetamines are popular. Marijuana and alcohol are also common.

**Hip Hop:** This group wears baggy clothing, baseball/hockey jerseys, baseball hats, expensive tennis shoes, and baggy Levis.

Party Goers: Underground, house (backyard) and warehouse parties and nightclubs.

Music: Rap music (not necessarily gangsta rap).

Drug Use: Alcohol and marijuana are prevalent. Cocaine is also common.

**Cholo:** Gang members with violent tendencies who favor baggy clothing, Pendleton or flannel shirts, solid colors, Ben Davis clothing (thick material) which is usually found in swap meets. Neat creases on shirts and pants, Nike “cortez” style shoes (dark blue/black with white stripe), heads shaved to the skin or short hair slicked back (using hair net, palm comb, or hair oil [typically “Three Flowers”]). Some with shaved heads have a braid at the base of the neck. Goatee or moustache is common.

Party Goers: Frequent most events of which they are aware.

Music: Oldies, old funk, gangsta rap.

Drug Use: Marijuana, alcohol, heroin and PCP are traditional among this group. A new trend in this group’s drug use is amphetamines (speed) and crack cocaine.

**Taggers:** Cross section of Rave, Hip Hop, and Cholo that focuses on “tagging” or marking graffiti on walls either individually or in groups called *crews*. This classification draws on facets of the other three in locations frequented, music listened to, and also in drug use. Existent drug use in this group can vary as in the other groups but is commonly like that of Cholos.

**Local Schools** Local elementary, junior high, and high school teachers and counselors assist the DPO in evaluating the behavior of G.A.P.P. cases.

**Special Probation Team (SPT)** The DPO receives much of its information on the G.A.P.P. caseload or potential G.A.P.P. minors by maintaining a relationship with the Special Problems Team and other local police officers from the Sheriff's Department. In some instances where positive redirection cannot be achieved, an alternative must be sought. In cases such as these, the DPO will recommend to the court that the youth be sent to a youth probation camp or an alternative educational institution.

**Tattoo Removal Services** G.A.P.P. believes that an important factor in helping the client start a new life is by changing the youth's image. However, there is a problem when aspects of that image are permanent, as is the case with tattoos. To deal with this, the Beckman Laser Institute and Medical Clinic has joined forces with Interagency Gang Task Forces in Los Angeles and Orange Counties to provide reduced-cost laser therapy for the removal of gang tattoos.

**Antigraffiti Campaign** Developing a more positive community image is the goal of antigraffiti efforts. Commerce Public Works, Community Development, Community Services, Park and Recreation, East Los Angeles Probation Department, and the East Los Angeles Sheriff's Department coordinate information and resources in this effort.

The graffiti removal team and painters from Public Works and Community Development take

Polaroid pictures of graffiti prior to removal. Expedient removal of graffiti is essential to cut down on communication between gangs using this medium and "tagging" (i.e., placing one's name on anything with an artistic flare). Taggers and gang activity are not always related. The Social Services Manager monitors graffiti on a daily basis working with Social Services staff, parks staff, local school officials, informants, and Public Safety staff to identify nicknames, insignias, etc. Law enforcement and city staff make direct contact with alleged graffiti producers, known gang members, and parents to advise them that they are being watched. Occasionally, arrests are made.

### Evidence of Effectiveness

Proactive action is taken to redirect youth activities away from gang or other detrimental activities before juvenile court proceedings are necessary. The concept of G.A.P.P. has become so popular that it has been replicated by other incorporated cities. In December 1990 there were ten contracted DPOs; today there are 18. G.A.P.P. has been instrumental in undermining local gang recruitment efforts in Commerce. The G.A.P.P. Officer provides early intervention to at-risk youth, juveniles on court-ordered probation, and youth returning to the community after court-ordered placements.

The impact of Commerce's YDP is clearly illustrated by the statistics contrasting neighboring East Los Angeles and Commerce. In 1993, East Los Angeles experienced 140 gang-related assaults and 11 homicides. Commerce reported seven gang-related assaults and zero homicides. More recently Commerce's G.A.P.P. Deputy Probation Officer

### *Exhibit 3C* How It Works: A Case Study

- In early 1993, Juan Costello was a junior at Bell Gardens High School. School officials noted that problems, including truancy, were interfering with his education. "I was involved in too many gang-related activities," Costello said, "I didn't feel I had to be there regularly."
- In August, Costello was recruited for Soledad Enrichment Action, an independent study program aimed at helping participants earn a high-school diploma or the GED equivalent. "The city of Commerce called me," Costello said. "They actually called me. People here make you want to come to their program."
- Through G.A.P.P. Costello received additional counseling and employment placement.
- Costello then worked with the city Employment Referral Office to find a job. "The same day I was interviewed, they found me a job at a fast-food restaurant," Costello said.
- By December, Costello became the first student to obtain his high-school diploma through the Soledad Enrichment Action program. His job has allowed him to move into his own apartment. "I stuck to it all the way through," said Costello. "My main interest is computers. I want to learn and get into that profession. Maybe go to trade school."

reported five straight months (March-July, 1994) with an arrest-free caseload of 40 probationers, half of whom are youth on voluntary probation.

During the first year of G.A.P.P., there was only one homicide in Commerce. However, it is important to emphasize that the G.A.P.P. officer came into a virtually homicide-free situation. Since 1984 there have only been three gang-related homicides. Hence, the G.A.P.P. officer is not dealing with a particularly violent population which means the program has a high probability of success.

Another potential indicator of the success of the G.A.P.P. program is to look at the high-school graduation rate of youth who have been in the G.A.P.P. program. While the number of high school graduates does not appear impressive (six) in relation to the number of G.A.P.P. cases, if placed in proper perspective it is quite respectable. The number of minors who were of age to graduate between September 1993 and February 1995 was between ten and 15, so a graduation rate of at least 40% was achieved. The case study in Exhibit 3C (see page 5) provides evidence of the program's effectiveness for one individual.